

Mech 2211

Chapter 2211 MTA Research

Totems were associated with savage, primitive religions in humanity's ancient past.

Some alien races also developed religious worship into some kind of spirit or god that was represented by some sort of decorated object.

Of course, these days totems were regarded as products of superstition in much of the galaxy. Only a few religions utilized them in their rituals.

Frankly speaking, a highly secularist organization like the MTA should have no business with totems. Ves doubted Master Willix was interested in them because she wanted to worship any proto-gods.

Considering the MTA insatiable hunger for knowledge, Master Willix and her fellow colleagues would definitely research them as much as possible!

Ves felt rather chilly at this prospect. How much would Master Willix be able to decipher from the glow of a totem?

Perhaps the only reason why he didn't panic any further was because he couldn't really stop the MTA from poking its nose in his business anyway.

If they wanted to study an LMC mech in great detail, they could just purchase a bunch of copies and subject them to all sorts of examinations.

The MTA archived most of the design files and schematics of the LMC's commercial mech designs. Many of the notes that Ves had left behind possessed hints towards the mech's interactions with an unknown entity.

The fact of the matter was that the MTA could already get its hands on a bunch of applications of his design philosophy.

Crafting a bunch of totems for the MTA did not sound like a big deal if that was the case. It was not as if the glows attached to totems were different from the glows attached to mechs.

If the MTA truly wouldn't get much useful out of researching his totems, then Ves did not mind accepting the trade.

Ves did not immediately accept, though. He frowned as a couple of concerns weighed him down.

First, the MTA's research capabilities were very formidable. They were also aware of spirituality in the form of psionic power and probably developed their own understanding of this phenomenon.

This made it dangerous for Ves to underestimate the Association's research prowess.

Second, the wording used by Master Willix made it clear that the MTA only authorized him to access some of its research on luminar tech. How much would he obtain? Would it be enough to achieve a substantial performance boost with the Crystal Lord Mark II? How practical would it be to implement this tech?

"What exactly will I be able to work with?" Ves asked the physical projection. "Your description of your offer sounds rather vague. I don't have enough information to determine whether I can obtain what I need."

Master Willix activated another projection that depicted a lab test. "You can see for yourself. This is some of the gains that one of our research groups have made over the last two decades."

The second projection depicted a completely empty white room. A standardized dummy mech built to average third-class specifications rested at one end of the testing chamber. A mech-sized laser rifle apparatus was affixed at the other end of the testing chamber.

A lot of numbers and labels scrolled through the view. Ves only partially deciphered the technical readouts.

Eventually, the rifle fired a powerful laser beam that instantly hit the dummy mech!

Ves estimated the energy level of the laser beam and the damage it was supposed to inflict. If his read on the situation was correct, then the concentrated laser beam should have penetrated halfway through the frontal armor of the dummy mech.

His eyes widened as the area struck by the rifle looked a lot more damaged than he thought!

After performing some rapid mental calculations with the help of his implant, he estimated that the damage of the laser beam was actually thirty percent more potent!

"How is this possible?!"

"More efficient energy conversion, mostly." Willix answered. "Compared to comparable commercial laser rifle models, the rifle in this demonstration is capable of converting much more electrical energy into useful damage output. Less energy is wasted in the form of heat, which has the added side effect of considerably decreasing the heat generation of the weapon."

While this effect was also present in the original Crystal Lord design, it wasn't as drastic as the MTA's demonstration!

A thirty percent boost in efficiency over modern, new generation laser rifles was huge! As long as the cost of this crystal laser rifle wasn't too excessive, it would definitely be able to empower the Crystal Lord Mark II to a considerable height!

Seeing that the lab test of the crystal laser rifle made a powerful impression on Ves, Master Willix switched to another piece of footage.

"The luminar race not only excels at outputting energy damage, but is also proficient in defending against it, as you surely already know."

The same crystal laser rifle as before now pointed its muzzle at a large crystal block. Ves could faintly recognize the odd alien circuits formed inside the crystal block through unknown means.

When the laser rifle fired a beam that was exactly as powerful as the one in the previous lab test, the block absorbed the laser beam without any issue!

Hardly any heat got released. The large crystal block perfectly absorbed the entire laser beam without any complications!

While Ves was already familiar with this phenomena, the laser rifle wasn't done yet. It continued to fire laser beam after laser beam at the same block.

The large crystal continued to accumulate energy as a result. It began to glow brighter and brighter in white. When the laser rifle stopped firing, the crystal block suddenly released all of the captured energy at once in the form of a magnificent white light beam!

The beam struck another target placed in the chamber, causing it to sustain a devastating amount of damage!

Though the original Crystal Lord was capable of performing the same feat with its central crystal, the capacity and damage output of the crystal block vastly exceeded what his old mech design was capable of. Not even his gold label Crystal Lords could release such a powerful beam!

In fact, even accounting for the increased mass and volume of the crystal block, its devastating counterattack already surpassed the threshold of third-class mechs!

"This.." His breath shivered. "Was this attack strong enough to threaten a second-class mech?"

Willix nodded, thereby confirming his radical guess! "The luminar crystals possess very interesting properties that allow them to function as great counters to many pure energy attacks. The crystals are highly effective at storing electromagnetic radiation and to a lesser extent thermal energy. The energy is then repurposed and homogenized in a form that allows the crystal to discharge the energy at once as a coherent attack.

Ves became incredibly excited by what he saw! This tech had the potential to elevate the Crystal Lord Mark II into a true beast on land! The meager applications that Ves came up with on his own paled in comparison to what the MTA accomplished after performing dedicated study into crystal builder technology!

Though Ves had become incredibly dazzled at what he saw, he knew he couldn't allow himself to get too hyped by the potential benefits.

There had to be a catch!

"This is.. very impressive." he said. "I'm concerned about their cost, though. Will implementing these luminar crystals in my mechs double their price? If that is the case, then it is very hard to justify their implementation into my Mark II design."

Master Willix faintly shook her head. "I have already taken your circumstances into account. The demonstrations that you have seen today will not unduly add to the cost of the mech. The luminar crystals will only add around 300,000 hex credits or so to the production cost of your mechs. The real challenge is producing them. Very advanced production equipment is required to synthesize these crystals."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What kind of equipment do I need?"

"They are out of reach."

"If that's the case, then how can I possibly produce these powerful crystals?"

"We can come to an arrangement. Every MTA branch that has reached a certain scale can synthesize these crystals and supply them to the LMC or any of the third-party manufacturers that produce your Crystal Lord. You only need to pay the requisite costs to the branches."

This condition made Ves lose the wonder he gained from witnessing the impressive lab tests. This arrangement made the LMC too dependent on the MTA for the supply of luminar crystals.

Ves figured that they must have figured out a way to create the crystal cube that 'activated' luminar crystals. Perhaps they even developed a better version of the crystal cube that Ves still stored in his vault!

Though he resented the arrangement proposed by Master Willix, he already understood that he wouldn't be allowed to produce the luminar crystals themselves.

Once the production methods leaked, alien crystals filled with inscrutable alien runes and circuitry would probably show up everywhere in the galaxy! The MTA already bent its rules by a considerable degree by allowing Ves to play around with them in his new Crystal Lord Mark II design!

If Ves and Gloriana hadn't continually impressed the MTA with successive accomplishments, there was no way that Master Willix was willing to accommodate his request to this degree!

This only made him feel more worried about the price she demanded. For some reason, Master Willix and the MTA really wanted to get their hands on his totems!

At least Ves possessed some very desirable bargaining chips. Since Master Willix valued them so much, he was curious whether he could milk the MTA further.

"The way you speak about luminar crystal technology suggests that the researchers working on it have probably developed more applications, right?"

"You are correct. Don't think about obtaining anything more, Mr. Larkinson. Your Crystal Lord Mark II doesn't require additional features."

"What about scaling up the luminar crystals so they become capable of empowering second-class mechs?"

This time, Master Willix chuckled a bit. "The main reason why you are eligible to work with luminar crystal technology at all is because it is mainly relevant to the lowest class of mechs. It is an entirely different matter to allow you to incorporate second-class luminar crystals into second-class mechs. The difference that this can make is enough to destabilize the second-class mech market."

The MTA may offer a lot of tech in the form of component licenses to mech companies and mech designers, but it also held a lot of it back. This kind of alien tech that was clearly superior to conventional human tech was truly dangerous to human society if it started showing up everywhere.

Ves already knew he had to revise the availability of the Crystal Lord Mark II in order to avoid ruffling the MTA's feathers too much. He would likely have to jack up the price of his product so that its amazing performance was paired with an even more excessive price!

He thought for a while. It was trivially easy for him to craft a bunch of totems that were pretty much useless other than their glows. It hardly cost him anything for him to do so. This entire trade sounded too easy, in fact!

Yet from what he saw, the luminar crystal technology truly fit the Crystal Lord Mark II to an amazing degree. Ves was not worried whether the Master Willix made the wrong selection or whether the MTA attempted to scam him in this trade.

With so many pros and so few cons, logic dictated that Ves accept this deal.

Even his emotions urged him to say yes.

There was just one more issue he needed to clarify. He addressed Master Willix once again.

"I can provide the MTA with a number of totems once I return from the Nyxian Gap, but I won't provide you with every glow. Some of the more obscure ones, such as those attached to my virtual mechs and those utilized in competition mechs, aren't within my reach anymore."

To be honest, Ves could probably reproduce some of them, but he simply couldn't be bothered to. He didn't want to hand over too many totems to the MTA and this sounded like a nice excuse to limit what they received.

"That is not a problem." Master Willix replied. "We are mainly interested in your stronger glows. Let us form a list."

They entered into a quick discussion. Eventually, Ves agreed to provide totems that carried glows that represented all of the commercial mech designs of the LMC as well as a few commission and private mech designs.

In his opinion, he was giving up a bit too much of the latter two categories, but Master Willix was fairly insistent!

Eventually, Ves reached out and shook hands with Master Willix's physical projection.

"It's a deal." She said with a smile.

"It's a deal." Ves replied with a mix of excitement and resignation.

Chapter 2212 Research Frenzy

As soon as Ves and Master Willix struck their deal, they transmitted a large data packet to the Darkbreak module.

Due to the great security of the MTA's private network, there was hardly any risk of third parties intercepting the sensitive data.

That did not mean that Ves could subsequently leak the research data on luminar crystals on his end.

"To minimize the chance of leaks and theft, the files I have sent to you will remain locked within the Darkbreak module." Master Willix's physical projection stated in a severe tone. "One of the functions of this device is to guard the data it stores in its data banks. Every means of directly and indirectly capturing the data will fail. If any of the research files on luminar crystals ever ends up in the hands of others, you will not escape the consequences."

Ves nodded nervously. "I understand, Master. I have no intentions of spreading this data around."

The MTA truly valued the research it performed on luminar crystals and deemed it very undesirable if it spread around! This was why the Association insisted on keeping it to themselves, to the point where the LMC wasn't even allowed to synthesize more advanced versions of luminar crystals!

All of these precautions only heightened his interests. From his brief stay on the Starlight Megalodon in the past, he had become exposed to the CFA's incredibly advanced research activities at the time. Ves had gotten lost in all of the mind-boggling projects involving a lot of high technology.

The MTA shouldn't be any worse when it came to research and development. The Big Two were in constant competition to each other and technology had always been the key to human growth.

Ves looked forward to seeing how much he could elevate the Crystal Lord Mark II Project with this research data!

One additional concern suddenly came to mind. "Oh, Master Willix, about the research data... will Gloriana be able to access it as well? It would be inconvenient for me to be the sole person who can study these files."

"I have already taken this into account." She said. "I will send Miss Wodin a notification informing her that she is permitted to enter the restricted library of the MTA's branch on Cinach VI. She will be allowed to study the same research data that your Darkbreak module has received at her leisure."

That would make the work on the Crystal Lord Mark II design a lot more convenient. With the two lead designers working on the same foundation, Ves wouldn't have to clash so much with his fiancé when it came to pushing his design choices.

Mentally, Ves had already elevated the priority level of the Crystal Lord Mark II Project. With some shiny new tech in hand, he became a lot more passionate about turning the second revision of his landbound rifleman mech into a groundbreaking product!

Of course, even if Ves and Gloriana became more involved in its design, the design teams assigned to the project still had to work just as hard.

Once Master Willix's physical projection said goodbye and disappeared, Ves manipulated the interface of the Darkbreak module in order to access the newly-received files.

The large device began to hum before outputting a very strong interference field! Ves blinked as he felt his body becoming ill at ease. He knew that all of his devices, from the comm on his wrist to the Vulcaneye multiscanner on his tool belt, were probably rendered helpless!

"Ahh!" Ves suddenly held his hand over head. "My implant!"

Not only did this powerful localized jamming field interfere with the operation of electronic devices, it also acted like a remote implant limiter!

His blood briefly chilled as he realized the scary potential of this functionality. Despite all of the upgrades and additions to his Archimedes Rubal implant, it was still rendered helpless by this seemingly omnipotent field!

"Even if it doesn't affect my implant directly, it is more than enough to block the interface between my brain and my implant!"

Fortunately, he already experienced what it was like to lose access to the functions of his implant a month ago. He quickly performed the same tricks he used to cope with the loss of his most important mental augmentation and regained his composure.

"Let's see what the fuss is all about."

Once the Darkbreak module's jamming function came online, Ves finally laid his eyes on the coveted research data.

The moment he read the first couple of documents, he instantly became engrossed. Though much of it already referenced knowledge and scientific terms that were beyond his ability to understand, he found out that the data package also contained selective knowledge that briefly summarized the MTA's understanding of certain subjects.

Ves found out that while it was incredibly difficult for him to digest this knowledge, they were just understandable enough for him to slowly build up his systematic understanding of crystals and laser technology.

He couldn't help but erupt into laughter! "Hahaha! I've got more than just a bunch of experimental data on luminar crystals! I've received the context around this research as well!"

In other words, he obtained much of the theoretical background needed to make sense of some of the fundamental aspects of luminar crystals! As Ves quickly skimmed all of the files, he understood that while he didn't receive enough learning material to turn him

into a comprehensive specialist in the relevant fields, he should at least be able to elevate all of his existing Sub-Skills on crystals and laser weapons!

He knew this must have been the handiwork of Master Willix. She likely possessed a very good grasp of his current knowledge base by studying his mech designs. It shouldn't be that difficult for her to figure out what he lacked and what he was capable of learning through self-study.

This was a very profound benefit to Ves! Even if he decided not to add any luminar crystals in his other designs, he could still elevate their offensive performance by a small extent.

"In fact, some of the research is also useful in enhancing my understanding of other directed energy weapons!"

This meant that Ves would be able to apply a portion of his gains on the pulse submachine guns of the Valkyrie Redeemer and the positron beam cannons of the Cat's Paw!

As long as he mastered all of the knowledge contained within the data package, Ves would definitely be able to gain as many benefits as spending at least 100,000 DP on various Sub-Skills!

He suddenly frowned as he felt the pervasive interference field subjecting his body to an invisible internal massage. The sudden loss of access to his implant vastly impacted his learning efficiency!

If he could activate his implant, then even if he couldn't digest all of the knowledge in a short amount of time, he could still store all of the documents he laid his eyes upon in the vast memory capacity in his mind!

"I'm not resigned to this reality!"

Ves wanted to see if he could circumvent the Darkbreak module's blockade. The Darkbreak module might possess an insanely powerful jamming function, but if there was one thing he learned, it was that no tech was perfect!

Rather than sitting down and learning the knowledge on luminar crystals and laser weapons the honest way, he instead began to pull out all sorts of devices in order to see if he could cheat the process.

Nothing worked, though Ves already expected that. No comm, sensor, scanner or any other device worked properly in the range of the field.

He even tried to open the hatch of the secure chamber in order to stand outside. While he managed to exit the localized jamming field, he could see nothing but

indistinguishable colors when he looked at the bubble enveloping the chamber. His sensors only captured static when trying to record the weird phenomenon.

Since normal solutions didn't work, Ves began to employ more esoteric means. He first had the bright idea of bringing in a chunk of B-stone.

Sadly, for all of its amazing potency at blocking and interfering with spiritual energy, it exerted no effect at all. The B-stone acted like a completely normal rock in front of the Darkbreak module.

Though this harebrained experiment failed, Ves nonetheless grew thoughtful at this result.

The B-stone's lack of interaction with the Darkbreak module proved that the latter only acted against technological means.

What about spiritual means? What if Ves came up with a way to record data in spiritual fashion?

A miniature explosion erupted in his mind!

From his theoretical understanding of spiritual engineering, there was no fundamental reason why this was not possible.

Ves had already found out a way to turn spiritual energy into fixed spiritual constructs!

As long as he was able to perform this trick in his own mind, he could leverage his engineering and software abilities to replicate a method to capture and store data in spiritual form!

He slapped his forehead with his palm! "Why didn't I think of this earlier?!"

Ever since he discovered he could 'program' the spiritual foundation of his mech designs, he only thought about using this new approach on his work.

He had yet to turn this insight to improving his own spiritual ability!

For a long time, he engaged in spiritual engineering like an old blacksmith or craftsman who created products through manual labor.

Now, he suddenly realized that he could upgrade himself to a modern engineer and software programmer who could develop much more sophisticated spiritual applications!

He performed a quick experiment on the spot without taking any precautions. He concentrated his mind and began to shape the loose spiritual energy in his mind like clay.

Just like manipulating the spiritual foundation of a mech design, he was able to mold the spiritual energy, though it was a lot more 'runny' and difficult to keep into shape.

It was no different from a temporary spiritual projection at this point. Without turning it into a fixed structure, it would quickly fall apart once he lost his focus.

"The key is to make it fixed."

He already knew the trick to doing that. From his current shallow understanding of spiritual constructs, all he needed to do was to concentrate specific attributes into the projection.

Ves possessed multiple spiritual attributes. Due to his design philosophy, he possessed a pretty abundant mix of attributes related to both mechs and life.

His choice was clear. Compared to the chaotic and changeable nature of life, the mechanical rigidity and precision of mechs was much more suitable to be applied to a software-like spiritual construct!

Though it took some effort, he eventually filled his projection with mech-attributed spiritual energy.

Though the concentration of mech-attributed spiritual energy floating in his mind had decreased by a minute degree, the construct had successfully taken shape!

Even as Ves gradually relaxed his focus, the construct made with the spiritual energy of his mind still exhibited the same properties of the spiritual constructs of his Purgatory Envoy design.

This meant that from today onwards, he could truly embark on developing semi-permanent or permanent spiritual augmentations!

The potential of this single innovation was enough to change his life! In fact, Ves already believed he could also apply this same trick to other people's minds as long as they possessed at least some spirituality!

As Ves cautiously performed more experiments with creating spiritual constructs in his mind, he began to harvest a lot of new insights!

His understanding of the nature of spiritual energy increased by leaps and bounds as he figured more and more rules from the interactions he witnessed.

With each new construct, Ves felt as if he added more and more structure to his mind! Instead of letting most of his loose spiritual energy freeload aimlessly in his mind, he could put them to more productive use and develop all kinds of specific spiritual augmentations!

Yet the more he got caught up with his experiments, the more the proportions of his spiritual attributes became unbalanced. His life domain became more dominant while his mech domain continued to weaken.

As soon as Ves noticed it became harder to draw upon additional mech-attributed spiritual energy, he suddenly snapped out of his research frenzy.

He felt his mind had undergone huge changes in a short amount of time! He looked at himself in horror as he realized he had inadvertently changed his personality.

As soon as he thought about his progress on his various mech design projects, he discovered that he had become a lot less fluent in working on them. It was as if his intuition and familiarity with mechs had suddenly disappeared!

"This is bad!"

He instantly deconstructed all of his experimental spiritual constructs. He did not dare to shatter them apart. Instead, he carefully unravelled them so that the mech-attributed spiritual energy gently flooded back in his mental space.

Ves sighed in relief once he found that his fluency in mech design returned to normal once he unmade every spiritual construct.

"That was dangerous!"

Chapter 2213 Safer Method

Ves retired back to his stateroom after he conducted his reckless experimentation.

He shoved all considerations about his mech design projects and luminar crystal technology aside for the moment.

Compared to these ordinary concerns, the new insights he realized just a moment ago had significantly expanded his understanding of spiritual manipulation and spiritual engineering.

He opened up another new door in these fields. Even though he only took a single tentative step inside another room, he could already foresee the countless possibilities and great potential of this pivotal breakthrough.

First, the ability to create spiritual constructs with his own Spirituality meant that he could imbue himself with the same kind of 'triggered abilities' and other artificial functions as his mech designs.

Essentially, he could treat himself as an empty system. By using up some of his free spiritual capacity, he could program some spiritual software programs to add permanent abilities and augmentations to his mind.

For example, he could construct a permanent spiritual eye and ear that remained functional even if Ves did not concentrate at all. This made it vastly more convenient to observe his surroundings and to pick up hidden presences that could circumvent regular sensory organs and devices!

This was just the simplest application. He could program much more elaborate and complicated spiritual constructs, thereby augmenting himself even further.

Ves might not be a biotech expert or a traditional spiritual sorcerer, but as a mech designer it was enough to approach it as a hardware or software engineer!

He could use his vast understanding of mechs and the components and technology that made them work to selectively create spiritual components that operated in a similar fashion to mech parts.

This was something that he had already come up with but couldn't execute. Now that he proved that he could form spiritual constructs in his minds, he was finally free to revive this idea!

However, just like real mechs, his Spirituality was limited by its capacity.

Now that he looked back at his earlier experiments in a sober and more objective fashion, he realized that forming more and more spiritual constructs slowly altered the balance of his spirit, which in turn affected his mind and personality.

He was literally rewiring his personality and capabilities back then! When he discovered that he had become a lot more clumsy at designing mechs, he had become incredibly frightened.

Ves was a mech designer! The ability to design mechs was of paramount importance to him! He could never stomach the idea of crippling his talent and affinity for mech design just because he wanted to create a couple of spiritual augments!

Fortunately, the process was reversible. So far, he had never seen any spiritual constructs decaying by themselves, but it was not that difficult for him to unravel them, especially since he created them in the first place.

All and all, Ves had managed to avert disaster.

What made Ves today him was mostly due to the mix of spiritual attributes in his mind.

A large portion of it was locked in his design seed, which was basically fixed and unmovable. Ves speculated that even if he expended all of his loose spiritual energy, he would still retain some of his talent, personality and capabilities.

He still felt uncomfortable after losing just a modest amount of his fluency in mechs. Every difference counted, so he felt a lot more reluctant to create spiritual augments and leave them floating in his mind.

It was difficult to come up with a spiritual augment that was useful enough to offset the loss in mech affinity.

However, Ves already developed some ideas to mitigate the harm. The most obvious one was to just create a spiritual augment when needed and keep it for as long as he needed it. Once it lost its purpose, he could just unravel it in order to recycle his spent spiritual energy and attributes.

It was very troublesome to do so each time he needed to make use of a specific spiritual augment. He had to manually program the spiritual augment from scratch, which could take minutes, hours or even entire days depending on its complexity!

He grinned. "I can probably circumvent this process."

Now that he had left the range of the Darkbreak module's interference field, he regained access to his cranial implant and restored his partially-digitized mind.

The sudden boost to his cognitive functions reminded him that he could store and retrieve as much data as he wanted from his implant!

Therefore, he only had to design a spiritual augment once and store the design in his implant's vast digital storage space. Once Ves wanted to conjure up a sophisticated spiritual eye, he could instantly retrieve the template and fill it up with single-attribute spiritual energy!

While the new process wasn't instant, at the very least he didn't need to reinvent the entire wheel from scratch every time!

This was the best approach he came up with. From his unsavory spiritual experimentations on William Urbesh, Ves learned that the spirit of an individual was incredibly important. Just a minor change could permanently distort or damage someone's personality!

Currently, Ves did not desire to change who he was. His career was on an upwards trajectory and his long string of successes in the past proved that he was already on the

road of success! Why should he attempt to fix something that wasn't broken in the first place?

Ves was happy with himself. While he wasn't perfect, he accepted and embraced who he was, warts and all. His strengths and weaknesses defined him as a person, and it shouldn't be simple at all to alter the very fabric of his life!

However, that did not mean he could apply these changes to other people.

"This is the second major implication of my discoveries!"

Leaving aside the utility of spiritual constructs, Ves could already tell he could employ them as a much less destructive and much more controlled way of altering people's minds!

If he made these realizations a year ago, he wouldn't have mutilated and corrupted William Urbesh's mind and spirit so much! He could have simply created some sturdy but inert spiritual constructs and stuffed them with most of the attributes related to fear, cowardice and timidity.

By bottling up those undesirable traits, he effectively removed them from the board in William's mind. This meant that his personality would shift in a direction where he naturally became more capable of piloting a mech without getting frozen by his own fears!

Ves wouldn't have ended up with the mute and taciturn Silent William if that was the case!

His eyes lit up as he thought about the potential of regulating other people's spiritual attributes.

Most norms didn't possess enough spirituality to make any meaningful changes. In fact, he was deeply reluctant to alter even a single pinch of their spiritual energy at all for fear of wiping out their sentience!

It was a different case to those with spiritual potential. As long as he did not decrease the overall level of spirituality in someone's mind too drastically, they would still be able to remain stable while their personality underwent substantial changes!

He thought back on all of the people with spiritual potential on his staff.

For mech pilots, the strength of their spiritual potential was not enough. The purity also mattered.

Usually, this meant that the more single-minded and dedicated someone became towards a certain pursuit or ideal, they became more likely to achieve a breakthrough in their chosen profession.

To mech pilots with spiritual potential such as Casella Ingvar and Imon Ingvar, Ves might be able to induce both of them to become expert candidates if he purified their spiritual potential!

By bottling up various irrelevant spiritual attributes, their spiritualities became less polluted by distractions, thereby allowing them to become much more focused on a chosen pursuit that was compatible with their spiritual attributes!

"This is an interesting interaction."

In his theoretical framework of mech pilots, those with spiritual potential usually started their advancement after they consciously shaped and altered their personality. Through discipline, training, and other purposeful activities, they honed their will until it gained a quality that enabled to fuse with spirituality!

In other words, the mind shaped the spirit.

This was what was supposed to happen. Almost every Larkinson expert pilot and other expert pilots in existence advanced step by step by honing their minds and wills first.

Even those who only became expert pilots accidentally such as Venerable Pelican had already developed a very strong will and obsession!

What Ves came up with subverted the normal process.

He theorized that if he changed someone's spirit first, it would result in a specific change in personality. These changes in personality which narrowed the thought patterns of the individual in question would then circle back and affect the evolution of the spirit.

To put it simply, the spirit shaped the mind, which in turn shaped the spirit.

If Ves could develop this process and turn it into a practical and proven method, then he may have finally invented a way to artificially create high-ranking expert pilots and mech designers!

His heart beat faster as he realized the great promise of this method.

"Wait! This is also dangerous!"

There was no guarantee it would work as smoothly as he thought. Messing with someone's spirit was literally the same as messing with someone's personality and

sense of self. Minds and spirits were so complicated and interconnected that a single change might induce a lot unanticipated changes!

Ves would never subject his own clansmen to the reckless experiments that he was already forming in his mind. The risks were too great!

Yet the temptations of this possible new method was too great. Even if he wanted to withhold the use of this method because the MTA already paid too much attention to him, it would nonetheless be helpful to keep this option in reserve.

One of the benefits of developing a safe way to foster expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designers was all of the missions he could complete!

The Rim Guardians and the MTA issued a lot of missions related to helping people breaking through. The mission related to William Urbesh was hardly unique. Ves knew that there were much more merits he could earn as long as he attempted to fulfill them with his new method!

If not for the fact that he would attract too much suspicion, he wanted to log into the Rim Exchange right away and snap up all of those missions right away!

He vigorously shook his head. "I need to control myself!"

He still had to develop this ability further, but he did not dare to experiment on himself or his Larkinsons. He did not believe it was wise to hire volunteers from local states and subject them to life-changing and potentially-damaging experiments.

"I still need test subjects, though." He sighed. "It's best to get a lot of them. I need to perform a systematic study to test the limits of this method."

Where could he get his hands on hundreds, if not thousands of humans who he could mess around and get rid of without getting into trouble with the authorities?

It wasn't as if there was some giant superplanet floating around in the Nyxian Gap that just happened to offer a huge population of degenerated people who no one cared about.

"Wait a second.. there's always pirates!"

As the ultimate scumbags of the galaxy, pirates had forsaken all of their rights as a human! The Big Two explicitly stripped them from all of the protection they afforded to other humans!

Ves would not get into trouble at all if he used a bunch of pirates as test subjects. If some of his harmful experiments ever got exposed, at most he would suffer some damage to his reputation. He would not get in any legal trouble as long as he properly

documented proof that his test subjects were recognized pirates or members of outlawed organizations!

"Why didn't I realize this sooner? The Nyxian Gap is filled with test subjects!"

Chapter 2214 The Scientific Method

The moment he conceived of the possibility of using lawless pirates as test subjects, Ves eagerly wanted to get his hands on them. The more test subjects he had access to, the more progress he could make towards his study in artificially cultivating high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers.

As long as he developed a method and confirmed it was safe, he could apply it to anyone with untapped spiritual potential. Even if they did not break through on the spot, Ves at least paved the way for them to advance smoothly!

As for those who already developed themselves to an extent such as Jannzi, Joshua, Tusa, Commander Dise and Commander Orfan, Ves might be able to purify their will and spirit even further so that their chances of breaking through their respective bottlenecks increased!

If he completed his experiments quickly enough, he didn't have to wait until he returned to civilized space to foster the first expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

He could encourage the formation of one of them while he was still in the Nyxian Gap!

The thought of adding bona-fide expert pilots to his force makeup almost turned him drunk.

Of course, an expert pilot without an expert mech was like an emperor without clothes. The true might and majesty of a high-ranking mech pilot could never be expressed with a mundane mech that did not incorporate any resonating materials.

However, the emergence of just a single expert pilot would have a very effect on the morale and confidence of all of his combat personnel!

His fellow Larkinsons would fight a lot harder if they knew that an expert pilot was in their midst. Their admiration and worship to those who underwent apotheosis was so high that the expert pilot did not even have to enter battle in order to enhance the battle performance of other mech pilots by 20 percent!

Still, it was a bit of a stretch to expect that he could raise an expert pilot in a matter of weeks. He was far from reaching this point. Though the method he conceived sounded nice, it was based on a lot of unproven assumptions and shaky homemade theories.

While Ves was very confident in the theoretical framework on spirituality that he built up step by step, a good scientist should never peddle untested solutions.

"I'm a bit of a bad scientist." He shrugged and admitted to himself.

Many times, he became so excited by his innovations that he immediately implemented them into his work without properly testing them. Even if it worked out most of the time didn't mean he was vindicated.

If Ves wanted to become a more effective and respectable researcher, he needed to respect scientific method and follow it earnestly.

The scientific method could be framed in many different ways, but Ves preferred to split it up in five stages: observation, question, hypothesis, results and conclusion.

For example, in this case, his initial observation was that forming spiritual constructs in his mind altered the distribution of spiritual attributes in his mind.

This led to various questions. One of them went as followed: was it possible to induce individuals with spiritual potential to advance to a higher rank?

After forming a question he wanted to answer, it was helpful to gain some direction by forming some guesses.

Usually, this was the stage where he was supposed to hit the books and read up on the research performed by others.

However, since Ves did not have access to a single textbook on spirituality, he could only resort to his own theoretical framework as a basis.

By applying his knowledge on spirituality, he could easily form a hypothesis that could be used as the core of an experiment.

In this case, his current hypothesis went something like this: The key to inducing people to advance to a higher rank was to alter their spiritual attribute makeup.

Now that he made this statement, he needed to back it up with proof. In this case, he needed to conduct a range of experiments.

Since his experiment involved changing people, he needed to get his hands on people.

Usually, scientists who wanted to experiment on people had to go through a lot of trouble. Conducting simulations could only do so much because no model perfectly replicated the functioning of human physiology and mentality.

Even cloning humans was problematic because these human-shaped meat bags exhibited various deviations from normal human functioning due to their lack of sentience. This was especially problematic when it came to matters of the mind.

Normal biotech experts still preferred to experiment with cloned bodies if there was nothing better at hand, but Ves already ruled out this option.

Clones possessed no spirit. This was something that Ves had already ascertained.

That left him with the ethically dubious option of performing his experiments on actual, living humans.

This was a little bit problematic in human space. Every scientist and researcher had to abide by lots of laws that served to enforce a standardized code of ethics and customs onto them. Even if these laws weren't always enforced didn't mean it was okay to treat random space peasants as lab rats!

The only exception to this rule was pirates, but even then many research institutions openly refused to experiment on them. Civilized humans should never lower themselves to the standard of scum. If Ves was still in civilized space, he would have to be a lot more circumspect about his intentions if he wanted to preserve his reputation.

He had no concerns in the Nyxian Gap. Not only was it sufficiently isolated to prevent any news from proliferation, it was also filled with an abundant amount of viable test subjects!

Frankly, Ves couldn't have traveled to a better location in the Nyxian Gap to perform human experiments!

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "Perhaps this explains why some Peacekeeper outfits venture into the Nyxian Gap while bringing along some research teams. It's very risky for those researchers to conduct their experiments in a lawless region, but as long as they gain their desired results, it is worth the risk!"

Results! This was what Ves was after! Performing experiments was not an end in itself, but merely a means to an end.

However, not every research result was equal. They varied in accuracy, precision, relevance representation, quantity and so on. In general, the more thorough the experiment, the higher the quality of results.

When it came to developing a promising but risky method of facilitating the advancement of his talented personnel, Ves was not okay with performing a simple and rudimentary experiment.

"I need to abide by a higher standard this time!" Ves urged himself. "I'm a Journeyman Mech Designer. I will probably shame my university teachers if I perform a sloppy test."

This meant he couldn't settle on results of spiritually altering a couple of pirates. He needed to perform the same procedure at least a hundred times, and he should develop variations of the same method and apply it to their own separate batches of test subjects as well!

"How many test subjects does that take?"

Ves shuddered at the daunting figure required to obtain proper research results. He needed at least a thousand test subjects!

"It's not a problem to get my hands on a thousand pirates."

A typical established pirate group such as the Rust Grinders already numbered that much. Aside from the hundreds of mech pilots, they also employed a larger number of support personnel.

The problem was that not every pirate equated to a qualified test subject to him! He could only test his current hypothesis on pirates with spiritual potential.

The good news was that, as far as he knew, the proportion of humans with spiritual potential was unchanged in the pirate population.

What truly made high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers rare in regions like the Nyxian Gap was their poor discipline, training standard and other factors.

There was a lot of untapped potential in the pirate population.

The bad news was that the population density in the Nyxian Gap was very low. Ves estimated that it might take at least a year to obtain a thousand qualified test subjects!

He couldn't afford to waste that much time! He still had five months left before his wedding with Gloriana took place.

"Perhaps I should compromise a bit. Maybe obtaining a hundred qualified test subjects is sufficient."

Though the quality of his research results would definitely drop if he experimented on so little people, it was better than nothing.

"I'll have to direct my task force to actively hunt down some pirate groups. The more pirates we capture, the more my experiment can progress!"

Once he experimented on enough test subjects and gained some satisfactory results, he should have made enough gains to answer his hypothesis.

This was the final conclusion stage. Not only would he be able to answer his original question, he could also formulate new observations, each of which might spark follow-up experiments.

"Hmm.. I think I'm overlooking something along the way." He pressed his finger on his lips. "Oh well, it's not important."

Ves knew what he had to do now. His eyes sharpened as he hungered to conduct his experiments as soon as possible.

He impulsively activated his comm in order to call Major Verle.

"Ves? Why are you calling at this moment?"

"Stop avoiding the pirate groups along the way. If they're weak, pounce on them. If they're slightly stronger, pounce on them. If they're too strong, bring it up to me and we'll prepare a proper plan."

Major Verle's projection frowned. "You sound.. different, Ves. Why order this change?"

"I need to get my hands on a lot of living pirates." Ves truthfully answered. "This is important! Prioritize seeking out pirate groups that are weak but very numerous! The strength and wealth of the pirates are of no consequence. Only the amount of bodies matter!"

"This..."

"Just do as I say! Coordinate with Ophelia Kronon and Calabast. The sooner we capture some pirates, the better. You don't have to go through great lengths to avoid killing them if they pose a threat to us, but don't kill off anyone who surrenders. Just place them into custody before I have the chance to inspect the te-, I mean captives in person."

Major Verle frowned deeper, though he refrained from indulging in his curiosity. "Do you have any specific.. requirements.. for the captives you desire?"

"Preferably, try to preserve the lives of mech pilots and mech designers, but any pirate will do. Quantity matters more."

After passing some additional instructions, Ves ended his call with Major Verle. There was no need for him to pay close attention to this matter at this point. He trusted his subordinates to enact his orders faithfully.

Ves smiled and mentally patted himself on his back. Unlike with his previous experiments, he intended to hold himself to a much higher standard of scientific rigor. Only by trying out his methods on as many test subjects as possible would he be able to obtain reliable and accurate results.

He turned towards Lucky, who was lying on his deck with his belly facing the ceiling.

"How many test subjects do you think I need to experiment upon?"

"Meow."

"That sounds too few."

"Meow."

"Oh I would love to, but it's too difficult to get my hands on so many pirates."

"Meow meow."

"Ah, you have a point. Roaming pirate fleets usually don't have that many people, but it's a different story for pirate bases! The larger ones are especially notable for their larger populations! I can acquire loads of test subjects after capturing a base!"

The biggest problem was that no fixed pirate base was weak. Only pirates who were strong enough to defend themselves against Peacekeepers and rival pirates possessed the capital to plant their flag on a desirable location!

This meant that if he wanted to reach his goals quickly, he needed to imitate his father.

Even though Ves didn't have the help of his mother, he could at least rely on Lucky to take over her role!

His eyes gleamed brighter as he stared at Lucky with appreciation.

His cat nervously flicked his tail. "Meow?"

Chapter 2215 Spiritual Templates

As excited as he was to explore a viable method to artificially induce the breakthroughs of mech pilots and mech designers, he couldn't do anything without test subjects.

In the Larkinson Clan's previous clashes against pirates, Ves admittedly paid little attention to the treatment of captives.

Some pirates fought to the death. Others just wanted to flee as far away as possible. None of them met a good end. Only those who despaired against the Larkinson Clan's might and lost all hope dropped to their knees to offer their surrender.

As pirates were humans who had turned their backs on human civilization, they never received good treatment.

The Peacekeeper Association formulated a standard code of practice.

Pirates who violently resisted the Peacekeepers deserved death.

Pirate commanders and officers also deserved death, but it was preferable to take them into captivity and bring them back to the Peacekeeper Association.

The intelligence they held was often valuable in understanding the circumstances of the Nyxian Gap, and the bounties on their heads made it worthwhile for Peacekeepers to take the risks of capturing them alive.

As for the support personnel who were often kidnapped and forced into a life of piracy, the rules were a bit murkier on that. Officially, the Peacekeepers had to take them into custody and bring them back to civilized space to put them to trial.

If they were culpable for crimes against humanity, then they were put to death.

If they were just innocent people forced to service a mech or something, then they had a chance to live.

However, Ves knew that in practice the Peacekeeper outfits weren't so diligent and discriminating. Holding captives was a considerable burden and the Peacekeeper outfits didn't really receive that much rewards for bringing them back so that they could go on trial.

Therefore, the more humanitarian Peacekeepers tended to wipe out any violent pirates on a ship but leave the innocents alive.

This was not really a good solution. Those innocents stranded on ships that usually didn't possess any FTL drives were still trapped in the Nyxian Gap. They either fell victim to another pirate group or turned pirates themselves!

Therefore, the more ruthless Peacekeepers simply disappeared these tainted and unwanted people. They never showed up again, and it wasn't hard to imagine what it took to vanish them from existence.

Perhaps the only former captives who could gain a new life were well-trained engineers and other notable technical talent that was very hard to come by. Anyone who didn't meet this standard simply wasn't valuable enough to retain!

Was this unjust? Probably.

Did anyone care? Nope.

In deep space and especially in vast, isolated regions such as the Nyxian Gap, different rules applied. The commander of the fleet or the highest leader assumed absolute authority.

It was too impractical to apply the laws of civilized space in a region of space where they never took hold. Each fleet turned into a moving own sovereign domain that applied its own laws however they wanted, though within a couple of limits.

This was the risk that people had to accept when they ventured into lawless space.

In any case, Major Verle was in overall command over Task Force Predator. When the question of dealing with captives came up, he decided to act leniently and simply allowed the innocent captives to take control over the useless pirate ships that the Larkinsons viewed as trash.

It was likely that most of those captives and ships would fall into the hands of another pirate group, but the gesture at least allowed most of the Larkinsons to sleep peacefully at night.

Ves did not begrudge Major Verle's decision, seeing as he did it in order to retain the Larkinson Clan's sense of righteousness.

However, Ves regretted the executions of so many violent pirates! All of them were destined to die anyway. They could have paid some of their debts back to society by donating their spirits to him so that they could contribute to pivotal, life-changing research!

It was the ultimate way to atone for their sins!

"Next time will be different." He vowed.

Calabast already identified a juicy target that would potentially yield a lot of living test subjects if the task force managed to capture the site intact.

It would take some time to get there and perform the necessary scouting in order to plan their assault properly.

Until then, Ves had no choice but to return to his more mundane mech design work.

"I almost forgot about the luminar crystal research." He belatedly realized.

He still wanted to record and digest all of the research documents that Master Willix prepared for him. In order to do it quickly and waste as little time as possible, Ves cautiously resumed his experiments with spiritual constructs.

This time, he acted with much greater care. He aimed to create the smallest and simplest spiritual construct that could capture what he saw in a 'spiritual file'. The less mech-attributed spiritual energy he expended, the lower the impact on his mentality.

To simplify the construct as much as possible, he decided to go as low tech as possible and merely aimed to create something that could capture visual data in an analog format.

It was the spiritual equivalent of an ancient film camera.

Surprisingly, the process went smooth. Ves borrowed many elements from the spiritual eye taught by Goldie to interpret visual data with spiritual means. He actually spent most of his time on defining the format of the spiritual file in order to make sure it didn't spawn some uncontrollable horror.

When Ves tested out his 'spiritual camera' by snapping a picture of Lucky munching on a bar of Breyer alloy, his imaginary new device expended some of its mech-attributed spiritual energy to spit out a spiritual file.

When Ves accessed the file and interpreted it through a special means, he was able to recall the exact image of Lucky eating a piece of alloy in pretty good fidelity!

Certainly, the image that popped up in the forefront of his mind wasn't perfect. Its resolution and clarity looked very shabby compared to the images that could be captured in near-perfect detail by modern optical sensors.

However, this result was already sufficient enough for Ves to declare this small experiment a success!

"With this trick, no jammer can stop me now!"

The follow-up step was easy to process. Due to the partial digitization of his mind, he could easily convert the spiritual file in his mind into a digital format which his implant was able to process in many different ways.

If Ves captured a picture of a bunch of text, then his implant would automatically be able to strip it all and compile them into a proper document. At that point, Ves could leverage the combined might of his organic intelligence and his implant's data processing capabilities to absorb the knowledge in rapid tempo!

Perhaps Master Willix estimated that Ves would take six months to absorb all of the knowledge on luminar crystals.

With this measure, Ves could shorten that by just one month or less! He could easily internalize the most relevant knowledge that was most applicable to the Crystal Lord Mark II project within a week!

He couldn't help but grow smug at the fact that he succeeded in doing something he wasn't supposed to do. Everytime he circumvented a rule, he felt incredibly pleased!

The application of the spiritual camera was only useful in specific situations since his implant could do a much better job.

However, this was just the start! By developing a greater variety of spiritual augments such as a spiritual calculator or a spiritual radar, he could essentially regain some of the functions afforded by implant when it was ever rendered inoperable for some reason.

This meant that in a design duel where the mech designers had to wear implant limiters, Ves could easily boost his productivity by 50 percent or higher by making use of spiritual augments!

"Still, there's a limit to what I can do." He frowned.

The biggest downside was that each spiritual construct removed some mech-attributed spiritual energy from the table. This lowered his overall ability to design mechs. Ves had to weigh carefully whether the benefits brought by a spiritual augment outweighed the price he paid.

To minimize the impact on his mentality as much as possible, Ves stored the design or template of his spiritual camera into an encrypted file on his implant.

He loaded up the template from his implant and used it to construct the spiritual camera in just half a minute.

"I need to practice this process and speed it up even further."

When Ves stepped back into the isolated chamber that held the Darkbreak module, he activated it again and commanded it to project the lunar crystal research data.

A familiar interference field spread into the entire chamber again. He had already braced himself for the loss of access to his implant. It only took him a short amount of time to regain his composure.

He smiled as he viewed one of the documents of the data package. While his implant and his comm still weren't able to do anything, his spiritual camera remained fully functional!

Ves cautiously began to scroll through the document. He snapped the shutter of his spiritual camera every time he stumbled upon a new page. His mind gradually became filled with dozens of spiritual files.

Due to the rudimentary nature of the camera and the inefficient, unoptimized properties of its output, Ves temporarily lost a substantial amount of spiritual energy.

This forced him to halt the process. When he stepped outside the chamber, he quickly regained access to his implant, allowing him to convert the spiritual files into digital files.

After that, he reentered the chamber and continued to record more pages.

This process went on for many hours. To save on time, Ves did not even bother to read any of the text. He only looked at it long enough to snap a picture before scrolling to the next page.

Ves had lost track of the amount of times he stepped outside the chamber to initiate the conversion process! His legs received a lot of exercise that day and he probably looked very weird to others!

If Master Willix was observing him from the sensors embedded in the Darkbreak module, she might probably be thinking that he had gone crazy!

Of course, she might also suspect that Ves employed a means of defeating the Darkbreak module's jamming function.

This was something that Ves already took into account. He knew that Master Willix was quite tolerant compared to many other officials within the MTA. He bet that a relatively minor issue like this was not really worth investigating as long as he abided by the spirit of their deal.

As long as he refrained from leaking the research data to the public, it didn't really matter what method he used to!

Over the course of several days, Ves finished the recording process. After that, he rapidly expanded his knowledge base.

Not only did he learn a lot of unique aspects on luminar crystals, but he also deepened his understanding of some very specific fields!

Several of his Sub-Skills such as Crystallography, Directed Energy Weapon Optimization, Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation and Optics advanced by leaps and bounds!

As one of the holy lands of human high technology, the MTA's grasp in this field was incredibly comprehensive. The theories that Ves absorbed were substantially greater in

quality than the theories taught by Clarion University's textbooks. Only the knowledge directly provided by the System came close!

His eyes gleamed as he began to see laser weapons in a deeper way. As much as he didn't want to, he couldn't help but gain a bit of appreciation for Master Willix and the MTA.

Perhaps it wasn't so bad to cooperate with the Association after all!

As long as he didn't give away anything valuable, he didn't mind conducting some more trades.

It could even substitute some of the benefits that Ves usually derived from the System!

In fact, it wouldn't be too inaccurate to say that the MTA actually functioned like a public version of the Mech Designer System!

Ves froze when he made this realization. "Is this a coincidence?"

Chapter 2216 Crona Lords

In Maynard Fields, those who possessed the capability to establish a base and maintain possession of it were strong.

Roaming pirate organizations that only possessed ships were usually dependent on raiding and other risky activities to maintain their existence.

Obviously, this was a very unstable means of survival.

If possible, pirates vastly preferred setting up a base in a resource-rich area so that they could earn a more stable form of living. Not only did they need to take part in risky attacks, but they could also settle down and form something that a pirate could call a home.

Sometimes, the line between pirate and colonist blurred.

However, that did not stop Ves from targeting these powerful pirate bases. Everyone in the Nyxian Gap was fair game in his eyes!

It didn't take too long before Task Force Predator entered the territory claimed by a long-established pirate group called the Crona Lords.

The fleet did not dare to venture too deeply. If the Crona Lords discovered the presence of a strong fleet in their backyard, they would instantly raise their guard!

A careful scouting operation commenced. To reduce the vigilance of the Crona Lords, the Flagrant Vandals resorted to a simple trick.

They took some pirate mechs captured in some of their earlier battles and modified them a little bit before sending them forward.

While they were not as easy to hide as the regular scout mechs of the Flagrant Vandals, their low quality shouldn't arouse as much vigilance!

Some time passed before the Flagrant Vandals obtained long-ranged scans that depicted the surroundings of Xiphard Base.

Built into an asteroid and surrounded by other asteroids, Xiphard Base was a very defensive fortification that was home to tens of thousands of people.

Not all of them were strictly pirates!

A large number of shabby mining vessels roamed the asteroids floating in a wide perimeter around Xiphard Base. Each of them were tasked with mining the relatively abundant amount of Kavenit deposits.

Most of their crew consisted of slaves.

The Crona Lords established Xiphard Base in this specific location because they discovered that the local area just happened to offer a lot of Kavenit.

The pirate group used the earnings they made from their mining operation to continually invest in their mechs and most notably their fixed defenses. They were much like the Mountain Kings in that regard.

According to Calabast's intelligence, Supreme Lord Roda was a cautious and relatively patient leader. He maintained a low profile and a tight grip on the Crona Lords.

There were plenty of pirate commanders who possessed a lot more ambition and went to a lot of extremes to climb to power.

Not so for the so-called Supreme Lord. Aside from giving himself a ridiculously inflated title, Roda did not leverage his growing power to fight for better territory but instead invested fully in turning Xiphard Base into a strong fortification.

Most rival pirate groups did not show any eagerness in conquering Xiphard Base.

First, anyone who attacked it would suffer severe losses. With 1,200 mechs and very strong base defenses, the cost of attacking the Crona Lords would definitely hurt!

Second, it was pretty much an open secret that Xiphard Base hid even more surprises in the dark. If a truly powerful enemy arrived, the Crona Lords would definitely bring out something powerful that allowed them to punch above their weight!

Third, it was not unusual to rig a base up to blow if worse came to worst. Sometimes, pirates refrained from doing so because once someone hacked their way to the hidden self-destruct mechanism and activated it, everyone would instantly die!

However, there were always pirates who were daring or stupid enough to install a self-destruction mechanism. No one knew for sure whether Supreme Lord Roda was one of them, but no one dared to take the risk!

Fourth, Kavenit could be found in many more places in Maynard Fields. There was no need for most ambitious pirate groups to attack the highly-entrenched Crona Lords when there were plenty of softer targets. The asteroids in the vicinity of Xiphard Base weren't valuable enough to justify the loss of thousands of mechs and other assets!

Due to this formidable amount of deterrence, the Crona Lords managed to withstand the test of time.

Ves and every leader in the fleet knew that assaulting Xiphard Base was too risky. Certainly, the MTA placed some bounties on the Crona Lords and Supreme Lord Roda, but the amount of merits he could earn was not enough to compensate for the huge amount of losses his task force would incur if it initiated a direct assault!

"It's very likely that not even the second-class mechs of the Penitent Sisters can withstand the trump cards of the Crona Lords." Calabast warned him during an initial briefing. "If the pirate groups of Wreckage Paradise are any indication, then we will definitely suffer serious casualties for the very first time."

"It's worth it as long as we don't lose too many lives." Ves spoke. "Not only will our troops gain a lot of tempering for attacking such a powerful opponent, a pirate organization as long-lasting and successful as the Crona Lords must have accumulated a lot of treasure."

The spymaster looked exasperated. "We aren't pirates, Ves. Why are you so insistent on attacking the Crona Lords when they aren't worth that many merits? We should be bypassing this obstacle and resume our original goal of tracking down and rescuing Solok Reyva!"

"You don't understand. I don't want to hear any doubts. Just make it happen. If you're so worried about the losses we might incur, then work harder to make sure we obtain a complete understanding of Xiphard Base."

Both of them turned to Lucky, who had just been outfitted with the Misfortune Harness. A handful of slim, custom-built gadgets that were meant to facilitate his first infiltration had been mounted onto its exterior.

Lucky truly looked the part of a commando cat this time!

"Meow."

Ves caressed Lucky's head. "I know you're nervous, but think of all of the exotics you can eat! Just make sure not to take a bite out of everything in your first deployment. You can't let them discover anything amiss. Just roam around and perform as many scans as possible. Hack into any critical computer systems that look important enough and keep your eye out on any dangerous hidden defense mechanisms. Above all else, try your best to sniff out any self-destruction mechanisms!"

"Meow meow!"

"He already knows what to do." Calabast smiled and picked up the black-clad mechanical cat. "I'll take him to the stealth shuttle so he can sneak up to Xiphard Base."

It took more than a day for Lucky to perform his mission. Not only did the stealth shuttle had to sneak into the defense perimeter of the Crona Lords undetected, Lucky had to cover a lot of ground.

It was not enough to infiltrate and make recordings of the interior of the main base. Lucky also to sneak into the smaller bastions surrounding the main base.

On top of that, the gem cat turned commando cat must also infiltrate the biggest ships of the Crona Lords to be sure that they didn't hide any surprises either!

Task Force Predator shifted to a greater state of alertness while Lucky was gone. Ves grew nervous as he thought of his cat venturing deep into a dangerous pirate stronghold.

If anything went wrong, Lucky would definitely suffer! Though Ves was somewhat confident of his gem cat's survival abilities, the uncertainty of the situation still weighed heavily on his mind.

He cared too much about Lucky. He even began to regret the decision to use Lucky in this capacity. While it made a lot of sense in theory, his sentiments towards his cat caused him to feel a lot more worried than if he dispatched a bunch of random clansmen!

"I'm sorry, Lucky." He quietly whispered. "No one else can do what you can do. For now, I can only rely on you to perform this mission."

If possible, he wanted to train some disposable clansmen to perform this infiltration mission instead, but Calabast already told him it couldn't be done. Not even DIVA could equal Lucky when it came to intruding into highly-guarded facilities!

Only Lucky possessed the ability to turn intangible and phase through solid obstacles. Though Ves temporarily gained the same ability in the past, it quickly faded for some reason. In fact, now that he recalled the incident, both of them gained this ability when they stumbled across an unknown installation of the crystal builder race!

The technology utilized by this extinct race and their ability to manipulate space and other properties to such a strong degree was very impressive!

"There's more to this alien race than I am aware of." He muttered.

During the entire operation, the Black Cats worked hard to keep an eye on the Crona Lords. The disguised pirate scout mechs not only kept a constant eye on Xiphard Base, but also deposited stealthy sensors as well as other devices in order to glean more insights from their observations.

When the stealth shuttle carrying Lucky finally returned, Ves quickly met up with his cat again!

"Haha, you made it back alive!"

"Meow!"

Ves smiled as he clutched Lucky and checked him for anything amiss. Fortunately, there were no signs of battle damage. The only change was the absence of various gadgets.

The abundant amount of scans that Lucky had made as well as the data he managed to copy from some of the data banks provided the task force with a wealth of pertinent information.

The Black Cats as well as other analysts became incredibly busy as they built up a complete overview of Xiphard Base and all of the secrets it hid beneath the surface.

Major Verle and the mech commanders already obtained a complete blueprint of the pirate base. This was enough for them to begin their planning for a major assault.

This time, the Larkinson Clan would not hold back.

This time, the 300 second-class mechs of the Penitent Sisters would play a key role in the upcoming battle.

It became clear why this was necessary when Major Verle and Calabast both reported to Ves in his stateroom.

Calabast handed over a data pad that outlined all of the hidden weapons of the Crona Lord. "According to Lucky's extensive scans as well as the private logs of Supreme Lord Roda, Xiphard Base doesn't contain any self-destruct mechanisms. It's not rigged to blow."

Ves visibly sagged in relief. "That's good news."

"Not quite. The reason why Xiphard Base doesn't have any self-destruct mechanisms is because the Crona Lord already has other means to destroy their base."

When Ves glanced at the data pad, he looked puzzled. "They have three trump cards?"

"Yes, and all of them are strong. The first major threat we must face are the Alpha Mines. These are twenty-seven asteroids spread around the perimeter of Xiphard Base that are secretly filled with exotic-enriched nuclear explosives. The most impressive feature of the Alpha Mines is that they incorporate a lot of sensor-dampening materials. This means that hardly any sensors will be able to detect the potent warheads buried in their center!"

Ves winced at the thought. "Even we would suffer great losses if any of our mechs carelessly pass by those asteroids!"

None of their previous long-distance scans detected those dangerous Alpha Mines! This was a very egregious oversight!

Even Calabast looked upset.

"It's clear to us that our means of detecting danger is inadequate. The threat of the Alpha Mines isn't confined to Xiphard Base. We might easily pass by a random coordinate and suddenly lose several light carriers because they strayed too close to a mine that an unknown pirate group has planted there. I'm already in touch with Commander Chancy of the Penitent Sisters to see if her mech technicians can fabricate more second-class sensor arrays."

"That sounds prudent."

The twenty-seven Alpha Mines was one of the most destructive tools available to the Crona Lords, but hardly their own means of resisting a vastly more powerful force!

Chapter 2217 Omega

"The second hidden weapon is the so-called Beta Ships." Major Verle spoke up. "The five seemingly-derelict pirate vessels that are parked outside of Xiphard Base are not as

innocuous as they look. When we showed the scans of the ships to Fleet Commander Kronon, Commodore Evern and some of our chief engineers, they all reacted with shock."

Ves flipped through the contents of the data pad until he came across the detailed blueprints of all five Beta Ships.

They were roughly similar ships. Their corroded and cheap exterior were actually false coats. Underneath their ugly outer layer, the layers below actually consisted of larger amounts of Kavenit alloys.

What was remarkable about the Beta Ships was how solid they were and how little functionality they contained.

The ships featured very little interior spaces! Instead, many places that should have held compartments were actually filled up with solid Kavenit alloys!

To call them ships was a stretch. They were mostly solid ship-sized objects that possessed a very minimal crew complement. The only meaningful functionality they contained was the oversized sunlight propulsion systems strapped to their rear ends.

"These Beta Ships are essentially ship-sized rockets!" Ves reacted with horror!

He scanned through the performance parameters of the Beta Ships. Though they took some time to accelerate forward, once they got going, their momentum was immense!

Even if hundreds of mechs fired all kinds of weapons at the approaching Beta Ships, the latter incorporated so much solid materials that it was impossible to destroy them in a short amount of time!

While these ship-sized torpedoes were exceptionally resilient, agile vehicles such as mechs could easily dodge out of their way.

The problem was that they contained just enough maneuverability to ram into ships!

As long as the Beta Ships built up a sufficient amount of momentum, not even the second-class combat carriers of the Penitent Sisters could survive a solid collision against a Beta Ship!

Major Verle looked grim. "The Alpha Mines are targeted towards large groups of mechs, while the Beta Ships are meant to take out key starships. The combination is enough to shatter the assault of forces much stronger than ours."

Ves was both horrified and confused at the sheer amount of effort and resources the Crona Lords invested in these countermeasures.

"How the hell can a bunch of pirates build so many destructive weapons?"

"It's very plausible that the Crona Lords are able to construct so many Alpha Mines and Beta Ships. They have been entrenched in this region for over seventy years. That is enough time to build a destructive weapon every couple of years. From Lucky's scans, it's clear that they weren't built at the same time. This is the advantage of an established pirate group. The longer they are able to cling to a territory, the harder it becomes to dislodge them from their fortifications."

The scariest implication of her statement was that Xiphard Base wasn't even the strongest pirate base in Maynard Fields! Frostbite Fortress and several other pirate sites possessed a much higher reputation!

As Ves continued to scroll through the data pad, he froze yet again. "What the hell is this?!"

Major Verle coughed. "The Omega Laser is the latest and most technologically-advanced weapon at their disposal. The main base contains a buried weapon hardpoint that is able to fire incredibly powerful laser beams. It is powered by several dedicated power reactors and is linked up to a large amount of energy cells. The engineers who studied the blueprint of this huge weapon estimate that it is powerful enough to fire twelve cruiser-grade laser beams!"

In other words, the Omega Laser outputted a comparable amount of damage to a single shot from the main weapon of a warship!

While the weapon wasn't as powerful as an actual MTA warship weapon, its power and scale still surpassed that of any weapon wielded by a mech¹

"Is this Omega Laser supposed to counter mechs or ships?" Ves asked.

"Both. It can fire in multiple configurations. In its most basic form, it fires an ultra powerful concentrated beam that can bore a hole straight through the hulls of several light carriers. The operators can also switch it to a wide-area mode to wipe out hundreds of mechs at close range or a splitting mode that allows it to take out a large number of mechs at a distance."

The data pad clattered onto the surface of the desk.

Though he knew that pirates were quite creative when it came to cooking up rule-breaking weapons, the Omega Laser vastly exceeded his estimates!

"This cruiser weapon is too advanced! While I can believe that the Crona Lords have trained or captured enough engineers to build the Alpha Mines and Beta Ships, the schematics of this Omega Laser is not just a scaled up laser cannon!"

As a mech designer and someone who recently absorbed a lot of new knowledge on laser weapons, he could tell that the design of this superweapon not only used up a lot of valuable exotics, but also incorporated technological principles that most Journeymen shouldn't even know!

Neither Major Verle nor Calabast had many answers.

"The records of the Crona Lords deliberately avoid as many references to their trump cards as possible, so we don't have the full story behind the Omega Laser. Not a single log written by Supreme Lord Roda mentions the laser despite the fact he occasionally references the Alpha Mines and the Beta Ships. From the indirect clues we have gathered, it's likely the Crona Lords performed a secret transaction with one of the other major pirate groups of the Nyxian Gap."

This meant that there was a very powerful pirate group that secretly supplied other Nyxian pirates with taboo-busting weapons!

Once Ves gained a good grasp of the three secret weapons of the Crona Lords, he sighed and leaned back on his chair. "What is the chance that the Crona Lords are hiding additional surprises?"

"Fairly low." Calabast instantly replied. "Lucky has scoured all of the major places that can hide anything that can threaten our troops. The biggest risk is that the Crona Lords have seeded more Alpha Mines or comparable traps in the local asteroids, but we have gathered sufficient clues to believe this is not the case. Just to be sure, my Black Cats have specifically configured our sensor arrays to scan for the specific sensor signatures and unique signs of the Alpha Mines. Now that we are aware of their existence and know what they are made of, it's a lot easier to detect them in the asteroid field. We have already double-checked and confirmed the placement of all twenty-seven Alpha Mines."

That sounded good. Ves found that it was quite enjoyable to be surrounded by capable leaders. Everytime Ves was about to bring up a concern, Calabast or Major Verle would quickly reply with an answer that made it clear they were already working on the problem.

Despite the great impact of these hidden weapons, Major Verle actually looked optimistic.

"One of the key rules to warfare is to know your enemy. In my long career in the Mech Corps, I'm used to working with much less information. The intelligence we have gathered is so extensive that we have practically stripped all of the clothes of the Crona Lords and taken scans of their naked bodies! We know almost every significant detail about their defenses and combat troops. Now that we know of their trump cards, we can specifically target them before we initiate our main assault!"

Ves turned to Calabast. "I take it that Lucky is needed to sabotage all of these weapons?"

She nodded. "That, and more. Our analysts have already detected that it is trivially easy to disarm the Alpha Mines as long as Lucky can slip in. He just has to cut a couple of sections to render them inoperable. The biggest challenge here is that Lucky has to do this to all twenty-seven mines, which will take a lot of time."

"How long?"

"Half a day. The Beta Ships are much easier to disable due to their smaller numbers. For all of their might, the five ships aren't deadly if they can't even move. Lucky just has to sabotage a few critical sections of their propulsion systems to turn them into actual floating husks in space."

If Ves could sneak aboard one of these so-called Beta Ships, he could accomplish the same.

"What about the Omega Laser?"

"I'm sure you can tell that it is no different." Calabast replied. "This is a large and powerful weapon, but it relies on a lot of key components to function. Disabling just a handful of them is enough to knock it offline. There are two problems, though. First, the weapon contains a fair amount of redundancies, and the Crona Lords have stocked up a fair amount of spare parts that the weapon crews can swap in a short amount of time. Second, the weapon is constantly checking on the conditions of its systems and subsystems, and to our surprise it's not easy to circumvent these procedures. If the routine checks stumble upon anything amiss, the Crona Lords will go on full alert."

Ves frowned. The Omega Laser was not comparable to average pirate products. Even its security systems were impossible to compromise in a short amount of time!

"So we leave the sabotage of the Omega Laser for last?"

She nodded. "That's the plan. We will just let Lucky sabotage the outer defenses and the trump cards of Xiphard Base first. If nothing goes wrong, he will slowly work his way inwards. Aside from disabling the trump cards, Lucky will also be tasked with sabotaging various power reactors, defensive installations, ammunition depots, data banks, life support systems, starships, base systems and so on. Along the way, he'll also be on the lookout for any senior pirate officers. If Supreme Lord Roda is close, assassinating him will likely deal a very severe blow to the morale of the Crona Lords."

"That sounds.. quite a lot for a single cat to handle."

"It's not as difficult to accomplish as you think. Lucky will be making several trips to the stealth shuttle in order to load up on gadgets, poison and timed explosives."

The fact that the first infiltration failed to trip any alarms was a hopeful sign that this second operation would proceed smoothly. So far, aside from the ridiculously powerful Omega Laser, the Crona Lords didn't possess anything advanced enough to detect a second-class stealth vehicle.

The more Ves learned about their plan, the more hopeful he grew. The impact he received from learning about all of the rule-breaking weapons in the arsenal of the Crona Lords had faded.

He even began to look forward to the reaction of the Crona Lords when they found out that their attackers had already disabled all of their hidden weapons beforehand!

Such a realization would definitely strike another huge blow to the confidence of the pirates!

Once they finished going over the plan, Ves moved on the last point on the agenda.

"By the way, what kind of plunder can we expect from capturing this base?"

"Well, Xiphard Base has stockpiled a large amount of Kanevit bars." Calabast answered. "Though the wealth isn't impressive to the Larkinson Clan, it's the most widely-accepted currency in the Nyxian Gap, which will definitely be useful in our subsequent operations."

Kanevit was not an exceptionally valuable exotic. Ves did not look enthused. "Skip the bulk materials and get to the good stuff. Have you found any B-stones?"

"Surprisingly, Lucky did stumble across three of them. Your cat found each of them in the bedrooms of Supreme Lord Roda and two other senior officers."

"Three?! Are you sure?!"

"They're smaller than the last rock you obtained, but they are still sizable."

This was fantastic news! The more B-stone he obtained, the greater his defenses against spiritual phenomena. Since Ves was unsure whether he could even obtain B-stones outside of the Komodo Star Sector or in the Red Ocean, gathering them all up was one of his highest priorities!

Chapter 2218 Agent Lucky

A stealth shuttle quietly approached a seemingly random asteroid floating in a field of asteroids.

It elicited no disturbance in its voyage. With hardly any strong light sources in the periphery of Xiphard Base, no hardly any light or other radiation shone in the shuttle's direction.

Even if someone shone a spotlight at the shuttle, there was no way it would become visible!

Through a combination of highly sophisticated stealth technologies, light and other energy seemed to pass straight through the shuttle's structure without revealing anything.

Even other forms of detection such as gravitic sensors and more esoteric hardware were also hoodwinked!

Perhaps the only major threat that could shred the stealth shuttle's facade was if something physical flung straight into its chassis.

However, even there the shuttle readied a response. The vehicle expertly manipulated the ubiquitous space dust and particles released from asteroid collisions.

If someone thought that a low-tech solution such as throwing huge volumes of sand in space would successfully reveal the passage of invisible objects, then they were sorely mistaken!

Second-class stealth technology already incorporated hundreds of different solutions to common means of detection!

The Crona Lords completely missed the fact that a stealth shuttle and a certain commando cat had entered the depths of their sanctum.

Now, Lucky would be making another trip. Inside the interior of the shuttle, racks and racks of gadgets occupied much of the space, leaving little room for the mechanical cat and the pair of Black Cats assigned to manage the equipment.

A black-clad woman studied the projection that provided her with a wireframe map of Xiphard Base and its security perimeter.

With one huge asteroid at the center, several smaller asteroids chained around it and a decent amount of pirate mechs patrolling beyond, it seemed daunting to approach this formidable fortification.

Lucky flicked his tail nervously. "Meow."

"It will be fine, Agent Lucky. While we are on a tight schedule, don't hesitate to skip certain tasks if the risk of discovery is too great."

"Meow!"

"We are nearing our first objective. Your first task is to disable the twenty-seven Alpha Mines that are spread in the outer perimeter of the pirate base. We have already uploaded the schematics of the Alpha Mine and which components and subcomponents you need to disable."

"Meow."

Hardly any of the mechs on patrols paid much attention to their surroundings. The stealth shuttle halted right next to the asteroid that hid a devastatingly powerful nuclear payload.

Lucky phased right through the shuttle hull and quickly dove straight through the asteroid as if all of the rock was nothing but air.

The brief exposure in space did not trip up any sensors. Neither the Alpha Mine nor the mech patrolling a few kilometers away noticed anything due to the Misfortune Harness that Lucky currently wore!

Once inside, the commando cat instantly recalled the schematics of the Alpha Mine and quickly phased to the center of the big rock. Eventually, he came very close to the explosive warhead and the components built to regulate its activation.

Lucky flitted around and swiped his claws several times. With each attack, his claw only phased back into existence long enough to cut through certain wires, demolish tiny subcomponents or ruin critically important processors!

Normally, an Alpha Mine frequently checked the condition and operation of all of its systems and components. As soon as one of them malfunctioned or became irresponsible, the mine was supposed to transmit a discrete signal back to Xiphard Base.

It just so happened that Lucky destroyed one of the transmission mechanisms first! Shortly after that, he destroyed the various redundant systems that were supposed to check the integrity of the Alpha Mines.

Once Lucky tore apart all of these safety systems, he was free to destroy some of the more essential mechanisms!

Though he only spent two minutes of time to tear apart all of the key components, the Alpha Mine no longer posed a threat!

Even if some pirates accessed its interior and replaced the broken components, it would take too much time to repair them all. There was no way the Crona Lords could finish the task in the middle of a battle!

Lucky phased out of the inert asteroid and dove straight back into the stealth shuttle, which had already shifted to a different position out of caution.

Though the Crona Lords didn't possess any sensors that could pick up the stealth shuttle, Lucky was different.

After eating some CFA gadgets and an entire CFA shuttle a few years ago, his detection ability was on par with first-class technology!

Even if the tech he assimilated was outdated, the Big Two's equipment at the time was still significantly more advanced than anything a second-rate state was capable of developing.

Therefore, to Lucky's sophisticated, multidimensional miniaturized sensor suite, the shuttle stood out like a sore thumb in space!

When Lucky phased back inside the shuttle, the vehicle quietly flew to another Alpha Mine.

In the meantime, Lucky draped himself over the lap of the Back Cat officer in order to offer himself to gentle caresses.

"Meow."

"Good job, but this is just the beginning."

It took many hours to sabotage all twenty-seven Alpha Mines. While Lucky only needed minutes to covertly disarm each of them, the mines were spread around many kilometers apart from each other.

Though it was easy to traverse this distance in the open, the stealth shuttle had to rely on very unobtrusive means of propulsion in order to avoid whipping up any disturbances. Just because the Crona Lords were unlikely to detect the intruder did not mean that the shuttle pilot could act careless!

In the end, sabotaging the Alpha Mines turned into a chore more than anything. The Crona Lords placed them a fair distance from Xiphard Base as the pirates did not wish for their explosive packages to impact their mechs and assets!

Lucky and the Black Cats considered this step to be a warm-up phase. Now that Lucky was tasked with sabotaging the Beta Ships and the various carrier vessels of the Crona Lords, the stealth shuttle had to fly much closer into Xiphard Base's security perimeter.

At this point, if the pirates ever detected the stealth shuttle, it was unlikely for the craft and its crew to escape death or capture!

"You need to act with much more care from now on. Just a single mistake can spell the premature end of this operation."

"Meow.."

The stealth shuttle approached one of the several derelict-looking ships parked just outside the defensive asteroids.

If anyone looked at one of the disguised Beta Ships, they would have instantly dismissed it as a threat. Its corroded, pockmarked exterior made it seem as if the Crona Lords had retrieved them from a battlefield but didn't bother to fix them up!

Due to all of the other space junk dumped in and around Xiphard Base, the Beta Ships blended in well.

It was only when Lucky phased through the solid Kavenit alloys that made up much of the structure that the scenery changed.

Lucky entered a clean compartment that hummed quietly. Various ship components lit up around him, signifying that the Beta Ship was constantly active but put on standby.

A skeleton crew comprising of just a single engineer and a handful of other pirates were secretly stationed on the ship.

Due to lack of systems on the Beta Ship, the cat did not need to mess with too many components.

As suicide ramming vessels, the Beta Ships almost solely relied on its oversized and upscaled sunlight propulsion systems to perform their sole job.

While their propulsion systems incorporated a lot of redundancies, that only meant that Lucky had to spend a bit more time.

Sabotaging a ship was different from disarming a mine. Lucky had to render the Beta Ships useless underneath the noses of a small but active crew.

Still, after the engineers of the Larkinson Clan poured over the detailed scans and schematics of the Beta Ships, they formulated a precise plan. Lucky merely had to follow all of the steps to complete his job.

First, he quietly disabled all of the sensors and inspection modules that watched out for irregularities. Then he began to tamper with the various systems that regulated the propulsion systems. Finally, he uploaded some malware to the Beta Ship's various control systems.

He did not do anything to the crew. It wasn't necessary to assassinate or poison them when the Beta Ship already couldn't be fixed.

It took several hours for Lucky to be brought to all five Beta Ships as well as several other pirate ships to perform his meticulous sabotage.

The Crona Lords owned interesting carrier vessels. Most of them originally started off as light carriers, but the pirates had gradually upgraded their internal structure and exterior hull with Kavenit alloys to strengthen them in a comprehensive manner.

After so many upgrades, the vessels couldn't be categorized as light carriers anymore. However, their resilience still fell short of purpose-built combat carriers due to the inherent inadequacies of the original ship class.

The Crona Lords just called them medium carriers in their internal documentation.

Regardless of how they were called, they were large vessels crewed by hundreds of pirates.

It was a lot harder for a little commando cat to remain undetected while he sneaked inside!

While he wore his Misfortune Harness, he became nigh-undetectable to regular detection methods. By spending most of his time phased through solid materials, not even the unalert crew members noticed any signs of an intruding cat!

Even so, Lucky had to act a lot more delicately to sabotage the ship. His main task was to tamper with the propulsion systems in order to prevent the pirates from retreating.

Lucky also tampered with various other systems. By installing some timed explosives and messing with some other components, the Crona Lords aboard the medium carrier were definitely going to suffer when the assault commenced!

Due to the lack of time, Lucky couldn't mess with too many essential components. With each sabotage he performed, the chance of discovery increased.

It would have been ideal if the mechanical cat could tamper with the mechs fielded by the Crona Lords, but there were way too many of them. They frequently went on patrol and received a lot of inspections.

With so many ships to visit, Lucky could only stay for ten minutes at most before he had to leave.

It took a long time before Lucky visited all of the ships in the vicinity. The stealth shuttle then proceeded to bring him closer to the defensive asteroids placed around the main base.

These defensive outposts featured numerous turrets and missile launchers, but they weren't too important.

The main role of these defensive asteroids was to act as solid obstacles. Their sheer bulk stopped many means of striking Xiphard Base directly from long range.

Despite their importance, the defensive asteroids offered plenty of solid mass for Lucky to remain undetected as he phased from compartment to compartment.

He not only tampered with the power systems, but also dropped a few surprises in the chambers that stored a lot of missiles.

After Lucky successfully compromised the functioning of all of the defensive asteroids did the shuttle bring him to his final destination.

Upon entering Xiphard Base, Lucky began to visit various important sections of the large base. He managed to remain completely undetected as he paid a visit to various power generators, security centers, ammunition storerooms.

During his sabotage, he also started to approach some of the more important-looking pirate officers. He didn't claw out their necks for fear of alarming the pirates. Instead, he dipped his paws with some poison and tapped very lightly on the skin of his targets.

The slow-acting poison would remain dormant within the bodies of the victims until they became more active. Once their excitement surpassed a certain standard, the poison would quickly act up and cause the victims to die or lose their consciousness!

Sadly, Lucky hadn't managed to bump into Supreme Lord Roda himself. Xiphard Base was actually pretty large and the pirate commander could be everywhere.

As time began to run out, Lucky finally reached a hidden base section which stored the latest and arguably the most potent secret weapon of the Crona Lords.

The Omega Laser..

An elite crew of weapon technicians and operators kept a very close eye on its various systems. Due to the meticulous design of this superweapon, it was impossible for Lucky to sabotage it with impunity like before!

Chapter 2219 The Battle of Xiphard Base

A projection of Ves sat on a prominent chair inside a command center aboard the Redfeather.

The Scarlet Rose was already cramped for space and could not accommodate all of the people and equipment needed to exert adequate control over the Larkinson Clan's combat forces.

Therefore, Major Verle decided to transfer to the Redfeather and command the battle from there.

Since Ves did not play a major role in the upcoming attack, it was better for him to remain in the Scarlet Rose which was a lot more secure.

The projection of Ves observed the large map of the Xiphard Base. Various elements in and around the base were marked with red to signify sabotage.

It actually took several days for Lucky to visit so many sites, but as far as the Larkinson Clan was concerned, the wait was worth it. With so many important sections marked in red, the Crona Lords were in for a very nasty surprise.

Major Verle glanced at the projected timer. "So far, the stealth shuttle hasn't transmitted any covert transmissions, which means that the sabotage is still happening on schedule. There are only fifteen minutes left before the Omega Laser is compromised."

A long time had already passed since Lucky left the Scarlet Rose. Those who were aware of the sabotage operation continually worried for its success.

Lucky had to visit many different sites and sabotage hundreds of different key components! Anything could go wrong in the meantime.

If the sabotage operation hit a setback, the shuttle should have transmitted a very weak but specific signal. If the pirates found out that something was wrong, they would have triggered an alarm.

So far, neither of these two options happened. The pirates remained as clueless as ever while the shuttle remained completely silent in order to minimize the chances of detection.

The lack of reactions and the inability for the Larkinsons to determine what was actually taking place generated a lot of worries in their minds.

Only Ves exuded a bit more confidence. His projection silently made the Larkinsons in the command center feel as if everything was in control.

Unlike them, Ves possessed an extra means of checking up on Lucky's condition. Though the turbulence and space warping in the Nyxian Gap added some difficulties, Ves was nonetheless able to track Lucky's overall presence in the Larkinson Network.

He had placed the Larkinson Mandate on his lap, allowing him to maintain direct contact with the Golden Cat.

Through her active bond with Lucky, she was able to track what the gem cat was doing and convey what she learned to her creator.

Nyaaa. Nyaa. Nyaa.

Ves smiled. "Major Verle, are our troops prepared to initiate the assault?"

"Every mech we intended to deploy has already been launched in space, sir." The commander of the upcoming battle replied. "We can commence our attack at any moment."

Twenty-five percent of the mechs of Task Force Predator would be held back in reserve in order to defend the fleet and be ready to respond to any emergencies.

That meant that the Larkinson Clan committed 1400 mechs to the assault!

Even though the attackers slightly outnumbered the pirate mechs, none of the Larkinsons dared to take this battle lightly.

Sabotage or not, there were plenty of other defenses that Lucky didn't have the time to tamper with, so the Crona Lords still enjoyed at least some defensive advantages.

Their mechs weren't as shabby as the machines fielded by nomadic pirate groups. With a foundation stretching more than 70 years, the Crona Lords had the time, resources and patience to build up a strong core of mechs and mech pilots.

The pilots received an abundant amount of training and rewards from the Crona Lords. The mechs they piloted incorporated higher-quality Kavenit alloys as their core means of protection.

The officer mechs and elite mechs were even clad with compressed armor plating!

Therefore, the quality disparity between the mechs of the Larkinson Clan and the mechs of the Crona Lord was substantially reduced.

Ves idly realized that it wasn't strictly correct to equate the Crona Lords with the pirates he was familiar with. The Crona Lords did not really engage in actual piracy. Instead, it was better to describe them as colonists who settled down in a mineral-rich area in order to earn a living by mining and selling valuable materials.

"Do you think the Crona Lords are pirates?" He suddenly asked. "It seems to me that they are just minding their own business. There are far more notorious pirate groups in the Nyxian Gap that we could target instead."

"It's a bit too late to ask this question." Major Verle responded. "Besides, the Crona Lords may not engage in pirate raids themselves, but they are facilitating the ones that do. Ending their mining and trading activities will inflict a small but measurable blow to the Nyxian pirates. Less pirate raids will occur in civilized space. Besides, we have already confirmed that the Crona Lords have egregiously broken several important taboos. The Big Two will be happy to get rid of this stain."

That reminded Ves to get in touch with the MTA in order to report all of the taboo weapons the Crona Lords had accumulated. With so many Alpha Mines and the egregiously powerful Omega Laser, the offenses they committed were a lot more severe than the offenses committed by the Rust Grinders and the Mountain Kings!

This meant that Ves might be able to earn more than 100,000 MTA merits this time. If he was merely aiming for merits, then launching an attack against such a powerful pirate base still wasn't worth it due to the risks he incurred.

Fortunately, there would be other gains.

As the timer slowly ticked down, the forward scouts finally reported some activity at Xiphard Base.

"Heightened activity detected! Ships are moving into more defensible positions while additional Crona Lord mechs are being launched into space! The amount of signal transmissions in and around the base has skyrocketed!"

Major Verle turned to the projection of Ves. "Sir, permission to commence the assault?"

Ves nodded as he gripped the Larkinson Mandate tighter. "Go for it."

"Commence the assault!"

The spaceborn mechs that had already deployed in space began to emerge from behind the asteroids they huddled behind and advanced boldly in the direction of Xiphard Base!

In order to remain undetected, the combat forces had to traverse a lot of distance before they entered the pirate base's security perimeter.

However, the emissions from their activated flight systems stuck out like a sore thumb, especially when more than a thousand mechs approached from a single direction!

Even though the various mech companies and mech squads maintained some distance from each other in order to make them less susceptible to wide-area attacks, the huge wave of emissions quickly tripped the long-ranged sensors of the alarmed pirates!

After the Omega Laser detected something amiss, the entire apparatus sounded a huge alarm. The crew in charge of guarding and operating the Omega Laser became alarmed, but just as they were about to crack open the huge weapon in order to inspect the damage, a quick succession of black-clad claws swiped across the necks of every pirate!

Over two-dozen weapon operators and guards lost their lives in quick succession! Even if they detected an intangible dark shape zipping in the chamber, Lucky moved too quickly, and even if someone managed to land a hit on him, his intangible form allowed him to ignore all physical projectiles and most energy attacks!

"Meow!" Lucky domineeringly phased back into the material realm.

His Misfortune Harness was completely unaffected by the scuffle. Aside from the blood dripping from the tip of his front paws, there was no sign that the gem cat had just harvested a couple of lives!

The cat looked longingly at the Omega Laser before orienting his body in the direction of the main base.

The sabotage of the Omega Laser did not mark the end of his deployment. If everything went as planned, the general assault had just commenced, which meant that Lucky could still play a useful role!

Since the Crona Lords tried and failed all of their defensive systems, they would soon find out that there was a saboteur in their midst!

Lucky's mission was to take advantage of the turmoil and wreak even more havoc inside Xiphard Base!

He no longer needed to evade detection as much! As long as he kept himself safe, he was free to kill every important pirate he saw and tear apart any critical systems in his way!

"Meow!"

As Lucky tormented the unfortunate pirates stationed at Xiphard Base, from the outside more and more pirate mechs hastily deployed into space.

The Crona Lords were under attack!

The aged but vigorous form Supreme Lord Roda had been inspecting one of the medium carriers when a large number alarms bombarded his ears.

He initially headed towards the hangar bay in order to return to Xiphard Base, but once the base defenders warned him that there were hostiles present, he changed his mind and entered the command center of the ship instead.

"Give me a status report! What is the state of our defenses!"

"Milord, our defensive bastions report numerous signs of damage! Eighty percent of our turrets are inoperable and ninety percent of our carrier vessels are immobilized!"

"What?!" The Supreme Lord panicked. "Why can't our ships move!?"

"Our engineers have just detected signs of selective sabotage on every ship! Their propulsion systems and several other systems are not working!"

Suddenly, the air in the command center and the rest of the medium carrier got sucked away!

Across the hull of the ship, several ports inexplicably opened up, causing them to vent all of the air and oxygen!

Many compartments automatically closed up to stop the leakage, but they moved too late!

This wasn't necessarily a disaster, though. Since each Crona Lord was supposed to wear at least an underlayer vacsuit, helmets formed over their heads.

Supreme Lord Roda just happened to wear a much higher-quality vacsuit, but even he became frightened out of his wits at the sudden disturbance!

"Milord, fifty-five crew members on this ship have lost consciousness! They weren't wearing their vacsuits!"

"Damnit! Those lazy gits!"

Pirates were pirates, after all. No matter how much Supreme Lord Roda tried to instill discipline in their men, they were still rulebreakers at heart. Many of them didn't like to sleep in them so they just removed them before going to bed!

While several comrades managed to supply air to the unprotected crewmen in time, others weren't so lucky!

What was worse was that this phenomenon took place in several more ships! Hundreds of unsuspecting Crona Lords had already died or suffered from severe oxygen deprivation before the enemy even entered into battle range!

Suddenly, various explosions started to detonate inside the defensive asteroids and Xiphard Base. More emergency notifications started to flood the communication channels. Some of the explosions even caused some base sections to fling rock and debris into space!

"Tell me what just happened!"

"Our missile storage compartments have just detonated! Xiphard Base and the bastions have just suffered severe internal damage! Most of our missile launchers can only fire a small number of volleys before running dry. Wait, we just lost contact with the bastions. Their communications have just lost power!"

A litany of bad news poured into Supreme Lord Roda's ears. The sheer amount of harmful incidents taking place momentarily overwhelmed the normally seasoned and stable pirate commander.

His fists clenched as he felt as if an invisible hand cruelly stripped everything he had built away from him. How could the Crona Lords be so vulnerable to attacks from the insides? Their security protocols should have been thorough enough to thwart any intruder!

His experience quickly compelled him to pay attention to the assets he had left instead of the ones he lost.

There was no use obsessing over his crippled ships and defenses! At the very least, their mechs were still functional. In addition, the Supreme Lord still had some secret weapons in reserve!

"Wait.."

The initial alert that Roda received came with a code that he immediately associated with the Omega Laser.

If the unknown attackers had been able to cripple his base defenses to such an extensive degree, then his secret weapons may have all been tampered with as well!

This single realization immediately caused him to contact a number of trusted pirate officers.

At this point, he threw all caution out of the window!

"Arm the Alpha Mines and arm up the engines of the Beta Ships!"

The responses he received were anything but hopeful.

"The Alpha Mines aren't responding to our signals!"

"Forgive us, Supreme Lord, but the propulsion systems of our Beta Ships are wrecked!"

The Supreme Lord's heart sunk even further.

"Milord! We are detecting hundreds of incoming mechs! No, make that a thousand!"

The pirate leader's face turned fierce. "Alert our mech pilots. We are not going down without a fight! Xiphard Base shall not fall today!"

Chapter 2220 Invincible Mechs

The Battle of Xiphard Base started off with discord.

Many Crona Lords had the illusion that their base had just been visited by hundreds of invisible and completely unnoticeable infiltrators, assassins and saboteurs.

The sheer extent of the sabotage affecting so much vital equipment and parts couldn't have been done by a single covert strike squad.

Far too many systems that the Crona Lords depended upon to guard their base had all failed!

Some never came online. Others blew up once their power levels rose. The remainder worked normally, but the pirates in charge of operating didn't know whether they remained that way!

A huge wave of distrust spread amongst the pirates. Some of the more suspicious ones even started to eye each other with distrust!

The sheer depth and breath of the sabotage caused them to think that a massive conspiracy might be afoot.

What if the sabotage hadn't been performed by a large number of invisible enemies?

What if it was an inside job instead?

Once this thought entered the minds of Supreme Lord Roda and many other pirates, they all shuddered with fear. If this was the case, then at least hundreds of Crona Lords were in on the conspiracy!

When the officers in the command center began to panic and issue extreme orders, Supreme Lord Roda stood up from his chair!

"Stop! Look, I share your concerns, but this is no time to persecute our own men! Station all of our guards at critical sections and tell them to keep an eye on every slave and crew member. Tell our officers and supervisors to summarily execute anyone who

stirs trouble or spreads panic, but don't act out when everyone behaves. We are the Crona Lords. We are better than this! Trust in your fellow brothers!"

His orders quickly imposed some order in the ranks of the Crona Lords. While the pirates were still disturbed by the sheer amount of defense systems, none of them wanted to roll over and die.

As long as their mechs could still fight, there was still a chance of repelling their heinous attackers!

With Supreme Lord Roda exercising calming leadership, the fighting forces of the Crona Lords slowly regained their order.

All of the training put into them caused them to shrug off the chaos and focus on the upcoming battle.

The energy emissions their sensors had detected were coming closer and closer. Soon enough, the pirates learned who possessed the audacity to attack one of the older and more entrenched pirate groups in Maynard Fields.

"The Larkinson Clan..."

"Who are they?"

"Wait, aren't those fellows supposed to be running wild in Wreckage Paradise?"

"Look at those 200 mechs in the front! Those are Hexer mechs!"

"Ahh! Second-class mechs, and so many of them! We're doomed!"

"Pipe down or I'll cut down your mech right this instant! Hexer mechs or not, our defenses are far more formidable than you think!"

"What defenses? They're all gone!"

The order and calm imposed by Supreme Lord Roda partially unraveled as soon as the pirates detected the presence of the Penitent Sisters!

In contrast to the upheaval taking place among the pirates, the combat forces of the Larkinson Clan remained under tight control.

Hundreds of Avatars of Myth flew in neat, slightly-dispersed formations. Their spotless gold coating along with the large amount of glows proliferating throughout their ranks caused them to build up a considerable momentum as they advanced.

The Avatar Commander decided to lead his forces into battle. Despite the risks, Melkor was still a mech pilot, and he did not wish to command from the rear!

The Speed Demons and the Bright Companions took part in the attack as well.

The former had already split off from the main force in order to approach the pirate base from the flanks. Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson knew he wasn't as close to the clan patriarch as the other expert candidates in the clan. He hoped his upcoming battle performance would raise his reputation!

"We are the sword and spear of the Larkinson Clan." Melkor transmitted to his men.

"Make our clan patriarch proud and watch out for your fellow clansmen. For the clan!"

"For the clan!"

As for Joshua, the golden boy of the Avatars, he and his Bright Companions attracted a lot of attention. The Quint surrounded by a dozen Bright Warrior mechs distinguished themselves from the other Avatar mechs by the red stripe running vertically across the middle of their mechs.

Joshua insisted on adding the stripe in order to represent his conviction and reinforce the assault role of his Bright Companions.

The stripe ran from the top of their mechs, went past the third eye on their foreheads and cut straight through the front of their torsos until they ended at the lower waist.

Today, Joshua decided to outfit most of his Bright Warrior mechs with the swordsman mech configuration. This was the best loadout for large, protracted battles and chaotic brawls involving hundreds if not thousands of mechs.

A couple of Bright Warrior mechs in their space knight configurations gave the Bright Companions some insurance.

"Stay together and follow my lead. We will target every enemy officer mech and cause as much disruption in their ranks as possible. If you can't keep up, then fall back, but I expect each of you uphold the honor of the Bright Companions. For the clan!"

"For the clan!"

Commander Magdalena Larkinson was too old to take part in the battle, but she didn't need to. The Living Sentinels already fielded plenty of capable mech pilots and mech officers.

After clashing against several smaller pirate groups, the rookies of the Sentinels rapidly matured. The officers and seasoned veterans also became more proficient in guiding

them and exercising their leadership over them. The Sentinel Commander was confident that none of her men would be making any rookie mistakes in this battle.

Commander Orfan of the Flagrant Vandals and Commander Dise of the Swordmaidens flew side by side as their forces were situated in the rear of the main force.

This was not a sign of disfavor to them. Instead, Major Verle held great trust in the experience, composure and veterancy of the two mech forces.

Unlike the Avatars and Sentinels who still had much to go before they matured, the Vandals and Swordmaidens were old hands in battle.

Therefore, Major Verle assigned the two to act as troubleshooters. If the Crona Lords put up much greater resistance than anticipated somewhere, then the Vandals and Swordmaidens were ready to intervene in an instant.

Neither Orfan nor Dise opened a private communication channel between their mechs. It wasn't needed.

Outside the Larkinson Network, they were already connected to each other through another spiritual bond.

Commander Orfan savagely curled her lips. "It's been a long time since we last fought side-by-side. I still remember our days on Aeon Corona VII."

"Feh." Dise snorted. "We lost too many good Swordmaidens on that cursed planet."

"We got to bond with the big lizard, but you're right. A lot of Vandals died as well."

"Let's make sure that none of our fellow clansmen suffer the same fate."

"I'm not sure we'll even get to make our moves." Commander Orfan grimaced. "Those Penitent Sister mechs can wipe out the pirates by themselves."

"Let's not get overconfident, sister. The Penitent Sisters are strong, but no Nyxian pirate is a pushover. It wasn't as bad back in the Faris Star Region, but even there it was unwise to drive a pirate into a corner."

"Hahaha! You're kidding, right? The entire base of the Crona Lords is falling apart around them! I heard that all of their fancy superweapons are offline. With their mechs and the few intact turrets they have left, what can they possibly do to beat those invincible Penitent Sister mechs?"

This time, the Penitent Sisters would be taking part in the battle! The exiled Hexers felt rather mixed about this deployment, but Commander Valerie Chancy who commanded her Sisters from the Surly Cockatrice thought slightly differently.

After experiencing the birth of the Superior Mother, her views on her employer had changed. There was something very special about Ves Larkinson that distinguished him from other boys.

"What is your connection to the Superior Mother? Are you truly just a boy?" She inwardly wondered.

Soon enough, the assault force entered into combat range. Even though a lot of asteroids still blocked the line of sight of many mechs, some of them already started to fire their weapons!

The pirates, though considerably less organized, responded in kind.

The quality disparity between the two sides immediately became apparent!

The Crona Lord mechs and turrets weren't individually powerful, but they had numbers on their side! Even after Lucky sabotaged a lot of defensive systems, a decent amount of turrets as well as a considerable number of bunker mechs still remained intact.

Those fixed defenses increased the damage output of the pirates, thereby causing the approaching Larkinson mechs to be met with a rain of fire!

Space knights and other sturdy mechs such as the Bright Warriors took the lead. The more vulnerable rifleman mechs and light mechs huddled in the rear. This caused most of incoming attacks to deal negligible damage.

As the distance shortened, the pirates started to land more solid hits, but that didn't necessarily boost their confidence.

The ranged mechs of the attackers hit much harder!

The Larkinsons mostly fielded premium mechs, so their rifles inflicted considerably more damage. Their mech pilots possessed considerably greater skill as well, so their shots accurately pounded the Kavenit armor plating of the pirate mechs even at longer ranges!

However, it was the Penitent Sister mechs that made their presence felt. Their ranged mechs fired much more powerful laser beams, positron beams and gauss rounds at the Crona Lords.

Hardly any Crona Lord mech could withstand a direct hit!

"You idiots! Don't fly in the open! Get into cover!" Supreme Lord Roda commanded.

The pirates enjoyed an immense defensive advantage. Even if most of their defenses had been knocked offline, the solid Kavenit alloy barriers still offered a lot of protection

against ranged attacks! The Crona Lords significantly reduced their rate of losses after their mechs all took cover behind an asteroid or defensive fixture.

The Penitent Sisters didn't waste their firepower on the rabble, though. Instead, they directed their firepower towards higher-priority targets such as the armored turrets and fortified bunkers that were clad with heaps of Kavenit alloy!

Even with the prodigious damage potential of the Hexer mechs, the Penitent Sisters still had to concentrate their fire and fire continuous shots to neutralize all of the fixed defenses. The Crona Lords had mined way too much Kavenit over the decades and put some of them to very good use!

So far, the battle progressed within expectations to the Larkinson Clan. Major Verle observed the Crona Lord movement closely, but saw no sign that they were pulling out some hidden superweapon that Lucky's prior reconnaissance had overlooked.

That did not mean that Ves and Major Verle were ready to relax. Anything could happen in a battle of this scale, let alone smaller ones.

The extreme amount of scouting, preparation and sabotage they conducted may have given the Larkinson Clan some huge advantages, but until the pirates surrendered or lost their ability to fight, the Larkinsons still maintained their vigilance!

As the exchange of fire between the two sides became more intense, both sides suffered more and more damage.

The Crona Lords exhibited enough coordination to focus their ranged firepower on a handful of mechs. Once they learned that the Penitent Sisters mechs were too tough to be taken down in this fashion, they focused their ire on the Avatars of Myth but especially the Living Sentinels!

As the most numerous but weakest-looking mech force, the Sentinels endured the brunt of pirate attacks! Many of the mechs targeted by the pirates sustained severe battle damage and were forced to fall back prematurely, much to the regret of their mech pilots.

Some of the Sentinel mech pilots were even forced to eject their cockpits!

As for the Crona Lords, their assets succumbed at a significantly higher rate! With the Penitent Sisters methodically thrashing their fixed defenses, the Crona Lords felt more and more dread at the incredible power of so many second-class mechs.

"They're unstoppable!"

"I didn't sign up to fight Hexers!"

"We'll all die before we can kill a single Hexer!"

As morale amongst the Crona Lords continued to drop, a change occurred on the battlefield.

A fleet of pirate ships emerged from the other side of Xiphard Base. Their markings and colors differed from that of the Crona Lords.

A substantial escort of hundreds of mechs surrounded the vessels. Some of them consisted of medium carriers, while others of them were large transports.

Supreme Lord Roda's eyes lit up! "Haha! You arrived early, my old friend!"

It turned out that one of the Supreme Lord's trading partners had dispatched its supply fleet early!

This unscheduled arrival completely floored Ves and Major Verle!