

## Mech 2221

### *Chapter 2221 Lord Drogen*

This was awkward.

Just as the Larkinson Clan innocently went out of its way to undermine and assault a pirate base, a number of outsiders arrived and caught Ves in the act.

Prior to the assault, the Larkinson ships and mechs had largely remained together and at a distance from Xiphard Base.

Task Force Predator aimed to leverage the advantage of surprise, and for that to happen, the Larkinsons had to stay well away from the Crona Lords.

Due to various reasons, the Larkinsons only opted to dispatch scouts in order to keep an eye of the surroundings of the main fleet. This was a compromise decision that allowed the task force to monitor its own surroundings but effectively remained blind to all but one of the approaches to Xiphard Base.

This meant that an unknown pirate trade convoy had managed to approach Xiphard Base without alarming any Larkinson scouts!

The new arrivals had already detected signs of battle just beforehand. Their light and medium carriers calmly disgorged mech after mech. In the end, the full escort of the trade convoy consisted of 300 mechs, which was not a negligible figure!

Worst yet, these 300 mechs appeared to be a lot more formidable than the mechs fielded by regular outfits. The rank-and-file machine was roughly equivalent to a midrange commercial mech. As Ves studied the preliminary sensor data, he became aware that the mechs were clad with a tougher Kavenit alloy that blended Kavenit with considerably more expensive exotics.

"Careful, Major Verle. The escort mechs of that pirate convoy are equivalent to mercenary mechs. They're not equal to the mechs of the Living Sentinels, but if their mech pilots are any good, they can give us a run for our money!"

Three mech companies looked different than the rest, though. Their purple and orange exterior featured considerably more ornate frills and decorative features. They looked as grand as an honor guard, and from the long-ranged scans their armor plating consisted of high-quality compressed armor!

"Those are bridge mechs!" Ves gasped.

The roughly 120 elite pirate mechs may not be equal to second-class mechs, but they performed considerably better than typical third-class mechs!

As Ves analyzed the elite mechs further, he picked up a lot of indirect clues.

"The elite mechs utilize a very advanced and rather wasteful alloy formula. Whoever produced the armor has blended a lot of Kavenit with a lot of exotics and blended them together in a simple manner. After compressing it, the resulting armor plating is very strong, but its price-to-performance ratio is quite awful. It's uncompetitive in civilized space."

He scanned the armaments of the mechs next.

"Their weapons are nothing special. They are largely lastgen weapons, but their laser rifles seem odd and contain modules that I'm not familiar with. Investigate them thoroughly."

He analyzed the other features of the mechs such as their flight systems.

"The remaining systems are not very remarkable. The relatively low tech base of the pirate industry constrains the local producers from fabricating components that are too complex or use up exotics that are very difficult to source in greater amounts. The mobility of these mechs are average or below average."

Ves continued to rattle more and more details at a rapid pace as the scanners continued to supply him with more detailed data. The expert analysis he provided gave Major Verle and the other mech commanders an increasingly more thorough impression of the new arrivals.

All the while, the battle against the Crona Lords still raged as hot as ever! The Larkinson mechs did not let up on their assault while the defenders did not cease fire just because they met with some friends.

A battle never ended easily once the first shot had been fired!

The Penitent Sisters fought with fury and overwhelming force. Their ranged Hexer mechs unleashed devastating fire that rapidly chewed up the Kavenit alloy barriers that the Crona Lords used as cover.

Dozens of Crona Lords mechs had already succumbed. An even greater number of fixed defenses got knocked out in rapid succession!

Barring any surprises, the Larkinson Clan would likely be able to attain an overwhelming victory against the Crona Lords. The morale of the pirates had constantly been sagging prior to the arrival of the trade convoy.

Yet now that the new arrivals boldly kept traversing towards Xiphard Base, it became evident that the 300 mechs of the unknown pirate force did not mean to shy away from this conflict!

"Who are they?" Ves frowned.

The projection of Calabast emerged in the command center of the Redfeather. "I can answer that. After scanning the markings and colors on the exterior of the mechs and ships of the new arrivals, I can conclude with a high amount of confidence that they are part of the Allidus Alliance.

Ves immediately looked alarmed! "What?! Isn't that the pirate alliance based in the core regions that built the Gravada Knarlax!?"

He remembered what Master Willix said about the Gravada Knarlax. She was a heavy cruiser that was completely built from the ground up by the Allidus Alliance. Though her technical sophistication probably wasn't high, the raw power she was able to bring to bear was more than enough to cement the Allidus Alliance's footing in the dangerous and contentious core regions of the Nyxian Gap!

"They're the Allidus Alliance, no doubt. In fact, Allidus is a regular customer of the Crona Lords. In the complicated web of Nyxian pirate relations, you can also say that the Crona Lords are backed or at least supported by Allidus." Calabast explained in a grim voice. "What is strange is that according to the trade logs we've obtained from Xiphard Base, the trade convoys dispatched by the Alliance aren't scheduled to stop by in a couple of months. It takes time for Xiphard Base to accumulate a notable amount of Kavenit, so the trade convoy that has arrived today won't be able to return to the core regions with full cargo holds."

"We can investigate this issue another day." Major Verle cut her off. "The presumed flagship of the trade convoy is hailing us right this instant. Ves, do you want to take this call or shall I address the pirates in your stead?"

"Let me take the call. You just focus on commanding the battle. The Crona Lords are still putting up a fight and we are already starting to lose some mechs. Make sure our forces are ready to battle those Allidus mechs. Their continued approach is not a good sign."

Normal bystanders never headed towards an ongoing battle unless they wanted to meddle in it. After straightening himself up, Ves accepted the hail.

A projection of a fierce-looking pirate leader appeared into view. The huge and formidable-looking man boasted a bushy and messy black beard. He wore an excessively pirate outfit that straightforwardly showed off his battle accomplishments in the form of trophies.

The blackened bones, tarnished insignia and faded metals hanging from the Allidus commander's uniform spoke of a long and vicious pirate career.

During his previous travels through the frontier, Ves learned that pirates didn't maintain any detailed records on the galactic net. Mostly, it was because their access to it was very intermittent.

Instead, they resorted to the more practical method of sprucing up their uniforms and adding trophies to them. The more junk a pirate wore on his body, the more battle accomplishments they accrued!

"Intruders." The pirate's gruff voice spoke. "The Nyxian Gap is not a playground for civilized folk like you. We have heard of you, Larkinson Clan. Your infamy in Wreckage Paradise has spread throughout the periphery of the Nyxian Gap. Not even the strongest Peacekeeper outfits are as brazen as your fleet. Do you think that anyone can get away with beating up our kind without retaliation? If you know what is good for you, then retreat immediately, or offer up your necks. The Crona Lords are not yours to take."

Shortly after the pirate commander made his demand, Calabast spoke to him through a private channel.

"The man you are speaking to is Lord Drogen, a trusted subordinate of Lord Hivex. He has a formidable reputation in battle, but he isn't known to be reckless. The sensors of his vessels should have gained a good impression of our exposed combat forces. Since he has chosen to adopt an aggressive posture, he must be confident he can deal with the Penitent Sisters."

"I see." Ves already had a feeling it wouldn't be that easy. "Is Lord Drogen confident because he is leaning on the strength and reputation of the Allidus Alliance?"

Calabast was very capable in reading people. "No. Lord Drogen isn't bluffing or exuding a sense of false bravado. He is truly confident in his own ability to resist our forces."

"That means he's hiding something else! Scan his mechs and ships for anything dangerous or unusual. We need to know what gives this fellow so much confidence."

He turned back to Lord Drogen and quickly considered his response. While the Gravada Knarlax was insanely strong, the heavy cruiser was nowhere to be seen, along with the remainder of the Allidus Alliance's formidable main fleet.

Ves smirked. "Lord Drogen, you underestimate our resolve. The Nyxian Gap may be infested by your kind, but you are but rats hiding in a dark hole. To claim this space as yours is folly, and we are not afraid of your feeble threats. The Crona Lords are already history from today onwards. Either get out of our way or join them in hell."

"You insolent brat!" Lord Drogen shouted as he lost his temper! "I will warn you one last time! Leave the Crona Lords alone or we will crush you and your pretty mechs! Lord

Hivex has personally commanded me to gather as much Kavenit and other minerals as possible and his will is absolute!"

Though Ves found it curious to hear that the Allidus Alliance sought to gather as much materials as possible, he had no plans of backing off. The 300 mechs fielded by Lord Drogen were still manageable, and even if the trade convoy fleet possessed any surprises, they shouldn't be too extreme.

"Talk is cheap." Ves stated. "Fight us at your own peril. We are not afraid of the Allidus Alliance!"

The communication channel closed. Lord Drogen had made his choice and so had Ves. The 300 mechs advanced shortly afterwards. The Allidus mechs circled a bit around in order to attack the Larkinson mechs from a flank.

The crossfire they would soon be able to establish with the Crona Lords would put the Larkinson mechs at a slight disadvantage.

"Sir, our scanners have picked up elevated activities in the bow sections of three different Allidus vessels!"

A visual feed quickly came into view. The forwardmost armor plating of the three biggest medium carriers slowly started to slide apart. Each of the ships had bared their fangs and exposed their formidable-looking warship-grade weapons!

Ves didn't need the help of an analyst to realize what those weapons were capable of! "Those are destroyer-grade laser cannons! Their designs are similar to Xiphard Base's Omega Laser!"

It turned out that the Allidus Alliance were the original suppliers of the latest trump card of the Crona Lords! In exchange for a huge amount of Kavenit, Allidus provided their trading partner with one of their taboo products!

A sensitive exchange like this did not take place between regular trading partners. It spoke of a deeper cooperation between the Crona Lords and the Allidus Alliance!

Though Ves grew vastly more concerned as those laser cannons started charging up, he at least took comfort in the fact that they shouldn't be as powerful as the Omega Laser.

The Crona Lord secret weapon was not only several times larger, but was also embedded into a huge asteroid base.

The medium carriers of the Allidus Alliance didn't look all that impressive. Much of their capacity was already taken up by the pirate mechs they were supposed to transport.

This meant that the forward-mounted laser cannons should be significantly constrained in terms of power supply and heat management.

That said, when those laser cannons finally discharged three powerful laser beams, the seemingly invincible Penitent Sisters mechs had been struck!

The momentum of the Hexer mechs abruptly stalled as the mechs that had been struck exhibited severe damage!

The Penitent Sisters suffered their losses as both the mechs and the pilots inside had died!

#### *Chapter 2222 Archons*

Both the Larkinson Clan and the Crona Lords reacted with astonishment as the bow-mounted laser cannons succeeded in doing the impossible.

They managed to overwhelm the defenses of second-class mechs!

Not only that, the incredibly powerful laser beams even destroyed the Hexer mechs!

The threat level of the Allidus trade convoy fleet had abruptly been raised. Ves, Major Verle, Calabast and many other Larkinson leaders exhibited considerable surprise at the daring of the Allidus Alliance.

It wasn't enough for them to construct their own heavy cruiser, but they also armed their other vessels!

Even if only three of the Allidus ships boasted a laser cannon, the mere presence of one of them was enough to step on the toes of the Big Two. These Nyxian pirates truly held no respect towards the rules that governed human space!

A couple of more mechs started to launch from the pirate carriers as the three laser cannons already started to charge up for another shot. With his extensive expertise in laser weapon technology and his existing understanding of the Omega Laser, he deduced some more details.

"Those warship-grade laser mounts are powerful only by virtue of their size, not their technological superiority. Their energy output is strong, but it takes a very long time for them to safely discharge another full-powered shot. The laser mounts aren't installed on the ships in the form of turrets, but are instead recessed deep in those bow cavities. While they are better protected against enemy fire, the medium carriers have to rotate precisely in order to hit a solid target. As long as all of our mechs take evasive actions, there is a decent chance that those laser cannons will miss. If we can put those armed ships under pressure, then they can't bring their big guns to bear."

While those laser cannons were very powerful, as long as the Larkinson Clan focused their fire on them, it was not impossible to disable them! The mere threat of doing so should already be sufficient in suppressing the Allidus fleet!

During this entire time, Calabast had been looking up the intelligence the Black Cats had gathered on their new opponents.

"There has been a lot of talk over the years about the Allidus Alliance arming their starships with warship-grade weapons, but there have been few confirmations. Word of a so-called 'Judgement Laser' has spread in some corners of the galactic net. I suppose they are true." She reported. "Despite parading around a heavy cruiser, Allidus normally refrains from showing off anything else. It is rather uncharacteristic for this pirate alliance to expose these weapons just to reinforce a rather modest trading partner."

Certainly, it would hurt customers like Allidus if Xiphard Base no longer existed. However, there were more suppliers of Kavenit in the Nyxian Gap, so it was not as if the Crona Lords played an indispensable goal.

Yet Lord Drogen did not hesitate in confronting the Larkinson Clan. He even decided to expose his trump cards at the beginning in order to prove to everyone that the Penitent Sister mechs were mortal!

As Major Verle received more information, he came up with a revised battle plan to deal with the changing circumstances of the battle.

"Commander Melkor, reorient your Avatars of Myth towards the Allidus fleet. Your men will be required to suppress those Judgement Lasers. Knock them out if you can. Disperse your forces and attack those recessed weapon mounts from multiple directions. Those medium carriers can't possibly shield their Judgement Lasers from every angle!"

"Understood, Major." Commander Melkor acknowledged.

"Commander Magdalena, your Living Sentinels should cease their current advance. Instead, pivot them around and pivot them towards the incoming Allidus mechs. Hold back the reinforcing pirate mechs. Wipe them out if you can but pull them into a stalemate if you don't. Either is fine."

"Commander Orfan and Commander Dise, your current instructions are still valid. Hold back and observe the battle lines. If the Crona Lords or Allidus Alliance are close to overwhelming some of our forces, move in and spoil their plans."

"Commander Chancy, while the majority of the Crona Lord mechs are still intact, you have done a good job at demolishing their remaining turrets and fixed defenses. Your Penitent Sisters should be able to defeat the rest of the Crona Lords by themselves."



"Commander Cinnabar, assist the Penitent Sisters in dismantling the Crona Lords. After that, focus on securing or cleaning up the remaining resistance in or around Xiphard Base. Force the pirates into surrender."

The string of orders along with the illusion of control that Major Verle conveyed quickly caused the Larkinson combat troops regain their composure.

Even if the Allidus Alliance brought some Judgement Lasers, the Larkinson Clan were still strong!

"Send in some of the reserves! Have them circle around and block the probable escape route of the Allidus trade convoy. Since they have chosen to throw their lot in with the Crona Lords, then they should stay here to the bitter end!"

The battle intensified as the formations of Larkinson mechs started to split up. The majority of the mechs oriented towards the Allidus Alliance ships and mechs.

Only the Penitent Sisters along with a modest number of Battle Criers continued their attack run on the Crona Lords!

Despite being outnumbered by more than three-to-one, none of the Penitent Sister mech pilots lost confidence! Now that the Crona Lords had lost all of their fixed defenses, there was nothing from stopping the Penitent Sisters from targeting the pirate mechs!

Supreme Lord Roda didn't have the time to catch up to Lord Drogen. He was shouting orders after orders in an attempt to find a way to stop the Penitent Sisters.

He would rather face thousands of Avatar and Sentinel mechs than confront a couple of hundred Penitent Sister mechs. At least with the former his forces could still make them bleed.

Without the Alpha Mines, Beta Ships and Omega Laser, Roda found that his Crona Lords were completely unequipped to stop the Penitent Sisters from drawing closer!

Once the Hexer mechs entered melee range, the cover that his mechs relied upon to stall their defeats would play no role anymore!

Only the Judgement Lasers of the Allidus Alliance could save his Crona Lords from destruction, but their allies were too preoccupied to come to the aid of Xiphard Base!

Around 400 Avatar mechs confronted 300 Allidus mechs!

From the furious exchange of ranged volleys to the intense collision between melee mechs, the two forces seemed to have met their match!



Commander Melkor, who piloted a rifleman mech and simultaneously commanded his men from the rear, saw that the Allidus mechs were actually piloted by very skilled pirates!

Along with skill, the Allidus mech pilots also possessed an abundant amount of battle experience. None of their mechs showed any signs of panic or loss of control.

What was worse, the pirates also exhibited close cooperation and coordination! Though none of their battle tactics, formations and maneuvers were sophisticated, the Allidus mech force fought like a well-oiled machine!

In comparison, the Avatar mech pilots were a lot more inconsistent and not nearly as stable!

The battle-hardened pirates largely compensated for their inferior mechs by exhibiting much greater grit!

The battle between the elite components of the two forces was a sight to behold. The Bright Warriors, which were all clad with Breyer alloy, were all being constrained by a slightly larger number of elite pirate mechs!

However, once the Avatars began to adjust to the rhythm of the pirates, the glows of their started to make a difference.

The confidence of the Avatar mech pilots constantly swelled while the pirate mech pilots came under varying degrees of mental pressure.

The regular Allidus mechs already started to flag, but the elite mechs remained steadfast!

Calabast quickly identified this strong unit. "Those elite pirate mechs are part of the Allidus Archons."

"Who the hell are the Archons?" Ves asked.

"They're the 10 percent most skilled mech pilots in the service of the Allidus Alliance. They are renowned for their battle prowess, brotherhood, fearlessness and powerful mechs!"

Their mechs were far better than any other pirate mech that Ves encountered so far. The wealth and power of the Allidus Alliance had made it possible for its mech production facilities to fabricate mechs that reinforced its dominance!

As Ves studied the performance of the Archon mechs, he began to recite their properties.

"The elite mechs are bridge mechs. Their offense, defense and mobility are all superior to premium and premier third-class mechs. They are not second-class mechs and can still be defeated by our Avatars."

He zoomed in on the Avatar mech company led by Captain Casella Ingvar. She had opted to take full advantage of the defensive prowess of the Bright Warrior mechs in order to block and entangle the Archon mechs as much as possible.

"Our Bright Warriors possess a decisive advantage in defense. The Archon mechs aren't nearly as tough, though their shells will need to be hit many times in order to crack them open. Their weapons are fairly powerful though and they pose a significant threat to our regular mechs. Their slight advantage in mobility makes them elusive as well, and it is difficult to pin them in place."

"What are their vulnerabilities?" Major Verle asked.

Before Ves could answer, the Allidus rifleman mechs suddenly changed their firing mode. Much different beams of energy spat out from the muzzles of their weapons and struck the lighter-armored ranged mechs of the Larkinson Clan!

"Alert! The Allidus ranged mechs are firing gamma lasers!"

"What?!"

The mechs struck by intense, high-energy gamma rays exhibited signs of immediate debilitation as a significant portion of energy rays has bypassed the armor plating and began to deposit a multitude of energy throughout the interior, including the cockpit!

Ves banged his fist against his armrest. "Those depraved pirates! The Allidus Alliance have gone too far! Only the most depraved degenerates of the galaxy make use of gamma laser weapons! Do not let up on them. We must wipe away this stain before they can unleash their destruction on innocent people!"

Many members of the Larkinson Clan were truly horrified now. The use of gamma laser weapons crossed yet another line. The sheer brazenness of the Allidus Alliance had exceeded all proportions!

"Pull the disabled mechs back. Suppress those Allidus ranged mechs. Don't let them fire on our vulnerable mechs." Commander Melkor quickly commanded.

The Bright Warriors were capable of blocking virtually all of the destructive penetrating rays of gamma lasers, but the problem was that the Allidus Archon mechs were doing their best to keep them busy!

The Avatars mechs were roughly on equal ground to the Allidus mechs at the moment. While the superior defenses of the former would ultimately ensure they would get the

upper hand, the ferocious, well-trained Allidus mech pilots had already reaped some Avatar lives!

Though Major Verle looked concerned at this awful turn of events, he did not panic just yet. This was because a single mech company of black-coated mechs had finally circled around and begun to charge the high-threat rifleman mechs armed with graser rifles.

"Sisters!" Commander Dise yelled as her powerful mentality seemed to spread across her entire mech! "Ready your blades!"

The gamma laser mechs immediately recognized their own peril. They stopped pressuring the Avatar mechs and brought their weapons to bear against the charging swordsman mechs!

As the pirate mechs unleashed an extremely energetic volley of gamma lasers, the Swordmaidens reacted in a surprising fashion!

Instead performing evasive maneuvers, they instead swung their blades in a blocking position just before the pirate mechs fired their weapons.

Surprisingly, all forty swordsman mechs managed to block the deadly rays with the heavy blades of their greatswords!

The pirate captain commanding the gamma laser mechs couldn't believe what had just happened!

In fact, Ves and Major Verle were astonished as well! They had never seen swordsman mechs blocking incoming fire so well!

Though the lethality of the graser rifles was immense, their energy requirements were considerably greater as well. Ves knew very well that those rifles featured a fairly slow firing rate.

This gave enough time for the Swordmaiden mech pilots to brace their mechs against another volley of attacks. When a shower of gamma rays began to concentrate on just half-a-dozen swordsman mechs, the Swordmaidens reacted appropriately.

Several swordsman mechs flying alongside the targeted mechs unhesitantly reached out their greatswords with rapid speed in order to block the rays that the original targets couldn't block!

Though this hasty defense maneuver failed to block every graser beam, the ones that went through only hit the legs or some other unimportant section of the mechs.

The Swordmaiden mechs advanced indomitably regardless of how many gamma rays irradiated their greatswords!

Though the ranged mechs of the Allidus Alliance had already begun to fly backwards, the Swordmaidens possessed too much of a head-start!

In just a short amount of time, Commander Dise and her fellow sisters crashed into their targets and chopped them all apart in a matter of seconds!

"Weak!"

### *Chapter 2223 Superior Women*

The Swordmaidens struck the Allidus mechs at a devastating moment.

Though it was a bit unfortunate that the pirates eliminated over a dozen Avatar mechs and mech pilots, the attack of the former daughters of the frontier fully showcased the cunning of Commander Dise!

Instead of moving to reinforce the Avatars of Myth right away, she instead took the long way around. Without moving to attack any pirates, her single mech company managed to fly under everyone's attention.

It was only when the swordsman mechs slowly started to turn around, building up momentum along the way, that their purpose became gradually clear.

By the time they bared their fangs at the ranged mechs of the Allidus Alliance, they had already built up a considerable amount of delta-v that would make any lancer mech proud!

The Swordmaidens succeeded in overwhelming the gamma laser rifleman mechs in a single devastating attack run.

This not only removed a major pirate threat from the board in a decisive fashion, but also struck a considerable amount of fear in the hearts of the remaining pirates!

The swordsman mech piloted by Commander Dise raised its greatsword!

"Sisters, enemies still remain! Let us show both sides that while our numbers are small, our ferocity is endless! Advance!"

The Swordsman mechs flew out of the debris field that consisted of the broken, chopped up parts of pirate ranged mechs in unison!

The elite Archon mechs as well as the regular Allidus mechs both noted to their alarm that the black-coated melee mechs approached the rear of their formation!

The pirates hastily reorganized their ranks in order to muster up a hasty line of melee mechs to meet the Swordmaiden charge.

Though it seemed as if another collision was imminent, the Swordmaiden mech company veered aside a few seconds from impact, thereby avoiding the prepared pirate defenders.

Instead, the swordsman mechs raked the edge of the pirate formation. Their greatswords opportunistically chopped through the frames of the Allidus mechs.

By borrowing the momentum of their movements, the Swordmaidens often succeeded in landing devastating attacks!

Even the sturdier Archon mechs with their superior Kavenit alloy formulas did not manage to escape unscathed! Considerable rents and deep tears marred their exteriors, thereby exposing those portions to follow-up attacks!

Commander Melkor's visor seemingly lit up at the assistance provided by the Swordmaidens. They had cooperated often enough in training sessions and simulated drills for him to know what Commander Dise asked of the Avatars.

"If you want us to be the anvil to the hammer, then so be it. We will gladly accept this role!"

The orders he issued intensified the stubborn, sticky approach of the Avatar mechs. Whether they were Bright Warriors or not, the Avatar mechs put their training to good use by adopting a cooperative fighting method that sought to rob as much initiative from the Allidus mechs as possible.

This prevented the increasingly more distressed pirates to encounter great difficulties whenever they attempted to allocate some mechs to blunt the flanking attacks of the Swordmaidens!

The swordsman mechs piloted by Commander Dise and her fellow sisters weren't particularly exceptional. Their defense and mobility was on par against other premium mechs.

What stood out was their offense and supreme skill in wielding greatswords. Ves had specially prepared these Breyer alloy greatswords to show his appreciation to the Swordmaidens and assuage the guilt he felt for their losses.

Though the Swordmaidens currently numbered very few mech pilots, each battle-hardened sister had survived the punishing gauntlet of the Aeon Corona Mission and turned into elite veterans that embodied the best of their outfit!

With their sharp and practically indestructible greatswords, the Swordmaidens ferociously circled around the rear and sides of the pirate formation as it remained entangled with the Avatar formation.

Chop!

Chop!

Chop!

Through successive attack runs, the Swordmaidens harvested at least a couple of pirate mechs and severely damaged a dozen more!

The Avatar mechs stopped attacking for the purpose of taking out the Allidus mechs. There was no particular need for them to risk themselves when they could just close ranks and keep sticking to their opponents like stubborn leeches!

Ves and Major Verle no longer paid attention to this particular clash. The main Allidus mech force was finished as far as they were concerned!

The other parts of the battlefield raged on as well. The Penitent Sisters, devoid of the numbers and support of much of the Larkinson Clan, still managed to instill despair in the hearts of the Crona Lords.

With much of their formidable fixed defenses rendered ineffective from the beginning, the lack of secret weapons being deployed made many Crona Lords suspicious whether the extensive sabotage had struck them as well.

If this was the case, the Crona Lords had very little power to contend against the superior Hexer mechs!

While Supreme Lord Roda did his best to motivate and stiffen his fighting forces, there was only so much a good leader could make a difference.

With the Living Sentinels running interference on the medium carriers armed with so-called Judgement Lasers, the exiled Hexers were completely unburdened by the threat of this superweapon.

Unless the Crona Lords managed to fix their monstrously powerful Omega Laser, they completely lacked the punch to inflict serious damage to the superior mechs!

Initially, the Crona Lords believed that the combination of solid cover and super numbers might allow them to stall their defeats and buy time for Lord Drogen's troops to come to their aid or their secret weapons to come online.

Yet as the less than 200 Penitent Sister mechs continued to advance while enduring a storm of ranged attacks, Supreme Lord Roda and his fellow pirates continued to feel as if doom approached.

The melee mechs of the Crona Lords readied themselves for a punishing confrontation. While none of the Crona Lords possessed the confidence to defeat or even last more than dozen seconds against a second-class mech, at least they had more mechs at their disposal.

"Keep calm and don't panic!" Supreme Lord Roda instructed his mech pilots. "Second-class mechs have met their end in the Nyxian Gap many times. Hexers are always overconfident. Use their arrogance against them. As long as at least one of you manages to circle around their mechs, you can hack away at their flight systems. As long as we break off their wings, it doesn't matter how tough they are or how powerful they land their blows. The immobilized mechs will just float away in random directions!"

His logic was sound. The weakest components of any spaceborn mech was always the flight systems.

Though the flight systems of the Penitent Sister mechs were not easy to break, compared to the frontal armor they were sturdy as twigs!

However, would the Penitent Sisters allow these filthy pirates to execute their naive and simplistic battle plan?

"Penitent Sisters, punish the damned!"

"Punish the damned!"

The moment the Penitent Sister mechs collided against the prepared ranks of the Crona Lord mechs, the disparity in strength became obvious!

The Penitent Sisters outright ignored defense and just swung their weapons as violently and with as much righteous fury as possible!

These detestable pirates deserved death!

The Penitent Sisters did not allow their inferior pirate opponents to attack their vulnerable rear. No matter how much Kavenit had been used to form their armor plating, the feeble pirate mechs lasted only seconds against the attacks of the Hexer melee mechs!

By mowing their opponents with an even greater degree of lethality than that of the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sisters decisively demonstrated the might of Hexadric Hegemony!

Even if they were exiled from their state and paired with outdated, worn-out mechs, they still possessed the identity and corresponding battle prowess of the most feared women in the Komodo Star Sector.



"Life!"

A Hexer swung a longsword with a single hand in a horizontal slash. The sharp blade raked across the chests of three Crona Lord mechs in an instant, slaying not only the machines, but also their pilots! Traces of evaporated lifeblood leaked from the exposed cockpits as their mech pilots only had seconds to live before their broken bodies succumbed.

"Death!"

A Penitent Sister mech lieutenant commanded her squad to rain death from above. Now that the Penitent Sisters had reached the position of their opponents, they were able to attack the pirates from angles where their defensive cover hardly offered any shelter from the apocalyptic devastation unleashed by Hexer rifles.

"Godhood!"

A pair of Hexer lancer mechs crashed straight in the middle of a prepared Crona Lord formation! Their lances pierced straight through multiple mechs! After shaking off the impaled mechs, the lancer mechs continued to fly away before the pirates had any chance of swarming them in every direction.

"Damnation!"

A Hexer space knight interposed itself in the path of a squad of Crona Lord elites. Though the pirate mechs weren't as good as the ones deployed by the Allidus Archons, they were still one of the remaining hopes of the pirates.

Yet no matter how many times they pounded on the thick shield of the space knight, they only managed to scratch the coating!

After discovering that it was a waste of time to attack the defensive mech, the elite Crona Lord mechs attempted to divert to other prey, but the Hexer space knight would not have it! It instantly boosted forward and began to counterattack! Its swords lopped off the weapon of an enemy pirate mech while its shield slammed against the surface of another pirate mech, visibly causing it to deform!

"Dust!"

A modest number of Hexer cannoneer mechs fired their gauss cannons at a slow but devastating pace!

With each heavy kinetic slug they fired, a Crona Lord instantly shattered! A shower of broken parts and crumbled components spread out with every shot. As for the human remains of their mech pilots, hardly anything bigger than a nail or a drop of blood was distinguishable from the expanding debris field!

"Woman!"

Perhaps stimulated by the display of martial prowess exhibited by the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sister swordsman mechs banded together and began to scythe through the main body of the Crona Lord formations without stop! Their blades hewed up and down, left to right, back to forth in rapid succession, causing any opposition in front of them to be hacked apart!

Not a single Penitent Sister mech fell! Their constant forward movement as well as their in-depth coordination between each other displayed complete contempt to the means of the Crona Lords.

No matter what tricks they attempted to pull off, the superiority of the Hexer mechs negated all forms of resistance!

The Battle Crier mechs following from behind anticipated that they needed to lend a hand in order to prevent some of the Penitent Sister mechs from being overwhelmed by desperation attacks.

However, the Hexers were so domineering that they didn't give any Crona Lord a chance!

The Kinner mech pilots were therefore left to police the battlefield and make sure that any downed mech no longer posed a threat.

Regardless of what happened elsewhere, the Crona Lords were finished as a pirate group. After losing all of their fighting forces, Surpeme Lord Roda had no capital to cling to Xiphard Base anymore!

With these local successes, Ves and Major Verle grew more at ease. The only opponents that still posed a threat was the Allidus trade convoy.

The three medium carriers armed with Judgement Lasers came under continuous attacks by the flanking and swarming attacks of the Living Sentinels.

Unfortunately, Lord Drogen had more surprises in store than the powerful anti-ship lasers. Some of the other ships in his fleet began to expose various weapon batteries and began to put the Living Sentinels under a lot of pressure.

Some of them even fired a large volume of devastating missiles! While they didn't carry any nuclear warheads, when they struck a target or exploded close to one, something worse took place.

Strange holes began to emerge at the coordinates which quickly caused the nearby Sentinel mechs to tear apart!

"Those missile explosions are generating localized anomalies! Stay away from them and intercept them at all costs!"

#### *Chapter 2224 Decisive*

The Battle of Xiphard Base ultimately did not lead to the massive losses that the Larkinson Clan had feared.

With much of its defenses and secret weapons crippled, the Crona Lords stood no chance against the Penitent Sisters. Their mechs, despite outnumbering the second-class mechs by five-to-one, only served to give the exiled Hexers more exercise.

The mech pilots of the Crona Lords mostly died in vain. Their feeble attacks did not cross the threshold that allowed them to overcome the superior armor of their opponents.

Certainly, with quantity they might have been able to circle around and attack the weak points of the Penitent Sister mechs, but they needed at least twice or thrice as much mechs to pull off such a plan.

The reinforcing mechs of the Allidus Alliance fared little better. Even though the Avatars had finally met their match for once, the Larkinson Clan had brought more forces. Commander Dise cleverly recognized an opportunity to hammer the Allidus mechs from the flanks despite the modest number of her Swordmaidens.

That left only the assault on the trade and escort vessels of the small Allidus convoy fleet.

The cargo vessels served little use in battle, but the light and medium carriers constantly pushed the Living Sentinels back.

The reason? Many of the pirate ships were armed!

The three considerably powerful destroyer-grade Judgement Lasers forced the Living Sentinels to escape from their line of fire.

Though the Judgement Lasers were well-protected in their recessed bow positions, this also meant that the medium carriers that mounted them had to rotate their entire hulls in order to aim their unwieldy weapons.

As long as the Living Sentinel mechs attacked from the rear, there was no risk of getting taken out by a massive laser!

Yet as the Living Sentinels discovered at the cost of dozens of mechs and almost just as many lives, the Allidus escort vessels held more weapons in reserve!

Only a handful of mechs remained to cover the ships. When Ves and Major Verle saw that the Allidus Alliance had foolishly dispatched too many of their mechs away, they thought the pirates overestimated their capabilities.

It turned out that Lord Drogen did have something to rely on after all. From secondary batteries that fired slugs at a rate of fire that equaled the output of a mech squad to strange missiles that created localized anomalies, the Living Sentinels who confronted all of this unorthodox firepower became confused.

"Get your heads back together, Sentinels!" Commander Magdalena Larkinsons admonished her flagging mech pilots. "Those ships aren't as formidable as you think! Keep your distance and take out the exposed weapon batteries one-by-one. Don't come close."

There was no telling what might happen if hundreds of melee mechs swarmed the armed vessels. The Allidus Alliance had already shown that it did not respect the taboos set by the Big Two. In the Sentinel Commander's opinion, such people were capable of doing anything.

Though the casualties suffered by the Living Sentinels distressed Ves a bit, he knew that the pirate ships did not have the power to stop hundreds of Sentinel mechs.

The carrier vessels weren't true warships. The weapons mounted on them at various places on their hull were jury-rigged in place by force.

In terms of energy supply, ammunition, protection and other factors, the weapons no longer threatened the Living Sentinels once they got their act together.

With methodical and coordinated ranged attacks, the relatively stationary weapon batteries were easily focused down. When even the thick layers of hull plating around the Judgement Lasers no longer held, the formidable weapons which managed to take out a Penitent Sister mech in a single shot no longer existed.

After stripping the vessels of all of their weapons and shooting their exterior sub-light propulsion systems into pieces, the Larkinson Clan successfully disarmed and immobilized the Allidus trade convoy!

Yet despite surrounding the pirate ships, the Living Sentinels received strict orders not to approach.

Ves stood up from his chair and hailed the flagship of the Allidus trade fleet once again.

When the oddly-dressed pirate commander appeared once again, he didn't look nearly as confident than before.

"Larkinsons. You dare to affront the Allidus Alliance. You do not know the gravity of the mistakes that you have made." Lord Drogen hissed as his projection seemed to cross across distances in order to bore a hole through Ves. "Lord Hivex has already been informed of your.. Transgressions."

"Oh. I'm scared." Ves flatly replied. "Now can we get all of the bluster and posturing and discuss the terms of your surrender? As a rule-abiding galactic citizen, I give you my word that I will keep you and your men alive while affording you the dignity that you do not deserve. You are more valuable to the Peacekeeper Association alive than dead."

"You think you can force me onto my knees? Hah! Grow a beard before you talk big!" Lord Drogen snorted and began to tap his fingers onto a console out of the sight of the projection. "Make no mistake. Retribution is assured and will not take long in coming. The Big Two may reign over civilized space, but our asteroid-filled void shall forever remain free!"

The tone that the pirate leader adopted reminded Ves awfully of fanatics. A very grave possibility came to mind.

"Wait a minute, Lord Drogen! Let's not be hasty here! All of your men don't need to suffer from your mistakes!"

Lord Drogen contemptuously sneered at Ves. "You may think little of us pirates, but we have our own honor. Lord Hivex! Forgive us for failing in our mission! Let us serve you one last time. For Allidus!"

During the pirate commander's decisive speech, Major Verle had already hastily commanded the Living Sentinel mechs to withdraw from the crippled Allidus trade vessels.

He did so just in time, as all of the cargo vessels, light carriers and medium carriers blew up in huge explosions that churned the surrounding space!

A rain of debris and metal chunks spread in every direction as the self-destruct mechanisms tore every ship apart from their insides!

Ves ached at the sight. Lord Drogen differed from typical pirates. The Allidus Alliance seemed to be an extraordinary pirate organization that managed to instill great loyalty and devotion in its members.

They were similar to the Swordmaidens in that regard, but enjoyed much more success.

He missed the bottom feeder pirates of Wreckage Paradise. At least the pirates there were always predictably craven.

The deeper Task Force Predator entered the Nyxian Gap, the greater the likelihood of stumbling upon the real powers who truly held sway over the dispersed but surprisingly interconnected pirate groups.

Ves regretted the loss of all of those Allidus ships. Even if their weapon batteries had been destroyed, he wanted to take a peek at the remains and any schematics that were doubtlessly stored in the data banks of the vessels. He also wanted to ransack the vessels for all of their juicy equipment and resources.

Unfortunately, Lord Drogen was far too loyal to the Allidus Alliance to surrender the valuable ships and trade goods his cargo vessels carried. Ves was genuinely surprised that the pirate commander did not hesitate in initiating the self-destruct mechanisms when it became clear that his ships wouldn't be getting away!

Ves looked at Major Verle and Calabast. Neither of them looked pleased.

"It's fortunate that we were prudent enough to be on guard against this possibility." Major Verle spoke.

"Pirates never meet a good end once they fall into the hands of a lawful group." Calabast added. "Lord Drogen knows that it is unlikely for him and his men to survive captivity and trial if they get to live long enough to be brought to court. We have gathered abundant proof that they have deployed warship-grade weapons and prohibited gamma laser weapons. The Big Two is never merciful when it comes to passing judgement on those who yearn to turn back time to humanity's darker age."

Verle agreed with her assessment. "Since they are marked for death regardless of what they do, a quick and imminent end is therefore the best possible course of action to take to Lord Drogen. They are able to perform one last service to the Allidus Alliance by depriving us of our spoils, thereby gaining the appreciation of Lord Hivex. This will make sure that the dependents they have left behind will be treated well."

Pirates were humans as well, and they possessed human needs. Though the typical pirate consisted of a former outlaw or refugee who had forsaken all of their ties to the people they knew, that did not mean they remained alone in their pirate careers. The more established pirates were much more likely to settle down and start a family, though their circumstances were very challenging, to say the least.

At some point, a pirate organization grew so powerful that they took on the form of a traditional power or state. The Allidus Alliance was huge. If all of their members consisted of single men and women, then it was doubtful if it could withstand the test of time!

Ves sighed and waved his hands. "Okay, we can discuss these issues later. The battle may largely be over, but the fighting hasn't ceased. There are plenty of stragglers that need to be hunted, and Xiphard Base is still in enemy hands. Let's make sure the

pirates don't rig something up that causes it to blow. I want as many pirates to be taken alive as possible."

"Yes, sir. I believe the Crona Lords possess much less resolve to follow in the footsteps of the Allidus Alliance. From the signal transmissions we have intercepted, it appears that Supreme Lord Roda is still alive and aboard one of the crippled carriers hovering in the vicinity of Xiphard Base."

"That doesn't mean the engineers there are incapable of causing the ships to explode." Ves warned.

"We are aware of the risks. We will attempt to intimidate them into surrendering voluntarily. Usually, surrounding the ships with lots of mechs is an effective way to break the nerves of trapped ship crew."

Even if Supreme Lord Roda became determined to go down with the ship, his fellow Crona Lords might not agree!

"What about the base?"

"We are deploying our infantry en masse in order to secure and pacify Xiphard Base. While it wasn't a high priority, we made sure not to neglect the training and outfitting of our foot soldiers."

Even if the outcome of the Battle of Xiphard Base had become clear, tens of thousands of unruly pirates still remained alive on the crippled ships, defensive posts and the base itself.

As long as they were able to use tools and weapons, they could accomplish an untold amount of mischief before they surrendered!

This meant that pacifying them was a very high priority. Ves did not want the desperate pirates to overload a power reactor, blow up an ammunition depot or vent all of the oxygen in Xiphard Base into space.

Their lives were precious to Ves! He already considered the soon-to-be-captured pirates to be one of his most valuable spoils of war. He could not bear the thought of losing so much precious assets!

As the Larkinson forces started to wrap the battle up, Ves saw no need to supervise the remaining operations. "Make sure to tally our losses as well. We will honor the clansmen and Penitent Sisters who have died."

"Yes, sir."



The Battle of Xiphard Base ended in an overwhelming victory for the Larkinson Clan. Yet Ves knew that much of his clansmen wouldn't see it that way.

For the first time since they entered the Nyxian Gap, Larkinsons had died. Broken mechs could be fixed or replaced, but the loss of a precious mech pilot was not so easily remedied.

Ves looked down at the Larkinson Mandate resting on his lap. The Golden Cat closely felt the deaths of the clansmen who fell in battle. Her bond with them broke as their minds permanently turned silent and their spirits dissipated and moved to another realm.

Even Ves didn't know what happened after these valiant clansmen died. He faintly hoped that at least a portion of their lives could be preserved through the Larkinson Network, but as he questioned the Golden Cat, it seems that not everyone could sustain a life after death like his mother.

Nyaaaaa...

"It's okay, Goldie." He whispered and spiritually stroked her head. "Death is a natural consequence of life."

#### *Chapter 2225 Pacified*

Compared to the decisiveness of Lord Drogen of the Allidus Alliance, Supreme Lord Roda was much more prone to equivocating.

The negotiators of the Larkinson Clan constantly tried to tempt the powerful pirate commander into offering his surrender.

Even though there was little chance that the Supreme Lord would be able to remain alive for the rest of his old age due to all of his violations, a man could still dream.

Unfortunately, Roda's grasp on the Crona Lords had already begun to slip as the Larkinson Clan won the battle and neutralized every mech or weapon that could pose a threat.

Just before the Supreme Lord was almost ready to offer his surrender, three of his confidantes aboard his ship had suddenly pulled out pistols and shot their former leader to pieces!

The pirate commander's flamboyant uniform that was decked with various trophies might look impressive, but it offered relatively little protection against attacks! The man had spent far too much time in the safety and comfort of Xiphard Base to take precautions against betrayal from his own side.

It didn't help that his bodyguards didn't lift a finger to save his life either!

The Larkinsons who saw the bloody spectacle unfold through the communication feed were only mildly upset at this turn of events. Supreme Lord Roda probably held a lot of secrets and understood the Nyxian Gap better than any of his other subordinates. Losing him was a substantial but not particularly catastrophic setback to the Larkinson Clan.

What little order remained among the Crona Lords evaporated after the Supreme Lord's passing became known.

Though the Larkinsons treated his title with contempt, the man held a considerable amount of authority among his own men. His ignoble death had caused the surviving Crona Lords to lose their main source of confidence!

Though some of the directionless pirates had become a lot more violent and irrational after losing their greatest leader, the infantry sent to pacify them eagerly took advantage of their lack of organization.

Every form of resistance had been crushed! Though some of the infantry sustained losses when they tripped some boobytraps or came under attack of industrial equipment, as a whole Xiphard Base and the immobilized starships slowly ceded ground to the Larkinson Clan.

What stood out to the Larkinsons the most was how much less resistance the infantry encountered at Xiphard Base. Lucky had single-handedly caused the pirates residing in the base to experience what it was like to be haunted by a ghost!

Ves and the leaders of the task force received increasingly more detailed reports on what kind of mischief Lucky had been up to. The cat abused his elusiveness for hours, causing the increasingly-hapless security forces of the base to feel as if they were being led around circles all the time!

Once the Larkinson infantry secured the interior of the main base, Lucky did not bother to return to Ves. Instead, he had phased straight into one of the vaults of the massive base in order to partake in his reward!

Who knew what kind of valuable and rare exotics ended up in the gem cat's belly. Ves felt tempted to enter the base right away in order to prevent his cat from eating everything of value, but he refrained from doing so out of caution.

He patiently waited for the infantry to completely secure and sweep the interior of Xiphard Base of any possible threats.

Even though the clan was already pretty sure that the base did not incorporate any self-destruct mechanisms, it was best to verify Lucky's scans and see if the pirates hadn't improvised something on the spot.

He only transferred over when an entire day had passed. As the mechs and shuttles of the Larkinson Clan scoured over the battlefield in order to sift through the expanding debris fields.

Salvaging the wrecks of their own mechs was the main priority of the salvage teams. Even if the mech technicians and mech designers couldn't restore them to functionality, at least they could recycle the parts and materials to repair other mechs.

As for the debris that originated from pirate mechs, there was relatively little of value for the Larkinson to take. In general, the clan wasn't interested in making use of Kavenit alloys. The only exception was the considerably more powerful armor plating of the mechs of the Allidus Archons.

The elite mechs offered protection that was far superior to any regular third-class armor system, though it was very inefficient to produce.

That said, once they were made, they were usually built to last.

Another notable spoils was taking over control of the partially-intact ships of the Crona Lords. While they weren't great vessels and weren't functioning properly, the sabotage that Lucky inflicted was very targeted, thereby leaving most of the core parts intact.

This meant that it didn't take too much time and resources to reverse the sabotage and restore them to working condition.

Whether the Larkinson Clan actually intended to take over the ships remained to be seen.

A handful of passenger shuttles landed in one of the main hangar bays of Xiphard Base. A considerable number of guards emerged from them first in order to secure the premises.

Though they were only repeating the actions of the infantry that arrived before, it didn't hurt to be careful.

When Ves and twenty-six assistant mech designers finally stepped out, they all looked with awe and fascination at their new surroundings.

Due to safety concerns, everyone who entered the base had to wear a hazard suit or something sturdier. No one was allowed to walk around unexposed in case some pirate trap released poison in the air or caused some volatile component to explode.

Though the suits elicited a lot of discomfort among the mech designers, Ves valued the extra layer of protection.

Various mechs, shuttles, mining vessels and maintenance equipment had been left behind in the spacious interior. The Crona Lords maintained fairly decent standards, so the hangar bay was actually rather clean and orderly.

"So this is a pirate base. It doesn't look much different from a mercenary facility."

"Most of the stories I've heard about the Nyxian Gap is that they can't distinguish a plasma welder from a multitool."

"I heard that pirate groups always keep a lot of slaves. Where are they?"

None of the Braves had ever been exposed to pirates up close. For all of their uncommon daring and courage, they still spent most of their time in design labs.

Though Ves had already taken them on a couple of tours, Xiphard Base was different from a regular pirate ship.

It was huge. Its scale was on another level than a typical pirate-owned carrier or haphazard asteroid base.

Xiphard Base had long served as the headquarters, castle and mining center of the Crona Lords. Its size and development reflected the decades of investment that Supreme Lord Roda had poured into it. As his crown jewel, he tried his best to take good care of it and avoid the usual neglect that less-disciplined pirates tended to exhibit.

Two younger clansmen joined the tour as well. They followed curiously behind Ves as they gawked at all of the abandoned pirate machines.

"Wow. How much profit can we make if we salvage or sell off all of this gear?" Maikel asked.

Ves quickly turned around and gently knocked his fist on the Larkinson seed's helmet.

"Of all the questions you could have asked, this shouldn't be the first one to escape from your mouth. This is just a fraction of the spoils that we have obtained from our victory! It's very likely that we'll be leaving all of this gear behind. The cargo holds of our ships can only accommodate so many goods. We need to take stock of our spoils and prioritize the most valuable goods."

"We've captured a lot of pirate ships, right? We could use them to store additional loot. The extra supplies might be sorely needed in the future." Zanthar Larkinson remarked.

"It's not that simple." Ves shook his head. "While you are right that carrying more supplies is better, the cost of doing so might be greater. Those pirate ships that you believe are for the taking are built and crewed by pirates. If you have paid any attention to the battle yesterday, then you should know that these depraved people are capable of doing anything. Who can say that the pirate ships aren't boobytrapped? Even if we have performed extensive scans on all of the vessels, I can think of many ways to circumvent the security sweeps."

Maikel brought up another argument. "They're also sluggish and old. They will only slow down the task force if we bring them along."

"Correct. I have always believed that we should always prioritize mobility whenever we venture into hostile territory. When you're too slow, you just make it easier for your local enemies to converge on you and cut off your escape routes. Now that we have provoked the Allidus Alliance, we need to take this threat seriously."

No one expected a trading partner of the Crona Lords to arrive at that time. The intervention and subsequent defeat of the Allidus trade convoy spelled bad news. He had already received an earful from Calabast on the risks of retaliation of a major core power of the Nyxian Gap!

That was something to worry for later. Right now, Ves just wanted to take a look at his harvest and enjoy the fruits of his victory.

"Let's proceed forward. This is just the entrance to the base."

The group of mech designers strode forward. They exited the massive hangar bay and moved further inward. After passing through some massive corridors and a couple of abandoned security checkpoints, they entered the heart of the hollowed-out cavern that had been dug out from the interior of the asteroid that hosted the base.

"Wow!"

The asteroid was actually quite large. The Crona Lords selected a good rock to build their base. A large stretch of structures had been built inside the base. While there were lots of sections that resembled the interior of starships, at least the main floor looked spacious and inviting.

Ves could tell that the pirates deliberately built this floor in order to alleviate their homesickness. The structures built on the main floor resembled an urban city district more than anything else. The pirates had even allocated space for some parks, though the weird purple exoplants did not look particularly inviting.

He wondered what Merrill O'Brian would say. As a former pirate designer, if unwillingly, she must have visited plenty of pirate bases when she was trapped in the frontier.

Sadly, she wasn't among the Braves who followed Task Force Predator into the Nyxian Gap. Ves already saw that Merrill was starting to fall into the camp of the Erudites.

As they walked through the pacified streets of the main floor, Ves and the mech designers finally encountered the people who resided in the base.

The clan infantry intimidated the locals into surrendering and shot anyone who resisted the inevitable.

The Larkinsons didn't really have the means to process tens of thousands of captives in a short amount of time. Therefore, the infantry simply rounded up the pirates and slaves and stuffed them into large cages."

The mass of prisoners sitting hopelessly onto the dirty floor caused some of the more sympathetic assistant mech designers to show some pity.

"How many of them are slaves?"

"That's to be determined." Ves shrugged. "From the intelligence we've gathered, the slaves outnumber the pirates. The problem is that there are many cases where the two labels overlap. The Crona Lords actually recruit a considerable amount of their men from the slaves that work under them. As long as they performed well and displayed plenty of loyalty to their masters, the slaves gained more rights and privileges under the pirate regime. This allowed them to work towards a better life."

A better life towards piracy, though. No matter how desperate these former slaves were, once they embraced piracy in any form, they became a part of the problem.

Ves did not intend to be merciful towards these folk.

*Chapter 2226 Peter Seterin*

Ves took his assistant mech designers and students on an extensive tour through Xiphard Base.

The sights were eye opening to those who never interacted with pirates and only knew them from the drama broadcasts on the galactic net.

They were a lot less impressive if you looked at them up close. Especially that now that they had been stripped of their weapons and thrown into improvised cages and put under gunpoint, the dangerous air around them had dissipated.

Supreme Lord Roda had died, killed by his own men. The loss of such a major pillar to their organization had caused every other Crona Lord to feel as if they had reached the end of their long and exciting ride.

The tour group visited many important-looking sites, each of which kept Xiphard Base alive. From power generation, waste treatment, air filtration, mineral processing and so on, the mech designers gained a greater impression of the Crona Lords.

More and more, the sights they had seen disabused them of the notion that pirates were technical illiterates who carelessly abused their stolen machines until they broke.

In fact the Crona Lords or their slaves did a decent job at maintaining their equipment. Certainly, their standards were fairly low, but that was mostly by necessity as the pirates did not have access to a robust supply network. Too often, Ves saw signs of jury-rigged solutions and inadequate repairs resulting from a lack of materials or technical expertise.

The sight both pleased and disappointed him. The Crona Lords obviously held themselves to a higher standard, but they were ultimately limited in what they could do. It was a sign of what humanity was like when they became disconnected from the galactic civilization that supported their entire race.

One of the more interesting parts of the tour was to witness the interrogation of the senior officers, those the Larkinsons managed to capture alive at least.

It turned out that Lucky had been a little too effective in clawing out the throats of every notable Crona Lord that held authority. Their elaborate uniforms decked with bones and other trophies had made it very easy to distinguish them from low-ranking pirates.

Ves reminded himself not to wear any clothing that was too fancy in hostile space. He briefly looked down at himself and was pleased that his hazard suit did not look that different from the others despite its higher quality.

In any case, when they entered a security center that the Larkinsons had taken over, everyone split up and curiously observed the former leaders as they underwent interrogation.

In one interrogation room, a pair of Black Cats draped themselves over the restrained form of a pirate officer.

"What are those women doing...?"

"They are extracting information." Ves said before grabbing the shoulders of the Larkinson seeds and pulling them away.

He brought them to another cell where a more normal interrogator from the Larkinson Clan talked to a captive.



This time, Ves noticed that the man being interrogated appeared to be a slave. After spending some time in Xiphard Base, Ves had learned how to distinguish the Crona Lords from their forced labor.

According to the various clues he derived from the man's appearance, the slave appeared to be some sort of senior technical supervisor. In other words, he was in charge of servicing and maintaining the large machines that kept Xiphard Base running.

A man like that probably knew the base from inside out. Ves grew interested in chatting with the slave.

He impulsively entered the interrogation room, startling the interrogator.

"Patriarch Larkinson! I was not expecting your arrival here!"

The eyes of the slave widened as he gazed at the hazard-suited form of the leader of the ones who doomed the Crona Lords.

Ves waved his arm. "Please step aside. I'd like to have a talk with this fellow."

"Very well." The clansman obediently rose from the seat and made way.

Maikel and Zanthar stayed in place, unsure where they should go. They soon decided to just stay put and listen to the discussion.

Once Ves sat down next to the table, he calmly faced the slave. Due to the transparent visor of his helmet, their eyes met each other.

Soon enough, the slave grew a bit discomfited. The identity of the Larkinson clan patriarch along with the demeanor he exuded loomed heavily on the slave who formerly took orders from the Crona Lords.

"What.. what do you wish to know?"

"Let's start with something simple. Do you have blood on your hands?"

"No! Never! I am a slave! I did not join the Crona Lords out of a willingness to get exploited. If I was still working back in civilized space, I would have earned a nice salary and lived a stable life."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "The condition of your body is quite good for a slave."

"That's because the Crona Lords need someone like me. If you have walked through this base, then you know how reliant they are on people who know machines and know how to fix them. There aren't any schools in the Nyxian Gap and their attempts to train their own engineers.. hasn't always gone right."

"Uh huh. So they feed you with better rations and outfit you with pretty decent clothing."

The senior base engineer looked upset. "I'm not a pirate! I don't deny that I enjoyed a position of privilege, but that is only in comparison to my fellow slaves. I.. I had to play by the rules in order to survive. The Crona Lords can be very harsh on those who offer resistance."

If Ves was in the man's position, he might have opted to make the same choice, so he did not begrudge the slave too much. His circumstances were very bad and striving to survive under a pirate regime always entailed desperate measures.

"What's your name?"

"Peter Seterin."

"Where do you come from?"

"I am a Reinaldan citizen."

"How did you end up in the hands of the Crona Lords?"

"I used to be a passenger aboard a liner that was heading from the Reinald Republic to the Sentinel Kingdom. I wanted to get away from Reinald and Sentinel looked like an attractive option. I never realized that accepting a lucrative job in the latter would lead me to travel on a ship that was waylaid by pirates."

"Were you captured by the Crona Lords?"

"No. It was some other band called the Zero G Devils. They're quite small, though I didn't see them that way back then. The Zero G Devils raided multiple middle-tier passenger ships, always managing to kidnap thousands of people, many of them who have paid a lot for their tickets. Mine was already taken care of by my new employer."

After that, the Zero G Devils sorted out their captives. The attractive ones were sent out first. The pirates then transferred the skilled ones like Peter to a more discrete pirate ship, which carried the prisoners all the way to the Nyxian Gap, where pirate groups paid well to obtain some useful slaves.

Hearing that someone travelling rather deep in civilized space had suddenly been kidnapped before being trafficked to the Nyxian Gap astounded Ves and his students.

This sounded like an elaborate and sophisticated operation that must have been active for many years!

Rather than waiting to hijack some engineers and skilled personnel from the ships entering the Nyxian Gap, the pirates evidently didn't have enough. They had to import them from civilized space!

"Well, it's quite a stroke of bad luck that your ride got hijacked." Ves remarked. "These are the perils of traveling through space. If I was in your shoes, I would have stayed in Reinald."

Peter smiled ruefully. "You think I don't remind myself of that every day?"

"So tell me about all of the equipment that the Crona Lords wanted you to service."

As Peter Seterin explained what his typical day of work involved and what kind of vital base equipment he needed to fix, Ves and the Larkinson seeds listened closely.

What was interesting was that the Crona Lords kept promoting Peter while affording him more privileges.

He gained the right to order around his fellow slaves.

He no longer had to live in a cramped cell with other slaves but instead moved to a more respectable apartment where he could sleep in the comfort of his own space.

He started to earn some Kavenit coins which he mostly spent on bribing his Crona Lord supervisors in order to get into their good books.

In a sense, Peter got what he wanted when he originally left the Reinald Republic. He experienced a change in scenery and gained new employment. His boss just happened to be Crona Lords instead of Sentinels.

Some time passed as Ves began to listen to the various details that Peter revealed about the various systems that supported the base.

The Larkinson seeds slowly grew bored. They weren't very interested in how the ventilation systems kept the air fresh. What did this have to do with mechs?

At some point, a change occurred. The interrogator quietly approached Ves and transferred some files to his comm.

Ves smiled. "Thank you."

He accessed the new files and skimmed them over. His smile grew wider, causing Peter Seterin to grow uncertain.

Only a minute passed before Ves was done. "Well Peter, it seems you have been truthful. You are truly an unwilling captive the Crona Lords had bought from a trafficker. The original logs of your transfer are still in their database."

"Ah. I didn't lie, sir."

"That's true, but there are more ways to deceive people than telling falsehoods." Ves chuckled. "Lying by omission is also a lie, don't you know?"

"What.. what are you talking about?"

"Let me show you something."

Ves projected one of the files transferred to his comm. The footage that appeared over the table showed an angled view from a hidden security monitor into some sort of rarely-visited supply room.

The footage just happened to show Peter and two of his fellow slaves he held authority over pushing a teenage boy against a wall.

"Mr. Seterin! I'm sorry! I thought I did a good job! It's not my fault the water pump malfunctioned!"

Peter, who appeared much more aggressive in the footage, stepped forward and punched the young slave in the belly.

"Agh!"

"You little rat! When the Crona Lords dumped you into my lap, I didn't expect you to be able to repair a power reactor, but at least I thought you were capable enough to clean the insides of a water pump!"

"This was the first time I came across a water pump. I didn't know what to do!"

"No excuses, boy! You caused a lot of trouble for our masters!" Peter launched another punch! "Now, let me show you what happens to slaves like you who forget your place."

The Peter in the footage then proceeded to remove his coat, slide down his pants and remove his underlayer vacsuit.

His two subordinates did the same to the teenager.

Maikel and Zanthar looked incredulous and horrified at the security footage.

As for the slave strapped to his chair, his face exhibited full-blown panic!

Before the footage could go any further, Ves swiped his hand, causing the scene to disappear before it could turn lurid.

"I..." Peter bent his head in defeat. There was no way to deny what he had done. "I was.. frustrated. All of the slaves were. We don't have access to a lot of women."

Ves calmly crossed his arms. "According to the laws and conventions of the Common Fleet Alliance and the Mech Trade Association, any human who engages in crimes against humanity under the auspices of a recognized pirate organization has forfeited his rights and identity in human space. As an individual who has gone beyond aiding and abetting the activities of pirates by partaking in some of their crimes, you have met the legal standard of an interstellar pirate. Do you have any objections to this statement?"

"I'm not a pirate!" Peter insisted! "I'm a slave! I never wanted this!"

"I don't care. I'm only interested whether I have to treat you like a human being or not. Luckily, I don't have to." Ves grinned.

"Wh-what are you planning to do to me?" Peter shook.

"Why, helping you atone for your crimes, pirate."

With those ominous words, Ves rose from the chair and moved to leave the room.

"I will see you later, Peter." Ves teasingly said. "I can promise you that I will make sure that you are able to contribute to science."

#### *Chapter 2227 Battle Incentives*

The greatest pleasure of defeating pirate organizations was obtaining their spoils.

Certainly, Ves did not expect to take over everything.

The valuables in their eyes might be trash in the eyes of the Larkinson.

The goods may have become irrevocably damaged or lost during the fighting, as was with the case of the Allidus trade convoy.

Nonetheless, Lucky's sabotage and the Penitent Sister assault both managed to defeat the Crona Lords without inflicting excessive material damage. In fact, the rioting and despairing Crona Lords inflicted the most collateral damage on the base.

After some time, the Larkinsons began to search through every corner of the base, ransacking both personal possessions and larger goods owned by the Crona Lords as a whole.

Since the LMC earned a hefty amount of money everyday, ordinary goods which made pirates wild no longer interested Ves. He did however allow the individual Larkinson clansmen to pick out something nice depending on their contribution in battle.

Risk should always be followed by reward. While Ves expected his Larkinsons to do their duty to the clan, he wanted them to be enthusiastic about it. Therefore, every member of Task Force Predator was entitled to a bonus. Mech pilots who risked their lives directly received the greatest benefits. Officers and higher-ranking clansmen received some nice rewards as well.

Even if the Larkinsons disdained the jewels, trophies, personal weapons, alien relics, random minerals and other spoils, the clan would just directly reward them with hex credits instead.

Many Larkinsons understood that money increasingly became less relevant to them. Most of their basic needs were already taken care of by the clan, and it was difficult to spend the money while they were traveling in deep space.

What the clansmen began to aim for instead was Larkinson merits. Though the Larkinson Merit Exchange did not offer a full range of services at this time, many clansmen already cast greedy eyes at the second-class augmentations on offer!

Empowering the mech pilots in the clan was an important priority to Ves and the other leaders of the clan. However, the warriors wouldn't value their augmentations as much if the clan handed them over for free.

In order to keep them motivated and foster a culture of diligence and hard work, Ves decided to boost their existing gains by rewarding them with varying amounts of Larkinson merits according to their battle contributions.

This was a fair and transparent way for the mech pilots to improve themselves. Ves hoped to establish a virtuous cycle of improvement with this incentive structure.

In theory, in order to redeem valuable augmentations, they needed to train hard and actively improve their skills.

This would make them stronger, and thereby lead to better battle results.

Better accomplishments rewarded them with more merits, which would allow them to augment themselves faster.

Once they received their augmentations, their skills and battle prowess would soar significantly!

With the right implants and genetic alterations, they would be able to improve even faster and expand their skill set!

This would allow the Larkinson Clan to gain even more value out of them in battle!

Ves knew that as long as the Larkinson Merit Exchange kept offering attractive rewards, the Larkinsons would keep fighting and improving with great vigor!

All he needed to do was to get the ball rolling, which he just did. As he and his students entered the main warehouse of Xiphard Base, numerous off-duty clansmen walked past the crates and piles of refined metals in order to reach the racks that the infantry soldiers had quickly prepared.

On these racks rested a large variety of pirate spoils and trophies. Most of them had been stripped from the bodies of pirates, whether alive or dead, or had been dug from their personal rooms.

Various clansmen in their suited forms inspected the items placed on the racks and picked anything they liked, whether it was a weapon, a piece of gear, some ornament or other curiosity.

Of course, not every spoil was safe and still had to undergo a thorough check, but those were problems that could be dealt over time.

"This is cool!" Zanthar grinned. "Can we take something as well?"

Ves knocked his fist against his hazard suit helmet. "Nope. Rules are rules. Only those who took part or contributed in the fighting are allowed to take some spoils."

"But we're a part of this task force as well! We are taking the same risks as the other Larkinsons!"

"While that is true, they are making actual contributions, whether that is making sure whether our mechs get repaired or whether our clansmen get the nutrition they need. All you two have been doing is studying and learning. You should be paying me instead of the other way around. Be lucky that I'm not interested in charging any tuition."

Many people would kill to receive the personal tutelage of a skilled and knowledgeable mech designer! While Ves was not yet a Senior who usually held respectable positions at universities, he was already one of the foremost Journeyman Mech Designers of his generation.

His rapid ascension meant that he was doing at least something right. That made his teachings even more valuable!

Both Maikel and Zanthar blinked. They had chosen to forgo studying at a mech design university in order to study under Ves. They didn't know how lucky they were at the time. There was no need to shower them with freebies and spoil them rotten before they became full-fledged mech designers!



"You can look, but you can't take. Just take this opportunity to widen your horizons. In the future, you can obtain whatever you want when you actually give something back to the Larkinson Clan."

The Larkinson Clan was under too much pressure. In the present, it needed to survive the Nyxian Gap. In the future, it needed to keep itself afloat in the Red Ocean.

Ves did not intend to keep his head down and rely solely on peaceful development to get ahead.

Only by grasping opportunities would he be able to improve himself fast enough to obtain the power he needed to effect real change!

As Ves and his students walked past the racks, they paid attention to different items.

As a mech designer and craftsman, Ves was always on the lookout for interesting materials, especially those that reacted to spirituality. He cast out both his visual and spiritual senses for any interesting exotics. He also scanned the small projected screens that provided a short summary of the name and known properties of a particular exotic.

Sadly, the pirates of the Crona Lords did not have any access to high-grade exotics. Maynard Fields predominantly held Kavenit, and most of the rocks that pirates with a certain hobby collected merely consisted of colorful and abnormal samples of Kavenit ore.

"Worthless." Ves shook his head.

He looked down on these rocks for two reasons.

First, even if they contained valuable properties, their volume was too low to build anything worthwhile.

Second, he already had access to better materials. So far, Ves had spotted nothing that could surpass Breyer alloy in protective ability.

That said, his sweep did harvest some small and useful gains. One of them was a mineral that allowed him to strengthen infantry-grade transceivers. Another rock contained properties that made it easier to generate a gravitic field.

Ves wordlessly snapped up these small rocks and ordered his clansmen to take them back to the Scarlet Rose.

In the meantime, his two students ignored the strange exotics and instead studied the much more impressive-looking pirate gear.

The Crona Lords owned all manner of equipment that rarely showed up in civilized space. Weapons such as heated daggers, serrated swords, tiny holdout pistols, cruel and majestic hand cannons, poison arm bracers received almost every clansman's appreciation.

Sadly for Maikel and Zanthar, they could only look on enviously as their older clansmen put a claim on them. Most Larkinsons either sought to add these wicked weapons to their personal arsenal or intended to show them off to their friends.

It seemed the pirate habit of showing off their accomplishments in the form of trophies was beginning to rub off on the Larkinsons. It was a much more vivid and interesting way to present one's life to other people.

"It's also a primitive custom."

There were good reasons why modern humans mainly relied on records to show their worth. Pirates had degenerated from their civilized cousins by resorting to baser means to convey their strength and accomplishments.

Yet despite this fault, Ves nonetheless became charmed by the sight of Larkinsons beginning to wear some more harmless trophies on their hazard suits or combat armor. It gave them a slightly more savage air, as if they were starting to become pirates themselves.

Ves thought they were beginning to look a bit more ferocious. That was good. They needed plenty of guts to make it out of the Nyxian Gap intact.

The smaller prizes did not hold his interest for long. The members of the Crona Lords may be allowed to hold some trinkets, but it was impossible for them to obtain something truly valuable.

No. That was left to the likes of Supreme Lord Roda and his most trusted subordinates.

The deceased pirate leader carried the most valuable and interesting goods. Ves first inspected the weapons and other gear the clansmen had taken from Roda's corpse.

It was too bad that none of them availed the pirate commander at the moment of his death.

The man's comm was missing, likely taken by Calabast so she could hack into it and read the Supreme Lord's personal correspondence.

Even though the Supreme Lord owned some genuinely good stuff, Ves did not show any interest in taking them. He decided to leave them in place for the commanders and those who earned substantial battle accomplishments to take them and use them as proof they toppled a genuine pirate lord.

In fact, Commander Dise suddenly appeared by his side. She wore a wicked-looking suit of combat armor that was draped in the furs of an exobeast along with many other battle trophies. She quickly raked over the goods and picked up the Kavenit alloy insignia which represented the Supreme Lord's authority over the Crona Lords.

"I'll be taking this, thank you." She spoke.

After registering her selection to a nearby guard, she proudly attached the insignia on her belt which already carried numerous old symbols of authority.

The new addition hardly enhanced her already intimidating battle-ready appearance. The greatsword she carried on her back was far more impressive than any of her trophies!

Nonetheless, habits died hard. The Swordmaidens may not call themselves pirates anymore, but changing their coats did not mean the people who wore them transformed all of a sudden.

It was only after he inspected all of the gathered that he came to the biggest prize of all in his opinion.

Three transparent cases holding three B-stones rested in a separate room. Ves carefully approached them and probed them all with his spiritual senses.

All of them blocked his spiritual projections, just as expected.

He grinned. "Finally."

With three more B-stones falling into his hands, the day came closer where he could build a custom suit of armor that completely protected him against spiritual attacks!

In fact, he already gathered a sufficient volume of B-stone to start making one right away, but Ves wasn't satisfied with the degree of protection. He wanted to clad himself with thicker layers in order to offer him sufficient protection against formidable entities such as Nyxie.

As Ves studied each of the rocks in greater detail, he noticed that all of them were not standalone rocks like his existing two samples.

Instead, they had all been cut down to size by an industrial tool or machine!

Ves widened his eyes as he studied the various marks. The B-stones had all been cut until they reached a uniform mass.

"They're products!"

While this did not necessarily mean that the source sold B-stones en masse, it at least proved that the Nyxian Gap must be hosting a B-stone mine!

"Where the hell did the Crona Lords obtain these rocks!?"

#### *Chapter 2228 Pity*

As the Larkinson Clan catalogued the material goods of the Crona Lords and selectively brought them back to the fleet, Ves no longer cast his eyes in this direction.

Aside from picking up some interesting exotics, Ves mainly came for the B-stones. The three lightly-processed B-stones more than doubled his existing collection. This meant that he no longer needed to protect himself against spirituals by putting an open B-stone lockbox over his head!

Sadly, despite the abundant amount of minerals and metals the Crona Lords accumulated, Ves found no trace of P-stones and F-stones.

Neither exotics provided any utility to regular pirates. At the very least, the B-stone offered valuable protection from the discordant spiritual vortex raging in the imaginary realm.

At this time, Ves was unsure whether pirates or other factions in the Nyxian Gap recognized the true value of these three spiritually-reactive exotics.

He knew that the Five Scrolls Compact maintained a hidden base in the depths of the Nyxian Gap. Since the cult actively developed various applications of spirituality, Ves did not believe they were ignorant of the effects of spiritually-reactive exotics!

Perhaps the B-stones the Crona Lords obtained may have been mined by the 5 Scrolls Compact or one of their secret splinter organizations!

"Interesting."

It was useless to speculate any further. He knew too little about what went on in the Nyxian Gap. He also did not know whether he could obtain P-stones, F-stones and B-stones in any other part of space.

What he did know was that smashing pirate groups was an expedient and effective way to obtain more spiritually-reactive exotics. It was not as if the Larkinson Clan intended to settle down in the Nyxian Gap in order to erect its own mining operations!

"Heh. Robbing pirates is surprisingly convenient and fun."

The irony of the situation was not lost on him. Pirates usually raided other targets in order to steal their hard-earned valuables.

Now, Ves and the Larkinson Clan did the same to the pirates! The predators had become the prey.

That did not mean that the Larkinsons could keep raiding the pirates with impunity. Calabast wanted to speak to him about this topic later in the day.

First, though, Ves wanted to make some other stops.

He briefly visited a room next to the warehouse where the star of the previous battle enjoyed his rewards.

Having shaken off the Misfortune Harness, Lucky eagerly dove into the pile of yummy, higher-grade exotics that he reserved.

There was no telling what Lucky had already eaten, but fortunately Ves didn't care too much about the materials that remained. Letting them end up in Lucky's belly was not a bad outcome, especially when Ves was confident it would pay off later in the form of a powerful gem.

"Be sure to eat to your heart's content." Ves lovingly said to his cat. "I expect you to produce great things in a month."

"Meow!"

"Don't be like that. You have eaten so much other exotics in the past month and you still haven't deposited anything from your other end."

"Meow meow."

Lucky swatted his tail at Ves and ignored the human in favor of resuming his consumption.

Seeing that his cat fully enjoyed his current spoils, Ves left his cat to his current feast and left.

He took his two students to the hidden base section which hosted the Omega Laser.

As soon as his little group passed the security checkpoint, they entered a cramped chamber which contained the huge bulk

"It's as large as a corvette!" Maikel gasped at the sheer metal monstrosity squeezed into the chamber.

In order to transfer as much heat away as possible, the huge rod-like laser weapon had been squeezed into a hole. Everytime the weapon generated heat, it could rapidly dump its heat into the surrounding walls and asteroid rock.

The Crona Lords only a modest amount of space to allow people access and to offer enough room to perform external maintenance.

As his students admired the sheer bulk and power of the Omega Laser, Ves approached a chief engineer that had been tasked with studying the weapon.

"What have you learned about the Omega Laser?"

"It's a ridiculously-sized laser cannon, sir, and I mean that literally. If you study the schematics, then core components are identical to the components of a conventional laser cannon, but scaled up by more than ten times. The sheer amount of bulk it adds and the huge amount of energy and other stresses the construction is subjected to necessitates additional components in order to keep this monstrosity functional."

That matched the conclusion that Ves initially formed after studying Lucky's scans. The Omega Laser was not an example of high technology. It achieved its raw output through brute forcing low-level tech. It was an inelegant solution and enabled unworthy people such as pirates easy access to extreme firepower.

The Big Two hated it when unworthy people obtained destructive weapons that were beyond their ability to control. This was why even if the first-rate superstates were able to field weapons that were far more damaging, their opponents were usually able to cope with this level of destruction.

To be honest, the Larkinsons shouldn't even be in the presence of this partially-intact superweapon. The Nyxian Gap might be labeled as lawless space, but the Big Two claimed that their jurisdiction extended to every corner of the Milky Way Galaxy!

The Omega Laser was very clearly a taboo weapon. One of the most obvious standards to judge this was to ask whether a mech was able to mount and use a weapon of this scale.

When Ves imagined what it would be like for a typical heavy mech to wield a weapon that was as large as a starship, the absurd mental image was enough to end this line of questioning.

"The Omega Laser is solely built to be mounted in fixed locations or purpose-built warships." The chief engineer remarked as he slapped his hand against the solid metal bulk of the weapon's exterior. "Even then, the latter has to be really big in order to cope with this big gun's demands."

"So we can't mount it on our own ships?"

"That would be very illegal, sir."

"Just tell me whether it's possible."

The chief hesitated a bit before shaking his head. "No. Our existing starships can't cope with the various demands of the Omega Laser. First, it's as big as a small starship. That means it won't fit in the hangar bays or cargo bays of our vessels. While we can install it on our larger starships, that entails an extensive refit that will take weeks to accomplish in a drydock."

That was way too much effort, and Xiphard Base didn't offer the appropriate facilities.

"What about installing it on one of our captured pirate ships?"

"Hmmm.. some of those vessels are large enough to fit the Omega Laser, but there are an enormous number of practical problems. For one, we need to install additional power reactors and other power management systems onto the ship. All of this will take months of work with our current capabilities."

In other words, it was not feasible to bring along the Omega Laser and use it as a trump card against powerful threats.

"A pity." Ves looked remorseful. "The power of this weapon is considerable. Pirate engineering isn't very sophisticated, but it is quite brilliant in leveraging its few strengths."

"What's an even greater pity is the self-destruction of all of those Allidus Alliance ships. Something like an Omega Laser is too big and demanding for us to mount on any ship, but the Judgement Lasers are different. While they are still bigger than anything a mech could handle, their size is optimized for typical light carrier-sized vessels."

Lord Drogen's decisive action put an end to this action. The Allidus pirates did not want to leave any possibility of their weapons being used against their compatriots.

After learning a few more details about the Omega Laser, Ves eventually decided on what to do with this big toy.

"Well, since there is no practical or legal way to make use of this Omega Laser, we might as well scrap it and salvage the most valuable bits. Is there anything good in this massive construction?"

"The Omega Laser predominantly consists of large quantities of low-grade alloys. However, there are numerous specialized components that contain traces of medium and high-grade exotics. It's well worth it to break down these parts in order to increase our stockpile of high-value materials."

"Do it, then."

If this superweapon was no use to him intact, then he had no qualms in tearing it apart.



Respectfully, of course. This was a weapon that required a lot of effort to build. Ves appreciated its design and craftsmanship. Whoever designed and built this weapon possessed a genuine love and passion for powerful weapons.

He even wondered whether he could ever meet this brilliant developer and conduct a fruitful exchange. Ves already picked up a number of small insights from studying the creative and unconventional solutions to get around the lack of key materials and tech in a barren place like the Nyxian Gap!

After bidding farewell to the Omega Laser, he left the hidden base section and ventured to another guarded location.

Ves arrived at a secure detention facility in the bowels of Xiphard Base. The infantry soldiers who secured the base had gradually hauled their prisoners to this facility, which was large and robust enough to fit every pirate and slave as long as they shared their cells.

The detention facilities weren't comfortable by any means, but it was a good short-term solution that kept the dangerous elements contained.

None of his students and assistant mech designers accompanied him this time. What he wanted to do next was not something they should be concerned about.

"Ves. You're finally here." Calabast greeted at the entrance. "Let's head inside and inspect the prisoners."

"Have you sorted them out like I asked?" He said as he walked alongside the black-clad spymaster.

"We did. While we lack the manpower to inspect and interrogate every individual pirate or slave, after we borrowed the processing power of the Scarlet Rose and the Penitent Sister ships, our automated algorithms and AIs has scanned all of the archival footage and gathered other evidence that can definitely declare whether someone is tainted with a 99.341 percent success rate."

As for Crona Lords or slaves who fell under the 0.659 percent and received the wrong evaluation, Ves didn't care. The lucky pirates who were mistaken as slaves obtained a new lease on life, while the unlucky slaves who were unjustly regarded as criminals were still pirates on paper.

"How many people are we talking about?"

"Of the tens of thousands of captives we've sorted, over six-thousand of them are pirates. There used to be thousands more, but the Battle of Xiphard Base had taken a toll on their numbers. Many Crona Lord mech pilots have died as the Penitent Sisters explicitly targeted their bodies. Those we managed to rescue from their ejected cockpits

or reasonably-intact wrecks are mostly intact, but they only constitute thirty percent of the Crona Lord's original pilot roster."

That disappointed him. He held an elevated interest towards mech pilots for his upcoming experiments. It wouldn't be the same if he conducted all of his experiments on norms.

Fortunately, there was no question that they were pirates. No matter what excuses those mech pilots brought forward, the fact that they hopped into a pirate mech and urged it to fight alongside other pirates sealed their guilt!

"Show me the prisoners who are proven to be pirates. Have you made sure to catalog all of the evidence and get all of the paperwork in order?"

"Yes, but..." Calabast frowned. "This is usually unnecessary. The Big Two usually turns a blind eye to what people do towards captives in the Nyxian Gap."

"Don't neglect this step! I want to cover my legal avenues in case my activities draw scrutiny."

"...What are you up to now?"

"Exploring the mysteries of reality and the laws of nature."

Calabast immediately grew dark. "Human experimentation."

"Can it even be called as such when pirates aren't legally recognized as humans anymore?" Ves directed an amused look at her. "This is why proper record-keeping is important. While I don't intend to spread what will happen, if it does, at least I won't get into any major trouble! Don't pity the pirates. The harm they do towards human civilization is so egregious that they deserve worse punishment!"

Even if Ves was right, Calabast still found his intentions distasteful. As someone who keenly understood how humans worked, she knew that anyone who performed depraved acts tended to descend to this level.

No matter what veneer of legality or civility that people used to justify their actions, the vile nature of their actions could not be changed!

This was why the Big Two prohibited slavery, brainwashing, mass murder and other crimes against humanity. To progress their race and civilization, humans needed to advance forwards, not backwards!

*Chapter 2229 Slippery Smooth*

Ves eagerly toured the detention cells that held his potential test subjects.

The pirates were all locked within secure, reinforced spaces. In their current settings, the cell walls were all opaque, allowing Ves to observe the defeated criminals without alerting them to his presence.

There was no need for him to interact with them on an individual basis. The Black Cats had already uncovered their history and place within the Crona Lords. They even sniffed out the moles and informants within the ranks of slaves!

All of these people were malignant tumors to human civilization. Getting rid of them would make the galaxy a better place, and Ves was glad to enforce justice on behalf of the Big Two in this instance!

He was such a righteous galactic citizen! The Big Two should thank him for getting rid of humanity's trash!

"What are you so proud of?" Calabast irritatingly slapped his suited arm. "Just because pirates aren't entitled to human rights doesn't mean that it is right to treat them as objects. I know it's a tall order to ask for you to behave decently, but please consider whatever you are planning to do. I am aware of the.. sordid experiments you performed on the indigenous population of Aeon Corona VII. Do you really want to return to those dark days?"

Ves looked absolutely unperturbed. "Everything I do has a purpose. Back then, our survival and success literally hinged on the outcome of those experiments. While I admit that the need is not as great this time, I believe we should grasp every acceptable opportunity to strengthen ourselves. The Nyxian Gap is even more dangerous than the frontier due to the brazenness and elevated development of the local organizations. With superweapons like the Omega Lasers proliferating among the Nyxian pirates, It's more important than ever to give my clansmen a greater chance to survive the battles to come."

"Ves.. all the rationalization in the galaxy doesn't change the fact that some lines just aren't meant to be crossed. While I am not a diehard supporter of the Big Two, I appreciate the calm and order they introduced in the galaxy after the destruction unleashed during the Age of Conquest. Do you know what originally caused humanity to descend into beasts?"

"The admirals and the people in charge engaged in reckless genetic modification that reduced their inhibitions and turned their emotions volatile."

"That's a major contributor, but not the only reason." She said. "Back then, a strong authority such as the MTA and CFA didn't exist. Power was concentrated in the rulers of great star nations. The Terran Confederation and New Rubarth Empire both believed they were the masters of the galaxy and that everyone else had to obey their whims. The smaller star nations adopted similar philosophies."

"What are you talking about?"

"Humans back then developed an arrogant, superior disposition. They also possessed much less restraint in using their powerful warships to raze entire cities and continents. The culture and society at the time was one that worshipped power and without limit. With so many people trying to fulfill their ambitions, they became more extreme as they tried to outdo each other. Because everyone was doing it, it not only became acceptable to commit certain acts we consider crimes against humanity, it even became encouraged! The Age of Conquest would have ended with a lot less mass destruction if this was not the case."

This was why acts such as human slavery became prohibited in modern times. No matter how much the slave owners tried to rationalize or justify slavery with religious scripture or economic benefits, the fact of the matter was that those individuals or their surdinates had to whip, punish, brainwash fellow human beings.

Many slave owners and the people who weren't even involved in it successfully lied to themselves that slaves weren't even human!

How could humanity progress and evolve to a higher level if it still acted in a morally hypocritical fashion?

In her experience, the true nature of people could often be determined by seeing how bad they treated those they despised the most!

How humans treated others at their worst was often the baseline of their true nature. If Ves retained no humanity at all towards those he considered pirates, how much stock could she put on him when he acted normally?

It was too bad that Ves did not share her thoughts!

"We don't live in that age anymore, Calabast."

"That's because greater authorities have come into power to forcibly curb these runaway acts. The path to degeneracy is a slippery slope. You only have to take a few steps before you have descended too deep. Unlike in the Age of Conquest, the current environment doesn't tolerate behavior such as yours. I don't want you to rile up the Big Two to the point where they brand you an outlaw. Not only will that invalidate my investment in your development, you'll also drag in your downfall!"

Ves turned at her and smirked. "There won't be any problems, Calabast. Your concerns are wildly overblown. I ordered your Black Cats to gather proof that the captives here are irredeemable pirates to avoid the outcome you are talking about. The Big Two won't have an issue with my actions. Instead, they'll likely reward me! The Crona Lords have dabbled with so many taboo weapons that these pirates are bound to suffer!"

"You're not getting my point." Calabast sighed again. "It's not what you are doing today that concerns me. It's what you will do afterwards. Slippery slope, remember?"

"Well, it's fortunate that I have people like you pull me up before I fall too far. Just don't do it now. It's too early. I haven't harvested the benefits of sliding down the slippery slope yet. It'll be fun!"

Calabast grabbed onto his arm in order to halt his steps!

"THIS IS NOT A GAME, VES! The Big Two may have set some rules that incentivizes people to hunt down pirates and enforce the taboos that ensure the continuation of stability in the current age, but their intentions towards people like you are not benign! The MTA and CFA mainly want to foster a society where piracy and use of massive weapons are discouraged as much as possible."

This was an understandable goal in the lens of institutional isomorphism. The Big Two wanted impose a strong break from the past, and the easiest way to do that was to transform the culture and institutions that people took cues from. It was much harder for the Big Two to enforce their rules by themselves, so it was important to foster a society that already suppressed undesirable acts!

The Big Two succeeded in this objective. These days, humanity largely regulated itself without requiring the intervention of greater authorities. From this perspective, Ves hunting down pirates with the sanction of the Big Two could be considered an extension of this phenomenon!

Even if Ves recognized that he could be regarded as the Big Two's tool, so what?

Ves stood to gain unimaginable benefits from his various acts! With the twin allure of merits and research results, there was no way Ves was stopping this shuttle ride just as it undocked from an orbital space station. He wanted to descend all the way down the surface and reach his destination before he was willing to call it a day!

Whether the surface of the planet looked like an idyllic paradise or a burning hell wasn't in his consideration at the moment.

He resumed walking, and Calabast had no choice but to keep up with his pace.

"Look, I understand what you're saying. I really do. However, let's leave the fate of humanity and the continuation of the existing order to the Big Two. We're too small and inconsequential to worry about all of that stuff."

"You.. I can't believe you.."

Ves raised his finger. "I'm going through with my experiments regardless of what you think. Before you nag any further, at least wait until I have achieved my desired result. I can promise you that the outcome will justify everything I do to the pirates!"

As a mech designer, he acquired the belief that almost anything could be justified as long as he designed the right mech. This had proven to be the case when he elicited controversy but resolved them by designing mechs that quickly converted his naysayers.

The Transcendent Messenger design helped him turn the Ylvainans to his side. The Desolate Soldier design silenced most of the critics who accused him of brainwashing his customers.

Now, Ves intended to invent something that was just as beneficial to the Larkinson Clan, if not more!

He suddenly halted. He recognized a familiar face in one of the cells. His smirk grew wider as he spotted Peter Seterin squeezed in a cell with seven other compatriots.

Acting on his neural commands, his implant matched Peter's face to his entry in the list of prisoners and marked out his name.

"I don't need to experiment with all of the prisoners." He said. "Only a small number of them are worth my time. Let me go over all of them so that we can proceed to the next step."

It took some time for him to walk past every holding cell and spiritually inspect each individual pirate.

He did not want to miss anyone who possessed spiritual potential.

Despite the amount of prisoners the Larkinsons had taken, the pirates with spiritual potential were quite low. Through his tedious, hours-long search, he only managed to identify a couple of dozen.

This was a disappointing, if not entirely unexpected result. To mech pilots, those with spiritual potential tended to perform better in their cadet days and gained better opportunities in the legal job market. Why should any mech pilot with a promising career go pirate?

The same was true for norms, though to a much lesser degree. It was not necessarily the case that normal individuals with spiritual potential were superior to their duller counterparts.

In many cases, spiritual potential played absolutely no role in their careers or daily lives!

It was just that the emergence of spiritual potential often tended to happen among more remarkable individuals.

All of this meant that scumbags that tended to go pirate consisted of low-quality humans whose chances of developing spiritual potential was several times lower than the average.

Even on a spiritual level, pirates were inferior.

"Ugh. Too few." Ves shook his head. "I guess I'll have to capture more pirates to make up for the shortfall."

Ves ordered the wardens to separate the pirates he had marked out and put them into separate cells. In the meantime, Ves entered an interrogation room with Calabast and waited for the arrival of his first test subject.

He turned to his annoying minder. "Your presence here is not required."

"I'm not going anywhere. I want to see with my own eyes what motivates you to perform human experimentation. At the very least, I can assist with wiping out your tracks."

She deployed various instruments such as jammers and other anti-surveillance gadgets in order to secure the entire room. Ves didn't need her intervention, but it saved him from deploying his own jammer.

Once a guard dragged Peter Seterin in the room, he strapped the prisoner onto his chair before leaving.

Peter looked nervously at Ves and Calabast. "Can.. can I plead my case? I know I did wrong, but I didn't mean it! I didn't know what came over me back then!"

Ves ignored the former base engineer's ramblings. From the moment that Peter entered the room, he turned into a test subject.

He concentrated his mind and began to extend his considerable spiritual strength towards Peter's mind. Though the man held spiritual potential, it was weak and dormant, which meant it hardly offered any defense against his intrusions!

"What is that?! Why do I feel so strange?! Did you drug me or something?"

As Peter jerked against his restraints, Ves decided to perform a quick and simple experiment. He forcibly tried to take hold of a portion of Peter's spiritual potential and mold it into a special shape before infusing it with one of Peter's spiritual attributes.



Surprisingly, every step of the way, Ves encountered notable resistance! Breaching Peter's mind was easy. Manipulating his spirituality without causing unanticipated changes was quite challenging!

Once he completed his crude and forceful manipulation, Ves drew back and stared at Peter.

The man already stopped trying to fight against his restraints. Instead, the base engineer's demeanor changed on a subtle but fundamental level.

"What have you done, Ves?" Calabast asked with a measure of shock in her tone.

To her, the shift was impossible! It was as if the prisoner switched to a different personality!

Ves continued to observe his test subject. He grew a bit discomfited when Peter locked eyes against his own. While being stared at in the eyes was not necessarily a big deal, Ves did not like the kind of look his test subject directed at himself!

"You.." Peter began to huff. "I.. I can't resist!"

The prisoner suddenly raised his waist as far as his restraints allowed! Both Ves and Calabast managed to spot something notable.

That was not a codpiece!

Peter quickly became increasingly more unhinged!

"Your skin is so soft! Let me lick it! I can't live without getting a taste!"

Ves grew grim. "..."

"Is this what your experiment is supposed to achieve?" Calabast carefully asked. "I must say that this is a novel way to interrogate a prisoner."

Ves resisted the urge to summon the Amastendira in order to blast his test subject's skull!

#### *Chapter 2230 Natural Defense Mechanisms*

In the initial experiments, Ves manipulated Peter Seterin's spiritual potential like a mortician dissecting a corpse.

He knew what he was doing was wrong and unnatural in a way, and the increasing resistance he encountered only reinforced that impression.

Peter Seterin was alive. His spirituality, however weak it may be, represented his strength as a person and a living, sentient being.

From his various interactions with other spiritual entities such as his spiritual products, he always made a big distinction between their states before and after Ves breathed them to life.

As long as they hadn't come into existence, spiritual products remained a disparate collection of ingredients. Ves could tinker with the ingredients and manipulate their merger process to an extensive degree.

Yet once they came to life, their entire state had shifted. The whole became more than the sum of the ingredients. At that point, the spiritual product he created could no longer be altered as if it was a machine. He had to treat it as a proper lifeform which mainly changed through growth rather than mechanical tinkering.

Though Peter's spiritual potential showed signs of neglect and even atrophy, it still possessed defense mechanisms of its own! While Ves managed to bend it at first, once he tried to force a change that deviated too far from Peter's original mindset, a portion of his spiritual potential actually broke!

"Ahhhhh!" Peter yelled as he felt something deep inside his being tearing apart!

The moment Ves induced substantial harm to Peter's spiritual potential, it suddenly did something drastic.

It retracted in itself!

It was as if the residents of a town fled to a castle which barred its gates and posted archers on the wall. Peter's spirituality began to retract and compress itself into a form that was similar to a seed, except not as strong.

Peter visibly sagged once that happened. Though the unknown change shielded him from the soul-searing pain of losing a literal chunk of his spirit, he also became less detached to one of the sources of his strength.

As Ves studied Peter's changed condition, he speculated that the shift caused his test subject to devolve back to a norm.

The reason why he felt this way? Once his spiritual potential compressed itself into a seed for self-defense purposes, it actually became less tangible!

Ves found it much harder to manipulate the inert seed. It was as if it weakened its presence to the point where it had gone out of phase from the dimensions that Ves operated in! Unless he could pull off a similar trick, there was no way for him to alter Peter's spirituality despite the huge disparity in strength!

He frowned as he stared at Peter's sweaty, shaking form. The repercussions of all of the changes that had occurred still left a very harmful impression on his psyche.

"This experiment is largely a failure." He muttered.

There was no reason for him to feel disappointed, though. Failures could reveal just as much as successes.

His botched attempts at altering Peter's spiritual potential generated several new phenomena that Ves had never witnessed.

The results provided even greater support to his theory, which stated that recklessly messing with someone's spirit could easily lead to great harm.

The only question he had right now was whether Peter's retracted spiritual potential would stay huddled like a hedgehog forever. As Ves peered closely at it with his spiritual vision, he intuitively felt that it might be harmful if maintained for a longer period of time.

This was because once the spiritual potential tightened itself into a shell, it didn't interact with any external impulses, including Peter's own thoughts and emotions!

Ves guessed that the state of Peter's spiritual potential therefore depended on how much danger it perceived.

If Peter's spirituality believed that it would get messed around once it lowered its defenses, it might decide that starving itself was better than the alternative!

As Ves observed, analyzed and derived numerous mechanisms related to spirituality and how it responded to certain changes, Calabast continued to remain baffled.

Unlike her partner, she possessed no spiritual potential at all. Even if she did, there was no way that she could perceive the elaborate spiritual changes happening out of her sight.

The only way she could tell that something happened was by observing Peter Seterin's drastic changes and reactions. His body language, his stress levels, his facial expressions and his words all indicated to her that Ves was manipulating the captive in an invisible and inscrutable manner!

The sight of it frightened her. Though she had managed to uncover Ves' greatest secret, she did not actually have a good understanding of what Holy Sons were capable of. Certainly, his mech designs provided a lot of clues to her, yet she always assumed that his powers mainly applied to mechs.

Now that she witnessed him manipulating people directly instead of resorting to indirect methods such as glows, her evaluation of him as a threat had risen considerably!

Fortunately, she was an ally of Ves instead of his enemy. She knew that for all of his lack of constraints, he treated his friends and allies sincerely.

That did not take away from the disturbing nature of his current experiments, though. Pirate or not, Calabast deplored senseless cruelty. If Ves wanted to punish Peter, then he should just give the poor fellow a quick execution.

"What is happening to Mr. Seterin?" She decided to ask directly. "Is there a point to all of this or are you merely developing a new torture method?"

"I am conducting serious research! Right now I'm just exploring the mechanics and learning from failure. Once I succeed, you'll definitely support me even more!" Ves defended himself.

He continued to poke and prod Peter Seterin's retracted spiritual potential and concluded that he could no longer do anything to it in any meaningful way.

"Take Mr. Seterin away and bring in the next test subject." He said.

Calabast partially lowered the jamming to transmit a command to her men. A pair of Black Cats soon entered the room and dragged the exhausted and mentally-wounded prisoner away.

"What do you want to do with Mr. Seterin? Do you still need him or can we end his suffering?"

He thought for a moment. "No. Don't get rid of him. Put him in detention on a ship where he won't be disturbed. I will have to observe him for a longer time and possibly experiment with him even more. Qualified test subjects are hard to find and I don't have the luxury to pick a bunch of them up on the street."

The discoveries he made today had already enriched his understanding of spirituality even more. He learned that people who were weaker than him on a spiritual level still possessed the means to resist his manipulations to varying degrees.

The more he distorted someone's spirit beyond its natural state, the more it resisted the changes.

This kind of external manipulation was different from what he did to William Urbesh. Back then, Ves contaminated the former coward's spiritual potential with another influence. These caused changes to occur within his castle, thereby rendering most defense methods useless.

The enemy was already inside and in control of some of the gates!

"There's a very important difference there." Ves concluded.

Changing someone's spirituality through contamination was an insidious method. It was like slipping in spies into a castle and turning some of the people inside into traitors.

Despite the ease of this method, this was a very destructive and uncontrollable means of transforming people. Seeing how William Urbesh ultimately ended up made Ves swear it off against using it against his own clansman.

In contrast, the new method he applied to Peter Seterin showed great promise despite the initial lack of success.

He attempted to amplify one of Peter's traits by creating an open spiritual construct and piling it up with one of his strongest and most abundant spiritual attributes.

Due to the difficulty in grasping and manipulating Peter's spirituality, Ves could only pull out one of the stronger attributes, which happened to revolve around lust.

The outcome proved that the method he used on the spiritual foundations of mechs also worked on a living person's spirit.

The problems that ensued complicated his plan, but Ves was confident he could overcome some of them. He just had to break down the problems he encountered and figure out the appropriate solutions.

In his previous experiment, the crucial difference lay in his authority. His own Spirituality and the spiritual foundation of his mech designs that he fostered with his own spiritual energy belonged to him. They naturally allowed Ves to manipulate them as he possessed full ownership over them. They considered him to be on their side.

It was different for Peter Seterin. Even to a close friend, his spiritual potential would likely resist any changes that caused it to move further away from Peter's actual nature.

This was a great issue to Ves as it constrained the scope of his changes. If he pushed someone too far, they would activate their most desperate form of defense and simply close their spiritualities to any external influence.

"I just have to rein myself in then." He muttered. "This is quite a hindrance, but reassuring as well."

The defense mechanisms at least showed that humans weren't defenseless against unbridled spiritual manipulation. Perhaps they had more means of defending the integrity of their spirits that Ves had not discovered as of yet. That was what made these experiments so valuable. Knowing what took place was always better than remaining clueless!

The Black Cats soon brought in another prisoner, this time a true unrepentant pirate. Once the attendants bound the Crona Lord to the chair, they soon left so that Ves could resume his second round of tests.

"Hmm, let's do something different this time."

Previously, Ves wanted to start off with something easy and attempted to distort Peter's spirit by amplifying one of his strongest personality traits.

However, Ves had overlooked that he was dealing with a bunch of pirates and depraved criminals. Their personalities were rotten and their spiritual potential, if they had any, reflected their ugliness!

Perhaps it might be a different story if Ves attempted his manipulations on someone nobler such as a Larkinson. Yet against scum, Ves would only be turning them into bigger bastards if he amplified one of their core spiritual attributes!

"Maybe I need to perform subtraction instead of amplification."

He partially replicated what he performed within his own mind when he went overboard in creating spiritual augments.

He created closed spiritual constructs that sought to leverage a specific spiritual attribute separately, thereby isolating them from the rest of someone's mind and spirit.

When Ves quickly read through his current test subject's record, he noted that the man possessed an unhealthy desire to beat up slaves in order to establish his martial prowess.

"You brat! The Crona Lords may have fallen, but the Allidus Alliance won't let you get away with taking out one of their suppliers! Lord Hivex is going to hunt you down and tear you from limb to limb before letting his docs put you back together so that he could do it again! Hell, once I get out of here, I'll do it myself!"

Ves grimaced. "Well, you're quite a cruel guy, aren't you? Let me see if I can fix that aspect."

He went to work. Again, he encountered great resistance when he attempted to take some of his test subject's spiritual energy and mold it into a shape that was meant to contain some of the man's cruelty.

Ves encountered a couple more setbacks.

First, he couldn't create a big enough construct to his liking.

Second, he couldn't draw out all of the spiritual energy with the right attribute. The test subject's spiritual potential was already on guard so Ves could only redirect a modest portion into his newly-created spiritual construct.

Overall, the changes Ves had made was a lot less drastic than the ones he applied to Peter. Fortunately, the second test subject's resistance to alterations had not reached a critical threshold.

Both Ves and Calabast stared at the test subject closely. Before, the bearded Crona Lord snarled and scowled at his captors.

Now, some of the animosity and aggression on his face had faded. Though the pirate still showed obvious dislike towards the Larkinson Clan, Ves managed to tone down his hatred by a noticeable degree!

This time, Calabast became genuinely impressed!

"This is interesting. It's as if you drugged this pirate! I can think of numerous interesting applications for this trick."

The pirate may have grown less furious, but he hadn't turned into a vegetable! He still retained plenty of spunk!

"You dumb kid! Release me now so that I can cave in your face!"

"..."

"Well, he already said worse just a minute before. It's progress, at least."