

Mech 2241

Chapter 2241 Confluence of Masters

Peter Seterin's unfortunate death revealed a lot to Ves.

The serum's life-attributed energy was so potent that hardly anyone could contain it. The fact that his mother absorbed it with ease shouldn't be taken as a model.

Weaker spiritual entities simply couldn't handle the excessive vitality contained within a small portion of high-quality life-attributed energy!

Ves should have fed Peter with a smaller dose. Even if decreasing the quantity of life-attributed energy vastly decreased its potency and vitality due to its interconnected attributes, it was better to make some progress than induce another head explosion!

Still, Ves did not quibble over one of his test subject's death too much. While it was a bit troublesome to obtain replacements, the Nyxian Gap never ran out of pirates for him to capture.

At the very least, up until Peter's spiritual potential was no longer able to contain the excessive vitality, its growth proceeded very smoothly and evenly.

Even without any active guidance on his part, the serum's life-attributed energy was configured in a way to foster comprehensive growth without any biases or preferences!

This was good news to Ves. If he ever wanted to strengthen someone quickly, he could just provide as much life-attributed spiritual energy that the subject in question could safely contain.

There was no need for Ves to do anything risky such as trying to control and direct the absorption process.

What happened if he absorbed it directly? He had a suspicion that he might be able to accelerate the growth of his Spirituality and shorten the time needed to advance to Senior.

However, Ves couldn't guarantee that such a forced growth would affect his foundation. So far, his Spirituality had grown at a fairly quick but steady pace. He was already satisfied with its current growth rate.

In addition, even if his Spirituality grew stronger, his understanding of his design philosophy still remained the same. Unless he made great progress in research and reached a much better understanding in his specialty, there was no way he could break through to Senior!

"That's going to take a lot of years." He muttered.

If he advanced when he reached fifty, then that was an impressive accomplishment. That was his current target, and so far Ves believed he was on schedule.

"In any case, there is no pressure as long as Gloriana doesn't advance to Senior first."

What interested him more was feeding the life-attributed spiritual energy to his design spirits. Some of them were weak, especially his earlier ones. Ves had long considered feeding life-attributed energy to the Crystal Leader in order to bring him up to par with his current standards.

Life-attributed spiritual energy also possessed remarkable healing properties. Before it strengthened a spiritual entity, it first healed the wounds and other impairments. Ves made this conclusion after seeing it work during the birth of the Superior Mother and the fatal experiment that he just performed.

Ves had long lamented the fact that some of his design spirits weren't as whole and undamaged as the others.

For example, the Crystal Leader was very deficient in many matters because its main ingredient was very damaged.

When Zeigra died, the Crown Cat's spirituality had become detached from its huge body and was just about to slip into the imaginary realm. Substantial portions had already crumbled away before Ves managed to recover Zeigra's still-living spirit!

The growth they experienced as Ves made use of them as design spirits did not heal all of the damage. It was as if they lost some of their limbs. Their natural healing processes were incapable of regenerating missing limbs!

Only outside intervention could fix this damage. Ves now became hopeful that he was able to address the congenital defects of all of his design spirits.

"It's still too risky to try this out." Ves whispered to himself. "If I somehow botch the process, I might lose a critical component that is responsible for empowering a lot of mechs!"

Ves suddenly realized he had not made sufficient preparations in the event that one of his design spirits left their positions.

What if they left? What if they became disabled? What if they died?

All of the mechs that depended on the design spirit in question would surely lose a lot of value! This would prove catastrophic to his reputation!

He didn't have any good solutions at the moment. The only method he could come up with was to hastily create a substitute spiritual product to take the place of the original design spirit.

It was best if the mech model affected by the design spirit's absence had already fallen out of use. Ves didn't care what happened to his oldest designs because hardly anyone piloted them anymore.

If that wasn't the case, then the more proper solution would be for the LMC to replace the invalidated mech models with newer models.

"This is a bit complicated." He thought.

Right now, it was too difficult to implement these solutions. This meant that Ves really couldn't afford losing any of his design spirits.

At best, he might choose to experiment on an expendable and unimportant design spirit. Bravo came to mind. The only purpose this feeble spiritual product fulfilled was to stroke Vincent Ricklin's ego!

"Hey! This is actually a pretty good idea!"

If his attempt to strengthen it succeeded, then Ves gained another option to strengthen his design spirits.

If the experiment failed and Bravo blew up, then no harm was done. Only Vincent actually suffered, and Ves believed that was a pro rather than a con!

Only his professionalism restrained Ves from making an immediate move.

From an ethical perspective, Ves had promised to deliver a custom mech to Vincent that performed up to a certain standard. He would be doing a great disservice to a customer if his product degraded and weakened ahead of time.

While it was normal to expect mechs to break down after they had been in service for five to ten years, for one of his mechs to abruptly lose its glow was not a regular malfunction!

"Hmm, I need to think on this issue further." He murmured.

When Ves returned to the Scarlet Rose, he continued to mull over his current research. While he hadn't collected enough data to make any solid conclusions, he was pretty sure he was able to help a mech pilot advance to expert candidate.

He was not as confident in helping the likes of Jannzi Larkinson or Tusa-Billingsley Larkinson in undergoing apotheosis. He still didn't understand the trigger to this phenomenon. All he knew that they needed to develop a very pure and solid conviction.

As Task Force Predator kept flying calmly through the dense asteroid fields of Maynard Fields, Calabast soon entered his stateroom.

"How is it going, Lucky? Would you like to undergo some additional training?"

"Meow!"

The gem cat jumped from the desk and floated towards the ceiling.

Ves stared up at his cat before directing his eyes to his strategic partner. "He enjoys your company, but he abhors training."

"Cats." Calabast shrugged.

"Yup. Cats."

When the black-clad woman strode forward, she leaned against the desk instead of sitting on the chair like normal people.

"Let me begin with the good news." She said. "Your Blessed Squire model has finally debuted on the battlefield, and it has already taken the Hegemony by storm."

Ves chuckled. "DIVA sure did a good job with rolling out the Blessed Squire. With the Hex Army on Marrakath III making much more progress than elsewhere, there is really no way for those boy-hating women to refute the effectiveness of my work."

In addition, the differences before and after the Blessed Squire's introduction was simply too big. Part of that was due to the complete lack of preparation on part of the Fridaymen, but it was undeniable that the Hexers fought considerably more enthusiastically than before!

"From the beginning, DIVA has targeted the Hegemony's opposition against mechs designed by boys. Fortunately, my former colleagues have managed to overcome the most difficult hurdle. It's very hard to argue that the Blessed Squire and your other Hexer mechs can be a boon to the Hex Army if the battle results haven't changed. In fact, if your mechs completely fell flat, then DIVA will be the first to pull them off the battlefields!"

"That's fair." Ves nodded. "I take it that the Blessed Squire's approval is only a matter of time?"

The lives of a lot of Hexer mech pilots was a stake. DIVA would never introduce something that imperiled the fate of the Hegemony!

Calabast nodded. "The matriarchs can't stop the vocal demand from the rest of the Hex Army. Behind the scenes, DIVA has made good use of the Little Angel to convince important Hexers to grant an exception to you. I'm not sure when the board of matriarchs will finally issue their verdict, but it won't take too long."

Once that happened, Ves would encounter much less hindrance when introducing other Hexer mechs. Even his female Hexer mech designs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer would probably make it through!

He briefly recalled his talk with Master Olson. His face grew serious.

"The Friday Coalition shouldn't be sitting on their thumbs, right? Do you know if they have made any moves towards the Blessed Squire?"

"I'm not sure." Calabast shrugged. "I'm no longer with DIVA so I don't have any access to intel relating to the Friday Coalition's response. If you ask me, the Fridaymen will never let a mech that has achieved such a drastic effect on Marrakath III to achieve the same impact elsewhere. It conveys too many advantages to remain unaddressed. That is all I can say about it. I'm not a mech designer so I do not know what kind of mechs the Coalition will present. Just take into account that your work will likely be targeted by the best."

"I'm aware. Masters are welcome to spend their precious design time on defeating my mechs. If nothing else, that means the Fridaymen are spending less time on figuring out ways to defeat the Hex Army's other models!"

"That's correct. Whether you win or lose, the Hex Army will always benefit. However..."

"What is it, Calabast?"

"You are overlooking something. With the great impact the Blessed Squire has made, you have definitely proven that you are capable of affecting conflicts between second-rate states. This is not only remarkable in the Komodo Star Sector, but also elsewhere. I am sure that many second-rate states in our neighboring star sectors are already paying close attention to what you can do. Some of their eminent mech designers may even feel threatened by your distinctive specialty."

Ves widened his eyes. "You mean that foreign Masters will develop counters to my mechs as well?!"

"If those foreign mech designers are observant enough to recognize the threat of your mechs, then they won't wait until you travel to their star sectors. They will likely develop countermeasures right away. Of course, these potential solutions all need testing."

The implication was clear.

"Those foreign Masters will cooperate or collaborate with the Friday Coalition to test out their unique solutions."

"This is a very great possibility. The Friday Coalition will not reject this foreign aid. Anything that helps stifle your mechs is valuable."

"Isn't this a bit too exaggerated?! While I'm okay with competing against the Masters of the Friday Coalition, it's another story if I have to resist the top mech designers of the rest of the Yeina Star Cluster!"

An ordinary Journeyman would never be able to withstand such scrutiny! While Ves believed he wouldn't buckle so easily, he knew that there were plenty of weird mech designers out there. Only one of them had to come up with a solution that completely suppressed or negated his design philosophy in order to set back his plans!

"Look, it's not that bad." Calabast attempted to reassure him. "If the Hexers become convinced of the value of your mechs and design philosophy, it's possible that some of the Hegemony's Master Mech Designers are willing to provide you with help."

Ves raised a very skeptical eyebrow. "Really?"

"...Perhaps not."

Chapter 2242 - Disunited Coalition

The realization that some of the best mech designers of the local star cluster might become his adversaries put Ves in a turbulent mood.

It was already bad enough that the Masters of the Friday Coalition focused their considerable abilities on countering his design philosophy.

Now that he learned that notable Masters and Seniors from several other star sectors started gunning for his mechs as well, how could Ves still maintain his composure?!

According to Calabast, there were several reasons why foreign Masters wanted to develop a solution against his mechs.

Their impact on the battlefield was considerable. Whereas the products of most other mech designers only strengthened a mech on an individual basis, Ves realized mechs that acted as powerful force multipliers!

In the Hex Army, that meant that not just the Blessed Squire became stronger, but dozens of other mechs around it performed better!

What was worse was that the Fridayman mech pilots that faced the Blessed Squire performed a little worse as well!

This meant that just a modest investment in a couple of Blessed Squires was enough to completely transform the battle performance of several mech companies!

Even compared to other utility-oriented mechs that existed to support other friendly mechs, this level of improvement was too efficient!

What if Ves rode on the coattails of his amazing accomplishments in the Komodo War and introduced his fearsome second-class mechs in other star sectors?

The old and formidable mech designers who advanced all the way to Master possessed formidable intellects and grand visions towards the future.

Once Ves and his remarkable design philosophy fully came to their attention, how could they possibly sit still and remain complacent?!

Even if Ves never intended to expand his reach to their star sectors, those Masters would not assume that their states were safe. If their enemies suddenly deployed a lot of mechs with glows at once, then it was too late to begin with designing counters!

This partially tied into the second reason why foreign Masters wanted to make a move.

Of the two states vying for dominance in the Komodo Star Sector, one of them was fairly 'normal' and the other one consisted of crazy female supremacists.

Who would they rather want as a neighbor? Certainly not the latter!

Calabast put it very succinctly. "From the perspective of Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal, an outright Hexer victory is the worst-case scenario. Even though the victorious Hexadric Hegemony will need to spend a lot of time to recover from the war and digest all of its new territories, once this period of weakness has passed, the state will become incredibly formidable. With aggressive and ambitious leaders in charge, there is a significant chance the Hegemony will start to intrude into other star sectors!"

Ves could easily imagine this outcome. Defeating the Friday Coalition would vindicate all of the Hexer matriarchs who pushed for war. The Hexers as a whole would likely develop an overinflated sense of confidence in themselves and eagerly push to continue their expansion!

"Compared to the threat of the Hexadric Hegemony, foreign states vastly prefer to see the Friday Coalition win." She continued. "The state is a friendly and open trading partner that doesn't discriminate against anyone. What is even better is that the Coalition is what its name says it is, a conglomeration of different powers with their own separate identities."

"I see what you are getting at." Ves made another realization. "The Friday Coalition only came together in order to resist the overwhelming might of the Hexadric Hegemony. Once their greatest enemy is eliminated, there is no acute threat to bind them together anymore. Only the faint threat from Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal might insure that the Coalition will exist, but the alliances between partners will certainly become frayed!"

Having interacted with several Fridaymen in the past, Ves knew that they considered themselves citizens of the Gauge Dynasty or Carnegie Group first. The label of Fridayman came second.

Internal tensions between the coalition partners would certainly exacerbate after winning the Komodo War. The division of territories that used to belong to the Hegemony would likely cause every partner to develop a lot of acrimony against each other!

Calabast laid out a pessimistic scenario. "The Friday Coalition's inherent division and disunity is something that foreign states very much like to see! The coalition partners would have no energy to cast their ambitions to other star sectors, as they are fully invested in competing against each other. Perhaps the Coalition might even break up as every partner turns into an independent state! At that point, the newly-declared states such as the Konsu Clan or the Vanguard Group may still have the strength to call themselves a second-rate state, but their ability to project power would sink to the bottom."

This was similar to the chaotic situation of second-rate states in Majestic Teal. There were many second-rate states there, but none of them equaled the mighty Garlen Empire of Vicious Mountain.

Instead of doing something sensible such as uniting together, the top powers of Majestic Teal mostly played games against each other!

"The collapse of the Coalition will make it easier for an ambitious foreign state such as the Garlen Empire to invade the Komodo Star Sector." Ves observed.

"Right. While the Garlen Empire is embroiled in its own problems and doesn't have that much energy to invade other star sectors, it will be different if the Komodo Star Sector becomes too weak. Every warlord and faction in Vicious Mountain will definitely agree to set aside their rivalries in favor of pouncing on a weak but juicy prey!"

"What makes you think the Friday Coalition will follow this trajectory?" Ves asked in doubt. "Surely the leaders of the coalition partners should know that they still need to present a united front against external enemies. The Hegemony is the closest but not their only danger."

Calabast smirked and twirled her hair with her fingers. "You'd be surprised at how short-sighted and selfish people can be. The leaders entrusted with responsibility do not always exercise their duties on behalf of their constituents. Many times, they can't resist the temptation to abuse their power for personal gain, even if it comes at the expense of the people who trust them to act responsibly."

"I'm already familiar with the agency problem. However, I find it hard to imagine that the leaders of the Coalition are stupid enough to risk weakening their strongest guarantee of safety in order to compete for minor benefits for their own powerbase. Greed can lead straight to ruination if you allow others to take everything away."

"You're right, Ves. Normally, the leaders of the Friday Coalition should have the prudence to know their limits. From the lens of the agency problem, these higher ups do not want to collapse the system that enrich them. They will make sure to find a state of balance where they can fill their pockets as much as possible without pushing them over the edge of a cliff."

Calabast briefly chuckled. "However, what if an outsider sneaks up from behind and gives them a push?"

Ves realized the danger of this scenario!

"Divide and conquer, kid. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book." She remarked. "The Friday Coalition is made up of six different partners, of which the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan is quite powerful. If the Friday Coalition ever wins the war, Gauge and Konsu will definitely retain the most strength. The Vermeer Group and Carnegie Group used to exist as middleweight partners, but after suffering so many Hexer offensives, their strength will drop considerably. As for the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan, the two coalition partners have already been in decline for a very long time."

Ves imagined the situation in the event the Friday Coalition won the Komodo War. Gauge and Konsu would definitely retain a lot of military and economic power.

In contrast, Vermeer and Carnegie would likely join the ranks of Vanguard and Puffer as weakened coalition partners.

Even if the four weaklings of the Coalitions banded together, they might still not be able to overcome the collective might of Gauge and Konsu!

What if the two giants decided to swallow the four weaklings? Depending on how much damage Vermeer and Carnegie suffered, this scenario might very well unfold immediately after defeating the Hexers!

If the leaders of the two giants truly wanted to enact this plan, then it was not in their interests to allow the Friday Coalition to crush the Hexadric Hegemony.

Instead, in the first half of the Komodo War, Gauge and Konsu would secretly cheer if the Hexers managed to rampage through Vermeer and Carnegie space!

The more territories the Hexers ravaged, the easier it was for Gauge and Konsu to cannibalize their former allies!

Ves grew shocked and numbed at the audacity of such an ambition plan. Such a scheme was too outrageous! Best of all, the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan didn't necessarily have to make any deliberate plots. They could fight the Hexers normally without drawing any suspicion and still fail to repel their enemies from the territories of the weaker partners!

Of course, there was a risk that the Hexers would gain an even greater amount of momentum and become too strong for the rest of the Friday Coalition to defeat. Gauge and Konsu needed to make some very careful choices over the course of the Komodo War.

As for the smaller partners, there was no doubt that they were cognizant of the possibility of being devoured by their former allies. There was no way that Vermeer, Carnegie, Vanguard and Puffer would allow the two behemoths in the Coalition to profit off their misfortune!

How could these four weak partners possibly make up for the shortfall in strength?

By inviting allies!

As long as they managed to partner up with powerful outsiders, the four weak coalition partners would be able to resist getting annexed after the Komodo War!

The only problem was that borrowing the strength of foreign states came at a hefty cost. If the weaker coalition partners weren't careful enough, they might be devoured by their new 'friends'!

Calabast flicked her finger against his forehead.

"Don't think too much. You're just a mech designer, not a politician."

"I'm the clan patriarch!" Ves defended himself.

"You're just a mech designer who just happens to assume some responsibility. That does not turn you into the second coming of Senator Tovar." Calabast corrected. "The people in charge of the Friday Coalition aren't blind to all of these considerations. It's just that there are no good options sometimes. Even if it's dangerous for the Fridaymen to ally themselves with foreigners, the threat of Hexer conquest is a more acute threat! We'll see how the war unfolds in the coming months and years. As for you, just concentrate on designing your mechs."

This was politics and statesmanship on a grander scale. The current Larkinson Clan was simply too inconsequential to become one of the main players.

Only Ves was able to exert a bit of influence over these events due to the considerable effectiveness of his mechs.

Chapter 2243 - Beneficial Competition

He had to admit that Calabast opened his eyes to the greater considerations of the Komodo War. The process and outcome of the war not only affected the locals, but also their neighbors!

With so many interests mingling and colliding with each other, it took someone much more adept in politics to make sense of this murky swamp.

At his level, Ves could only look out for himself and the Larkinson Clan while trying his best to give the Hexadric Hegemony a leg up. There was only so much his unique mechs could do to swing the geopolitical situation.

He eventually shrugged. "Whatever. I'll just do what I can from my corner. Even if the Fridaymen call upon their allies, the Hexers won't overlook this possibility."

The Fridaymen had always been better at diplomacy than their Hexer counterparts. Ves found it a bit distressing that the Hexers never adopted a friendlier face towards outsiders.

Instead, the Hexers always sneered or condescended the way that every other state aside from their own treated men as equals to women. Even if forging a couple of allies was in their best interest, the female supremacists simply couldn't get past their dogma in order to present a friendlier image of themselves!

"Goddamn bigots." Ves quietly cursed. "Why are you making it hard for me to ensure my mother's continued existence?"

If any foreigners wanted to meddle in the Komodo War and lend a hand to the Friday Coalition, Ves would definitely add their names to his list!

Whether he would follow up on them and teach them a lesson depended on the circumstances.

From a mech designer's perspective, competition was a natural process to their profession. No mech designer sold mechs in isolation. Each successful product merited at least some response from the designers of competing mech models.

Therefore, it was not particularly wrong for foreign mech designers to develop mechs that targeted his own work. No mech designer would experience much pressure to

improve and push their limits if they did not feel the need to go through all of that trouble.

Ves immediately felt the difference. Ever since he resumed working on his projects, he forced himself to work much harder. The urgency of the situation and the importance of delivering products that could withstand the upcoming competition caused him to neglect his other priorities in favor of focusing fully on progressing his mech designs!

Fortunately, he was not the only one who became fired up. When Ves shared his understanding of the competition they faced, Gloriana became eager to see how her mechs compared against the machines that their adversaries came up with. As someone who constantly pursued perfection, there was no better lesson to learn from than failure!

"I don't mind Fridayman Masters picking my finished work apart." Her physical projection calmly stated during one of their private design sessions. "I am not blind to my inadequacies. There is no reason for me to feel that I am the best mech designer when I'm only a Journeyman. Obtaining the personal tutelage of a Master Mech Designer is one of the most difficult forms of assistance that mech designers can obtain. Even I failed to get apprenticed to a Master from the Hegemony. Now, there are dozens, if not more Masters emerging out of the woodwork who plan to teach us a lesson!"

Both of them were of the same mind, it seemed. Ves was worried whether Gloriana might buckle under the pressure, but it seemed she wasn't as fragile as he thought! Her immense belief in her own design philosophy provided her with a very strong backbone!

As a result, neither became depressed. Instead of looking at this development as a threat, they instead preferred to see it as an opportunity!

Normally, the phrase 'teaching a lesson' entailed beating someone up. Certainly, no Journeyman liked to get bullied by a Master, let alone several gangs of Masters!

That did not mean that the beatings that Ves and Gloriana would endure were senseless. As long as they set their egos aside and studied how the Masters picked apart the flaws of their mech designs, the pair would definitely be able to come up with something better next time!

There were already clear signs that a number of formidable mech designers started working on researching a counter to glows.

"There are a lot of mech designers and mech companies who have licenced our mech designs all of a sudden!" Gavin excitedly reported one day. "At least half of our new customers are Fridaymen, but there are plenty of Vicious Mountainers and Majestic Tealers. There are even mech designers from Winged Serenade trying to figure out what makes our product tic!"

This amounted to a lot of money pouring into the coffers of the LMC!

Just a single Doom Guard license cost 400 million hex credits. This was a considerable amount of money to most people, but not enough to trouble Masters and state-backed mech institutions!

Therefore, all of these Masters and organizations who licensed the Doom Guard also picked up some other licenses along the way. The Desolate Soldier, the Aurora Titan and many other LMC mechs presented a lot of research value to those who set out to counter them. How could they defeat their targets without knowing what they were dealing with? A lot of Fridayman and foreign Masters simply decided to license the LMC's entire mech catalog!

Ves shook at the thought of how much money that entailed. "How.. how much money does that entail?"

"It's only been a few days, but... we have almost accumulated a trillion hex credits. While the rate of licensing has slowed down since the initial wave, we project that we'll be able to earn another trillion hex credits in the next couple of months! In fact, we predict that when your Valkyrie Redeemer model successfully debuts on the battlefield, we might see another spike in licensing depending on its battle performance!"

Only a few months ago, earning a trillion hex credits sounded like a distant dream.

Ves had to make a very cumbersome deal with DIVA in order to obtain a factory ship that was worth this amount of money.

He had to win a nigh-impossible design duel against Jovy Armalon, whose design philosophy consisted of outright cheating, in order to earn another trillion credits!

Those were very exceptional circumstances that couldn't be repeated. Ves had to rely on the LMC's regular mech sales to slowly fill up his coffers.

He did not expect that the sudden demand for his licenses would present him with another trillion hex credits, with an additional sum of money to follow!

For a moment, Ves felt bewildered. He looked at the projection of his assistant in a daze.

"What do you want to do with the money, boss? The Larkinson Assembly has already come up with a lot of ideas. Some of the assemblymen want us to procure better combat carriers. Others want to use the money to order another capital ship. Right now, the debate is centered around whether to spend the extra trillion on a fleet carrier or an ark ship."

Ves abruptly shook his head. "It's not a good idea to expand our fleet too rapidly. I think it's best to transition to the sh.i.p.s we have already ordered first before looking ahead. It's a very daunting operation to move from our old third-class sh.i.p.s and become accustomed to operating second-class sh.i.p.s. Don't touch the money and put it into our reserves. I'll discuss the matter with the Larkinson Assembly after I return from the Nyxian Gap."

"Do you at least have a preliminary idea on how to spend that money?"

"I am not against procuring other capital sh.i.p.s, Benny. It is just that now is not the time. As for my choice of sh.i.p.s, I think we should continue to invest in increasing our security and deterrence factor. Ark sh.i.p.s sound nice, but they don't have that much combat value. I'm more inclined to go for a fleet carrier."

Ves wanted to invest heavily into a good fleet carrier. The vessel needed to be bigger than his upcoming factory ship in order to accommodate as many mechs on a long-term basis as possible. This was why he believed that investing 1 trillion hex credits was not sufficient.

Fleet carriers were the closest equivalents to warsh.i.p.s to many people! They were more than mech transporters. Not only did they feature an incredibly resilient structure, they were expressly designed to support the functioning of bunkers mechs as much as possible without breaking the rules.

This meant that a fully-crewed and outfitted fleet carrier effectively functioned like an armed cruiser! All of the mechs that fired from the hull bunkers took on the role of secondary weapon batteries. If not for the lack of primary weapon mounts such as Omega Lasers or spinal-mounted kinetic weapons, a fleet carrier might be enough to threaten genuine warsh.i.p.s!

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Ves warned his assistant. "Make sure the Larkinsons on your side don't entertain any delusions."

"Understood. I'll be sure to tell the other clansmen that we need to hang on to the money."

Even after the call had ended, Ves still felt the situation was a bit surreal.

In truth, his situation wasn't actually rare in the mech industry. Any powerful mech designer immediately earned a windfall whenever they published a good mech. Developing effective responses to the most popular and successful mech models was actually a productive interaction that benefit both sides.

Of course, Ves and Gloriana had to be good enough to endure the pressure! There was no doubt that their works would become irrelevant if they failed to keep up with the competition.

Due to the stimulation of increased competition, the pair invested a lot more passion and enthusiasm in designing their next mechs.

Both the Valkyrie Redeemer Project and the Cat's Paw Project benefited considerably from their heightened motivation.

The former especially became a priority. The Hex Army's growing demand for the Blessed Squire vindicated their beliefs that their products could make a difference in the Komodo War!

The medium aerial marauder mech served a very different role from the Blessed Squire. Intended to be piloted by female Hexers, the highly-mobile mech was meant to skirt around the main engagements that involved a huge amount of mechs.

For this reason, the Valkyrie Redeemer had to become as self-sufficient as possible. It had to be versatile enough to fend off a variety of threats while being able to run away from opponents that were too strong to defeat.

This was a very different approach from the Blessed Squire, which was almost completely incapable of fighting on its own. Even a squad of Blessed Squires couldn't achieve much aside from standing their ground and passing their energy to each other!

So far, the design process went well. The Valkyrie Redeemer was not actually that complicated. Ves and Gloriana mainly struggled to fit in as many features and as possible into an aerial frame that was designed with mobility in mind.

Fortunately, Hexers were quite generous when it came to the budgets of female mechs. Since they were piloted by women, they needed to be strong enough to reflect the superiority of their gender.

After a bit of back-and-forth with DIVA, Ves and Gloriana eventually decided to set the maximum budget at 400 million hex credits!

This was the double the budget of the Blessed Squire!

Even though the supportive knight mech was considerably larger and more massive, the faster and nimbler Valkyrie Redeemer would nonetheless make use of better components, many of which were miniaturized to a greater degree.

"Our Valkyrie Redeemer needs no support in order to pay for its cost!" Ves confidently stated. "Only a small squad of Valkyrie Redeemers is enough to harass the Fridayman from range or up close!"

A small problem soon arose after their design project advanced past a certain stage.

While there wasn't much of a problem to arm their Valkyrie Redeemer with a pulse submachine gun, integrating its spear and shield combination was another matter!

Chapter 2244 - Light Cavalry

Pairing the soaring Valkyrie Redeemer with a submachine gun granted the mech sufficient ranged firepower against opponents at medium range.

Submachine guns, which were light enough to be wielded by a single mech arm if necessary, weren't known for their accuracy.

Even though there was a lot of overlap these days, the mech industry still maintained a conscious distinction between various ranged weapon types.

In general, rifles were quite effective at different ranges. They worked best at medium range but did not become useless at longer or shorter ranges.

Submachine guns didn't have to cover so much ground. In exchange for increasing their firing rate and decreasing the burden onto the mech, this class of weapons straightforwardly sacrificed long-ranged firepower in favor of increasing their effectiveness at shorter ranges.

Their fairly constructed weapon frames made them very suitable for mechs that did not wish to lug around a big and cumbersome weapon.

While the weapon lacked punch, this was a worthwhile tradeoff to make. The Valkyrie Redeemer's ranged capabilities mainly served to give the mech some teeth against distant targets.

In general, the mech pilots of the marauder mechs could opt to harass their opponents at range or close in for an all-out charge!

The latter option entailed a lot of risk. The female Hexers would have to confront their enemies head-on. If they bit off more than they chewed, then it was quite dangerous to disengage and fly away.

Therefore, the submachine gun played an important role in keeping the Valkyrie Redeemer relevant. Its firepower might be low, but the mech would not have to expose itself to a lot of danger to pressure their targets.

Overall, the low burden imposed by the submachine gun meant the Valkyrie Redeemer possessed plenty of capacity to strengthen its melee combat capabilities.

Since the Valkyrie Redeemer was an offensive mech, Ves and Gloriana had to make sure that it possessed enough power to defeat enemy mechs.

Gloriana summed their objective. "Different from skirmisher mechs, marauder mechs are designed to confront their enemies head-on. The main challenge is that the latter mech type is plainly not good at defense. We have to combine its mobility and offensive power in a way that allows our Valkyrie Redeemer to fulfill its purpose while keeping it alive."

Ordinary light mechs relied on their exceptional speed and evasion to avoid getting hit.

One of the problems that the pair struggled with was that the Valkyrie Redeemer's size and mass put it firmly in the medium mech category!

Even if it was on the lighter end of the medium weight class, the Valkyrie Redeemer was simply too sluggish to zip around like a nimble wasp.

Its forward acceleration and top speed was rather respectable, but its lateral acceleration and reaction speed was not as good.

Compared to other medium mechs, this was still a respectable level of performance, but the Valkyrie Redeemer would never be able to outrun or outdance a genuine light mech!

"This is why we paired this mech design with a shield." Gloriana pointed out. "The shield doesn't have to be as big or cumbersome as a knight mech's tower shield. As long as its material composition is good enough, it will hold up against a fair amount of attacks the Valkyrie Redeemer is unable to dodge."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I don't have much of a problem with that. It will be fairly costly for the Hex Army to replace or repair the spent shields after every sortie, but it's better than losing an entire mech."

The Valkyrie Redeemer cost twice as much as a Blessed Squire, after all! It was very easy to destroy a lot of value if the Fridaymen managed to take this relatively fragile mech down.

Of course, calling the mech fragile was only a relative description. Its thin, light-weight armor plating was still very tough. Due to the mech's penchant for charges, Ves and Gloriana made sure to strengthen the internal structure along with the exterior. Not only that, they made sure the mech was capable of enduring and absorbing a certain amount of shock.

Yet there was only so much the armor could withstand attacks. The cost of improving the mech's defensive capabilities rose exponentially higher the further they progressed. There was no way 400 million hex credits could afford the kind of armor systems that were used in some of the premier Hexer offensive mech models!

Ves and Gloriana both began to theorize and simulate their options. Eventually, they came to an agreement that it was best for the mech to launch a single overwhelming attack before retreating immediately afterwards.

"It doesn't make much sense to turn the Valkyrie Redeemer into a duelist or a brawler." Gloriana shook her head. "Compared to conventional offensive mechs, its relatively light armor means it can't exchange a lot of blows. The moment the Valkyrie Redeemer reaches its targets, it will likely lose most of its speed. The mech becomes very vulnerable to counterattacks at this stage."

The safest condition for the Valkyrie Redeemer was if it flew low in the air! This allowed the marauder mech to maximize its speed, provide it with a good view, remain out of range of landbound melee mechs and make it elusive enough to evade most hits from range.

To put it in simpler terms, the Valkyrie Redeemer was safer in the air than on the ground. Landing its feet on a solid surface meant danger, as any landbound mech could take the relatively fragile mech down!

That said, the Valkyrie Redeemer wasn't safe in the air either. If it flew too high, it would just make it easier for ranged mechs spread across the battlefield to fire straight at the marauder mech!

This was why it was best for the mech to fly at extremely high altitudes or fairly low above the ground.

Against aerial opponents, the Valkyrie Redeemer was already capable of holding its own. Its submachine gun posed a serious threat against any nimble light mech, while its spear and shield combination provided the marauder mech with enough close-ranged capabilities to outfight most aerial mechs at point-blank range.

"It's the enemy landbound mechs that pose the greatest threat to the Valkyrie Redeemer." Ves stated as he studied the projection of the incomplete design. "Fridayman mechs that aren't designed to fly aren't burdened with cumbersome flight systems. Their offense and defense is always considerably better than mechs with wings. It's a really poor idea to pit a hawk against a wolf."

The latter was superior in almost every front except for flight ability.

While the Friday Coalition boasted plenty of multi-environment mechs, they still relied a lot on mechs that specialized in landbound combat.

Entire mech regiments and mech divisions existed solely to put up the best possible fight on land!

Marrakath III showcased the great ability of the Opal Tridents to draw out the Wrathful Doves into a grueling battle of attrition with the help of its hardy and resilient landbound mechs.

Ves even admired many of those mechs. Some of the models were used throughout the entire Fortune Legion while other models were specific to the Opal Tridents or individual mech regiments.

Regardless of their ownership, the Friday Coalition's military mech designs were very good despite their great variety!

Since his Blessed Squire, Valkyrie Redeemer and other upcoming Hexer mechs were meant to confront these Fridayman mechs, Ves and Gloriana needed to make sure their mechs could keep up in terms of performance.

"Generally, we need to work together with specialists in melee combat and employ a considerable number of design teams in order to optimize the upfront combat capabilities of the Valkyrie Redeemer." Gloriana noted.

That was impractical to their current situation. The assistant mech designers they hired so far were only qualified to work on their minor design projects.

As for working alongside competent mech designers who specialized in melee combat, which Hexer would possibly cooperate with a male mech designer?

Ves seriously doubted whether any Hexer Senior or Master was capable of treating a boy like him as an equal partner!

Soliciting the help of non-Hexers was not on the table. Every Hexer mech design commissioned by DIVA involved a lot of confidential and exclusive tech and components.

In short, making their marauder mech good at upfront combat was not a viable option.

This was why they fully committed the Valkyrie Redeemer melee options to delivering a single overwhelming strike before quickly moving on. In that regard, the mech partially took on the role of a lancer mech.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "This is fine, but the Valkyrie Redeemer doesn't perform as well as a specialized lancer mech. It's a bit more agile, to be sure, but it doesn't have the frontal armor and other attributes to break through a solid defense line."

"The Valkyrie Redeemer doesn't have to take on such a tough target, Ves. The Bright Warriors in their lancer configurations have done an admirable job with charging straight through formations of pirate mechs, but the disparity between the Larkinson Clan and

the typical pirate group is massive. That's not the case in the Komodo War. I hate to admit it, but the mechs of the Coalition are just as good as the mechs of the Hegemony."

Of course, in her opinion, Hexer mechs were always better than their Fridayman equivalent!

Regardless, she was right. True lancer mechs played the role of heavy cavalry. They were built solely to accelerate forward and build up a considerable amount of momentum. Their main objective was to punch through vulnerable enemy formations and open up gaps to be exploited by other elements!

This did not fit the Valkyrie Redeemer's battle profile. If this marauder mech attempted to charge straight into a defensive line, then it was highly likely that it would be attacked on all sides once it delivered its charge!

The more enemies it faced, the greater its disadvantage! Ideally, the mech adopted the role of light cavalry. The Valkyrie Redeemer was supposed to steer clear of large groups of enemies and instead hunted for isolated patrols and vulnerable supply vehicles.

If their marauder mech was just supposed to fulfill a flanking role, then Ves believed that it didn't need to be as powerful as a genuine lancer mech.

Once they finalized this decision, the pair optimized the mech's structure and weapon handling to enable it to deliver a swift and decent charge, especially when it descended from above.

This was quite difficult. Ves needed to pair the mech with a fairly long lance that was quite strong but heavy in order to endure successive powerful charges.

Designing a mech designed to charge enemies from above caused Ves to recall one of his older works.

Gloriana noticed his distraction. "What are you thinking about?"

"Huh? Oh noting, haha!"

For some reason, Ves thought back on one of his more.. eccentric mech designs. The Lady Death's Heel was a particularly remarkable mech that he designed in his early years.

Transforming its feet into a giant spike so that the Lady Death's Heel could charge straight down onto a vulnerable surface target was a very original implementation!

If the devastating charge of this mech didn't finish off a target, then the mech could always bash its impaled victim with its hammer to finish the job!

For a moment, Ves felt tempted to bring up this old work of his to Gloriana. Since he published it onto a pseudonym account, he was pretty sure his lover wasn't familiar with it. Now that he thought about it, the Lady Death's Heel was very compatible with Hexer sensibilities!

Ves had a faint suspicion that the female Hexers would love to pilot a mech that was able to deliver death from above by impaling their opponents with a giant spiky heel!

He shuddered. Some mechs were simply too horrible to introduce to the galaxy! He had no idea what the Hexers would do with a mech that possessed such an unusual feature, but he was sure that they would definitely go overboard with impaling enemy mechs!

Chapter 2245 - Starburst Module

Turning the Valkyrie Redeemer into the second coming of the Lady Death's Heel was impractical.

It may have worked in the simplified setting of virtual reality, but modern mechs were considerably harder.

It took quite some effort to pierce through the armor of second-class mechs. When Ves performed some quick calculations and simulations with his implant, he realized that a dive attack with a weaponized pair of legs would more likely crumple the Valkyrie Redeemer than its target!

This was because the Valkyrie Redeemer was too light!

Ves would need to reengineer the mech's entire frame to withstand the immense forces that came from underneath. While he estimated it would be possible to do so, it would come at the cost of almost every other advantage of the mech.

He resolutely shelved this idea aside. From a practical standpoint, such a mech was too specialized and monotonous for his liking. As a mech designed to fight as an independent flanking element, the machine needed to possess at least some versatility in order to respond to various threats.

Even if the current configuration did not give his marauder mech a lot of pronounced advantages, its current toolkit at least boosted its survival rate, which was very important for independent mechs.

Speaking of survival, one of the most precarious moments the Valkyrie Redeemer could end up in was when it had just completed a charging dive attack. Once it stopped on the

ground, it would take at least a few seconds for the marauder mech to leap back into the air!

He turned to Gloriana's physical projection. "I think it's best to add a disengagement tool to the mech. You know as well as I do that our mech is at its most vulnerable when it is stationary, and that happens to be the moment when it has just rammed its spear through a target or the ground."

His partner gazed towards the incomplete design schematic. "We've used up all of the capacity of the mech. If we add an extra module, its mass and power draw will increase to an unacceptable degree."

"It's a tool of last resort. Against weaker targets, the Valkyrie Redeemer shouldn't have to make use of such an ability. I only want to provide our mech with some additional help in case it has landed in hot water."

As a mech designer, Ves needed to know his audience. Though he couldn't claim to know Hexer mech pilots in depth, he performed enough study and made enough observations to know that female Hexer mech pilots tended to be aggressive by nature.

Their upbringing, training and combat doctrine all caused them to grow overconfident. Certainly, the women would probably learn to respect the Fridayman properly once the Komodo War dragged on, but until then Ves expected many of these female tyrants to die ignoble deaths on the battlefield!

Ves did not believe he could single-handedly stop this foolhardiness. He merely wanted to avoid blame when the Valkyrie Redeemer finally began to fielded. He was sure that the Hex Army would assign some of its most hot-headed female Hexers to pilot this mech. If those idiotic women began to drive themselves to their deaths in droves, it would definitely lead to a strong degree of pushback towards his involvement in the Komodo War!

After a bit of persuasion, Gloriana came around to the idea. She added some caveats, however.

"Let's limit our selection to a smaller auxiliary module. I don't want to ruin the sweet spot that we have already managed to settle upon."

Finding a good balance between offense, defense and mobility was crucial to the Valkyrie Redeemer. Adding some utility to the mix would disrupt this beneficial balance.

Ves did not look worried. "We don't need a module that needs to be active every time, so it doesn't have to be too big. What we do need is something that is potent in the few times it's activated. This is a lifesaving tool that needs to work in the most dangerous moments."

"We'll have to find something that is based on cartridges. The endurance and energy efficiency of our mech is not that great and the value of our mech will drop considerably if its effective deployment time is lowered even further."

Independent flanking mechs were designed to roam in the sides and outskirts of an active warzone. They needed to remain in the field for at least several hours to half a day in order to be worthwhile.

Ves and Gloriana proceeded to search through the Hex Army's internal mech catalog. Though they did not have access to the full range of exclusive Hexer components, the list of auxiliary components provided them with sufficient options.

The pair eventually settled on the Starburst S*tc 343x-z. Odd model name aside, the Starburst was a disengagement module that worked similar to a flashbang and a smoke bomb.

Upon activating it, the Starburst released a strong but short-ranged ECM pulse around the mech. At the same time, it also released a burst of short-duration interference particles.

Due to its small size and capacity, the Starburst was only effective for an instant, and its disruptive effects only worked at short range. It was only effective on land and would not do much in aerial clashes.

This was sufficient. What the Valkyrie Redeemer feared the most was getting struck by a strong blow shortly after landing.

Adding the Starburst module to the Valkyrie Redeemer resulted in few issues. Its small size and limited capabilities did not fundamentally alter the current mech design's sweet spot.

Sadly, the new auxiliary feature came with a very restrictive limitation. It could only hold three cartridges. Once the Valkyrie Redeemer activated the Starburst module three times, it could only replenish this function by going back for resupply.

"Three times is enough." Ves affirmed.

If the Valkyrie Redeemer had to activate the Starburst three times, its energy reserves should have probably dipped considerably. Without sufficient energy, the mech wouldn't be able to fly much longer.

There was no cooldown to the Starburst module either. If the Valkyrie Redeemer just needed to obtain some extra assurances, it could just activate this function once.

If the marauder mech happened to land straight into a prepared ambush or something, then the mech pilot could always expend all three cartridges at once, thereby producing an incredibly bright and confusing spectacle!

There was another downside to the Starburst module, though. Since much of its effectiveness depended on consumable cartridges, their cost was considerable. Each activation of the Starburst module consumed a considerable amount of hex credits, though the exact cost varied depending on where it was produced.

Supplying them to the front was another issue. Ves wasn't sure how widespread the Starburst module was being used in other Hexer mech models, but he didn't believe it was ubiquitous.

"You don't have to worry about this problem." Gloriana reassured him. "As long as the battle effectiveness of our mech design is good enough, the Hex Army will definitely invest enough logistical capacity."

If the Blessed Squire was any indication, the Hexers might embrace the Valkyrie Redeemer with just as much enthusiasm. From what Ves had learned of Hexers, they were similar to the Ylvainans in their reverence for design spirits that affirmed their beliefs.

Whether the Hexers were secular or religious, they all revered the Superior Mother as a symbol and an ideal.

The particularly strong reaction among the soldiers of the Wrathful Doves towards the Blessed Squire proved that the Superior Mother strongly resonated with them. The nature of design spirits meant that Ves would always be able to achieve more results with people who held distinct values! Religion was one of the easiest ways for him to find common ground with a specific target audience!

Therefore, even if the Valkyrie Redeemer design did not immediately stand out performance-wise, Ves still believed the Hexers would still embrace the distinctive mech design.

With all of the design choices they made, the direction of their mech design was pretty much set. From a technical perspective, the remainder of the design process did not require any further pivotal decisions. Ves and Gloriana could pretty work on it on autopilot as they only needed to solve the smaller, more immediate problems.

At this stage of the design project, the Valkyrie Redeemer acquired enough of a spiritual foundation for Ves to mold some spiritual constructs.

He grinned. The experiments he performed on his test subjects vastly expanded his understanding of spirituality and spiritual constructs. He gained a lot of clarity on how

spiritual energy behaved and he discovered many useful interactions that produced specific effects.

Even though the spiritual foundation of a mech design was different from the spirituality of a living human, they were based on the same building blocks.

Plenty of time had passed since the start of the Valkyrie Redeemer Project for Ves to come up with some good ideas on how to develop its triggered abilities.

Though Ves wanted to discuss them with Gloriana, he was very reluctant to do so through the Darkbreak module. He would definitely reveal too many secrets to Master Willix and the MTA if he began to mention anything about spiritual engineering!

Fortunately, Gloriana understood him quite well. He only had to give her a slightly meaningful look for her to respond with a trusting smile.

They did not need to exchange any words.

With Gloriana concentrating on integrating and perfecting the technical elements of the mech design, Ves proceeded to manipulate the Valkyrie Redeemer's spiritual foundation with an open mind.

All of this was still new to him. What troubled him most was that there wasn't a convenient way to test his implementations until the prototype phase. The mathematical models that supported the virtual simulations were only able to calculate defined variables.

Against something that was as obscure and unknown as triggered abilities, not even Ves could come up with an accurate mathematical model! He still hadn't developed a sufficient theoretical foundation of spirituality!

Even so, it was not as if he had been doing anything different in his previous designs. He usually possessed enough confidence that his spiritual implementations would work out as expected.

It was just that the stakes were very high and the uncertainty was greater than usual. He could not afford to botch his additions. They played such a key role to the battle performance of the Valkyrie Redeemer that their absence would instantly cause the mech to lose 10 to 20 percent of its value!

As Ves initially envisioned, he added the Marked For Death ability first. The implementation of it was fairly simple. Instead of radiating the mech's glow around it like a sphere, the ability sought to concentrate this output and turn a blazing sun into a concentrated laser!

He hoped to increase the intensity and range of the Valkyrie Redeemer's death-oriented glow in this fashion.

To form this triggered ability, Ves created a meticulous spiritual construct that looked like a strong and straight spear. He molded its surface and proportions in order to create a specific impression of a thrown spear that would spell death to anyone who had been struck with its tip!

His mind went a little fuzzy during this spiritual design session. He relied on intuition, feeling, his shallow understanding of spirituality and plain old trial and error to achieve the outcome he wanted.

When Ves believed the spiritual construct came into form, he took a step back and evaluated the death spear.

It radiated supremacy, control and death. The spiritual spear actually contained three spiritual attributes instead of one. This was because it did not consist of one spiritual construct but actually three of them put together!

This was another innovation he came up with during his previous experiments. While it was all well and good to develop spiritual constructs that embodied a single spiritual attribute, what if he wanted to develop something more complex? What if he wanted to make use of several spiritual attributes?

The solution seemed obvious. He could just form several spiritual constructs and assemble them together into a compound construct!

The result this time was a speartip that represented death, a shaft that contained supremacy and a grip that embodied control!

With three of them combined, Ves believed he nailed the first triggered ability of the Valkyrie Redeemer!

Chapter 2246 - Hihi!

Combining several spiritual constructs with different properties together was a basic application of spiritual engineering. Since physical objects consisted of different materials, why shouldn't spiritual objects be the same?

This was a very simple feat of engineering, yet it wasn't as clear-cut as it seemed with regards to spiritual engineering.

When Ves concentrated his mind and studied the Grand Dynamo that churned out lots of spiritual energy in his mind, he was amazed at how it consisted of one, seamless construct!

Despite its apparent simplicity, it was nonetheless capable of performing many different functions. The spiritual engineering principles used in the creation of the Grand Dynamo were obviously much more sophisticated than what he came up with. Ves had barely come any closer to deciphering its mechanisms from when he initially obtained this reward.

It was like comparing the wall painting of caveman to a vivid, modern projected image!

"Well, I have to start somewhere." He sighed.

He did not think his implementation was weak or ineffective. It may be rough, but its relatively simplicity meant that there were fewer ways it could go wrong. Ves had a good feeling about the death spear when he observed it with his spiritual senses.

The only downside was that the compound spiritual construct already took up a considerable amount of real estate.

While he could have used spiritual energy to form the death spear, Ves wanted to beef it up in order to resist any attempts at weakening the Valkyrie Redeemer's most important spiritual tool!

The Marked For Death ability not only allowed the Valkyrie Redeemer to stand out from other aerial flanker and harasser machines, but considerably increased the success rate of an all-out dive attack!

Ves made sure to emphasize three different aspects in the formation of the death spear.

First, it had to induce a sense of imminent death against the target.

Second, it had to provide the mech pilot with enough control to affect the right target.

Third, the suppressive glow had to be strong enough to resist any interference and overcome any hindrances.

Ves looked forward to seeing whether he attained all three goals once the project proceeded to the prototype-testing phase.

"There's still room for another ability." He thought.

Inducing the terror of death in someone augmented the offensive capabilities of his mech. There was no need for him to strengthen it further.

What Ves sought to do instead was to enhance the survival of the mech. Even if it was a medium mech, the Valkyrie Redeemer could not take a lot of hits. This was one of its biggest shortcomings and something that concerned him quite often whenever he worked on the design.

The problem was that the death spear already took up quite a lot of 'spiritual capacity'. The spiritual foundation of a mech could only support a limited amount of spiritual constructs before starting to lose too much strength.

Going any further would be no different from trying to build a castle above a couple of wooden twigs. The entire layout was liable to collapse!

He couldn't create something as strong as the death spear, but he didn't need to in his opinion. Ever since he and his partner added the Starburst module to the Valkyrie Redeemer, Ves mulled over whether he should add a spiritual dimension to this disengagement tool.

The strong but localized ECM pulse along with the spontaneous release of disruptive energy particles were mainly targeted towards confusing various sensors. Each activation momentarily overwhelmed various kinds of optical sensors, heat sensors, acoustic sensors and so on, thereby preventing the enemies of the Valkyrie Redeemer to track its subsequent movements for at least a second!

However, the Starburst module possessed a fatal flaw that caused the Hex Army to limit its implementation.

It did not disturb a prepared and well-trained opponent.

Mechs were controlled by humans. The Starburst module only confused the former, but not the latter.

Certainly, if the enemy mech pilots did not anticipate getting hit by a burst of disruption, they would probably grow muddled for a moment, giving the Valkyrie Redeemer ample time to escape!

Yet Ves did not believe that the Fridaymen would remain ignorant for long. With the Blessed Squire making such a huge impact on both sides, he believed the Valkyrie Redeemer would definitely attract a lot of attention.

It would be quite bad if the Fridayman mech pilots studied the Valkyrie Redeemer's properties and memorized how to fight the marauder mech!

Against elite and prepared enemy mech pilots, they could just shield their sensors beforehand or simply let them get blinded while launching their attacks blindly!

In such a critical situation, a triggered ability which allowed the Valkyrie Redeemer to induce a spiritual shock to nearby enemies could be a life saver!

Living through several successive Mastery experiences provided him with a deep understanding of the importance of rhythm and focus. Disrupting them with a sharp

spiritual shock was enough to make enemy mech pilots pause, and at a crucial timing this was enough to allow the Valkyrie Redeemer to retreat unscathed!

When it came to triggered abilities, Ves had learnt that symbolism and intent mattered the most. The constructs he shaped carried his touch, and therefore his framework on how they were supposed to work.

To put it simpler, as long as Ves believed something would happen, a well-designed construct would do its best to make it happen!

Of course, it wasn't as simple as he sounded. There were many nuances and unknown variables at play that Ves did not fully grasp. He could only resort to trial and effort to come up with a viable spiritual construct.

He initially started to form a spiritual construct in the form of a bomb or an explosive. However, Ves did not wish to risk the construct blowing up and dealing damage to the Valkyrie Redeemer's spiritual foundation.

He experimented with other constructs before he settled on creating a traditional bell.

As long as the bell rang once, the spiritual construct released a pulsing wave that was supposed to shock anyone within the range of the Valkyrie Redeemer's glow!

The soul bell consisted of two spiritual constructs. The main body was filled with death attributes in order to induce fear, while the clapper that was responsible for ringing the bell compressed the active effect in a pulsing wave.

The soul bell wasn't strong if it was constantly active. Ves overcame this problem by designing the spiritual construct in a way that allowed it to accumulate its energy. Once the mech piloted triggered the ability, the bell immediately rang, thereby releasing all of the pent-up energy at once!

He called it the Shock Pulse.

One of the most crucial properties of this Shock Pulse ability was that it aimed squarely towards non-Hexers. Any Hexer or believer in the Superior Mother should be able to remain unaffected, which was very important as Ves did not wish for the mech pilot of the Valkyrie Redeemer to pause at the crucial moment of activation!

Ves hoped that this implementation was sufficient to disrupt any nearby enemy. The Valkyrie Redeemer would be able to activate this ability to facilitate its retreat as well as its advance!

"The mech doesn't necessarily have to leap back into the air. It can also perform a follow-up attack!"

At this point, Ves believed the Valkyrie Redeemer could accommodate no more triggered abilities without weakening its fundamentals. That was unacceptable!

"I wonder how they will hold up against any possible counters to my mech." He whispered.

He could no longer assume that glows would be able to empower the users of his mechs with impunity. Once the Masters who targeted his design philosophy rolled out their counter designs, Ves was not certain whether the two triggered abilities of the Valkyrie Redeemer would function correctly under adverse circumstances.

Nonetheless, he did not believe that any competitor could negate his glows entirely. If mech designers were able to completely negate each other's specialty, then why develop in the first place?

In every conflict he studied, he rarely encountered any mention where the work of one mech designer completely negated a specialty!

Nonetheless, he knew too little about Masters to say for sure.

Ves felt grateful that he came up with the Sanctuary Project. Designing a mech that was expressly designed to counter his own work seemed crazy at first, but with the advent of competition, it was actually quite a clever response!

The difference between his own counter and the counter developed by his competitors was that he exerted no control over the latter!

He couldn't just call Master Olson and beg her to take it easy on his mechs.

In contrast, selling the Sanctuary mechs to the market would ensure that Ves would be able to control exactly when glows worked and when they were suppressed. The hidden backdoors and rules that he planned to add to the Sanctuary would make sure of that!

Most of the counters developed by Masters probably ended up in the military rather than the private sector. As long as the Sanctuary offered the best value for money, Ves would definitely be able to gain a lot of market share of mechs that countered his glows!

Now that Ves completed the triggered abilities of the Valkyrie Redeemer, he felt tempted to do the same to his other projects.

Some of them were a bit further ahead than others, but they had all progressed to the point where Ves was able to play with their spiritual foundations.

Gloriana picked up his exhaustion and excitement when they next contacted each other.

Her physical projection stepped close to his and touched his arm. Ves felt a strong pressure on his skin, which caused him to look at her in puzzlement.

"This isn't supposed to happen. Why is your touch so strong?"

She grinned at him. "I upgraded the physical projection tech of my stateroom aboard the Stellar Chaser! Doesn't that sound great?"

"High-quality physical projection machines are expensive. Why would you possibly spend so much money?" Ves frowned.

"To do this." She snapped her fingers.

A smell suddenly tickled his nose. Ves widened his eyes. He could actually smell one of her regular perfumes! A hot and rosy smell intoxicated his nasal senses as he breathed the distinctive smell generated by the Darkbreak module.

He wasn't able to determine whether the smell precisely matched the perfume, but the fact that the Darkbreak module was able to convey this much was already impressive!

"You.. upgraded your physical projectors just to make your projection smell better?"

"No, silly. I also wanted to do this!"

Her physical projection threw itself at him, causing him to feel a strong pressure exerted on his body. Before he knew it, her projection kissed his lips!

Though Ves knew he was just feeling simulated pressure generated by the Darkbreak module, the illusion was very close to reality!

When the two began to engage in some tongue action, Ves found to his surprise that he could sense plenty of moisture on his tongue and lips!

What an amazing function! Physical projection technology had evidently advanced considerably since the time he interacted with the virtual officers of the Starlight Megalodon!

Once Gloriana withdrew her lips, she gazed at him with an intriguing look. "Did you know why humans originally developed physical projections? In space, it's very hard for couples to live apart from each other. There is so much you can do to sustain the love you have for someone if you are just limited to talking to an intangible projection. There's also a lot of lonely bachelors aboard vessels who can't go to a club and aren't allowed to fraternize with each other."

"Wait a minute.. are you suggesting that.."

"Hihi! You guessed it! Technology is so amazing. Let us test whether modern physical projection technology is good enough for you to be able to 'discharge your energy' to me across light-years..."

The hands of her physical projection already started to unbutton and peel off his shirt uniform. Though Ves felt excited, he also felt reluctant to engage with her any further!

"Wait! This channel isn't secure! Our lovemaking will probably end up in the archives of the MTA. Master Willix is probably watching at this very moment!"

"Then let her. I don't mind, hihi!"

Chapter 2247 - Ulimo Citadel

Ves looked troubled the next day. Though he admittedly gained a lot of satisfaction after he released all of his pent-up 'energy' yesterday, the circumstances of his discharge was anything but usual!

"Technology has gone too far!"

He shook his head. Though he felt a bit weirded out, he had to admit he enjoyed it quite a bit. The Darkbreak module simulated Gloriana's physical properties to such an accurate and realistic degree that he could hardly name the differences!

If Gloriana offered to go for another round, Ves would likely nod his head and say yes!

He eventually shrugged and readied himself for another day of work. After he finished his breakfast, he met with Major Verle and Calabast in his stateroom.

"Meow."

Lucky curiously looked up at the two older Larkinsons as Ves rubbed his head.

"Good morning." Ves greeted. "I take it that we have approached yet another pirate base, right?"

"That is indeed the case, sir." Major Verle waved his hand, activating a projection that showed a map of their surroundings. "Our forward scouts have managed to approach a famed pirate base called the Ulimo Citadel."

The projection shifted to a base built into the surface of a small moon-sized asteroid. "Ulimo Citadel is the stronghold of the Dry Snakes. According to second-hand intelligence, the Dry Snakes are able to field around 1700 mechs, which is enough to secure their foundation in this rich patch of Maynard Fields."

The visible structures of Ulimo Citadel looked considerably more formidable than Xiphard Base. Part of it was because it was built into a much larger moon-like environment. Another part of it was because the Dry Snakes invested considerably more resources in its construction!

What Ves found remarkable was the elevated amount of traffic going in and out of Ulimo Citadel.

"Is this open base?"

Calabast nodded. "Ulimo Citadel is one of the rare pirate strongholds that has opened a limited public market. It's similar to Frostbite Fortress in that regard. While Ulimo doesn't host the largest pirate marketplace, it is especially attractive towards smaller pirate outfits and independents."

"Why so?"

"Many pirate marketplaces are very dangerous to visit if you aren't strong enough. The pirate groups who oversee them also have a penchant for ripping off their visitor. What is remarkable about Ulimo Citadel is that the Dry Snakes charge very low fees for landing a vessel in its hangar and various other services. This turns Ulimo Citadel into an affordable place for sc.u.m to gather."

Trade, recruitment and many more activities took place in this surprisingly lively pirate base.

"How is the reputation of the Dry Snakes?"

"Fairly good. They mostly abide by their responsibilities. While their guards aren't always proper, according to word of mouth they don't abuse their power too often. It helps to bribe them, though."

Ves snorted. "I suppose that is the best that you can expect of pirates."

"Don't underestimate Ulimo Citadel, Ves." Calabast glinted her eyes at him. "Under normal conditions, the Dry Snakes are mainly counting on their formidable base defenses along with their 1700 mechs to hang on to their lucrative base. Aside from the trade that they have attracted, the Dry Snakes mainly earn their living by mining the more interesting exotics from the surrounding asteroids. This particular portion of Maynard Fields doesn't offer as much Kavenit as other places, but in return there is a good chance that prospectors are able to stumble on small deposits of medium or even high-grade exotics!"

Ves leaned forward from his chair when he heard that. He stopped petting Lucky, much to the cat's complaints.

"Meow!"

"Ulimo Citadel must contain a lot of wealth if that is the case."

"That is probable. The Dry Snakes are considerably stronger than the Crona Lords. This also means that they are much more formidable. Attacking this base is very risky even if we have the help of Lucky."

"I find that hard to believe." Ves stated and gestured towards the projection of the base. "Oh, I'm sure this base has a lot of nasty surprises, but we haven't encountered any pirates who are able to do anything about my cat!"

"Meow meow." Lucky preened with pride.

Major Verle spoke up at this moment. "The issue that Calabast is alluding to is the notoriety that we have built up as we have sought out several pirate groups. After Xiphard Base, we knocked over three other pirate bases, thereby ending the lives of many pirates!"

Task Force Predator went on a pirate hunting spree after profiting considerably from defeating the Crona Lords. Calabast researched and picked out several smaller pirate bases in order to refine their methods and obtain some quick and easy loot!

Lucky managed to eat a considerable amount of valuable exotics!

Ves expanded his collection of B-stones with two extra samples!

He also obtained dozens of test subjects, each of whom were confirmed pirates with spiritual potential!

The mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan accrued even further experience!

The task force looted plenty of valuable materials!

Though none of the pirate bases held anything truly remarkable, the entire task force had become a lot more accustomed to attacking them. With Lucky's help, the Larkinsons should have no problems cracking Ulimo Citadel!

However, Calabast disagreed.

"The situation is more complicated than we thought. According to the long-ranged observation data from our forward scouts, there are much more mechs and sh.i.p.s present at Ulimo Citadel."

She tapped the projection, causing it to highlight four different groups of mech forces.

Ves frowned. "I take it the largest group are the Dry Snakes."

"Yes. We already anticipated their presence. What is problematic are the other three pirate groups. According to investigations, they are the vassal pirate groups that normally roam elsewhere. The fact that they have congregated at Ulimo Citadel is not a good sign."

Major Verle let out an exasperated breath. "We have toppled too many pirate groups. In each and every attack since we entered the Nyxian Gap, we completely devastated our opponents. You have to know that all-out attacks on pirate bases don't happen very often. Now that an outside factor such as us have entered Maynard and shown that we do not abide by the rules, the local pirate organizations have all begun to respond to your actions."

"The Dry Snakes have summoned the Xona Stalkers, the Farmund's Own and the Hapid Qlinters to reinforce Ulimo Citadel. While these pirate outfits are weaker, their numbers and individual strengths can't be overlooked."

Calabast provided a brief overview of the vassal outfits.

The Xona Stalkers attracted her attention the most. Presumably founded by intelligence officers and operatives gone rogue, the Xona Stalkers were famed for using stealth mechs and stealth shuttles based on outdated stealth tech.

However, despite losing access to newer iterations of stealth tech, the Xona Stalkers still managed to maintain their foundation. These days, they were able to field 400 mechs, though this was only what everyone knew on the surface.

Several rumors swirled around the Xona Stalkers.

One of them stated that they were still secretly backed by a lawful organization, most likely a Sentinel noble house.

Another rumor claimed that the Xona Stalkers somehow managed to get their hands on some alien stealth tech in the Nyxian Gap.

The most improbable rumor stated that the Xona Stalkers secretly maintained a research team that consisted of scientists who specialized in stealth technology!

"Regardless which of these rumors are true, as long as we plunder the Xona Stalkers, we'll likely be able to take over all of their possessions." Calabast grinned. "While their stealth gear is probably inferior, the exotics used in making them is very valuable to my Black Cats. It's quite challenging to obtain stealth materials in the Nyxian Gap."

Her personal interest in attacking Ulimo Citadel became clear. The Xona Stalkers was led by former spies like her. This caused Calabast to become a lot more excited about plundering this specific pirate outfit!

"The Farmund's Own are a lot more boring in comparison. It's founded by a number of military veterans, so their discipline and training is a lot better than the typical pirates. They're able to field 700 mechs, and they are generally strong in ranged combat and defending strongholds."

"That's quite a lot of mechs. Don't the Dry Snakes feel threatened by their vassal?"

"It's complicated." Calabast shrugged. "The third group is the Hapid Qlinters. Unlike the other two vessels, the Hapid Qlinters share a different origin. The leaders of the Qlinters don't come from civilized space. Instead, the Qlinters are fully made up of Nyxian pirates who were born and raised in the region. While they are known for their aggression, they are also famed for their lack of discipline and restraints. They are able to field around 650 mechs."

The Hapid Qlinters sounded like upgraded bottom feeders to Ves. They likely consisted of thugs who lucked out on some raids and managed to grow stronger instead of getting annihilated by the Peacekeepers.

Though these subordinate pirate outfits weren't particularly threatening to the Larkinson Clan when they were alone, it was a different story now that they answered the call of the Dry Snakes.

Disregarding Ulimo Citadel's fixed defenses, confronting over 3000 pirate mechs at once was still a risky endeavor!

"What do you think?" Ves asked with a hint of uncertainty.

"The Dry Snakes are ready for us." Major Verle responded. "It is not a wise idea for us to hit a tough and prepared target. Even if the pirates here aren't aware of how we managed to sabotage the defenses of the previous targets that we've hit, there is no way that the pirates will remain complacent when it comes to guarding Ulimo Citadel. I fear that Lucky won't be able to get away with as much mischief as before."

"Meow!" Lucky raised his tail.

The major ignored the disgruntled cat. "To be honest, I think we have done enough in the Nyxian Gap. You set out to travel here in order to bloody our combat forces and earn a large amount of MTA merits. After we have cracked open four pirate bases, how many merits have you earned?"

"Almost 2 million merits. Those pirates we've attacked have all been naughty. With the MTA offering double rewards for every violation of the taboos, we've quickly made progress towards obtaining passage to the Red Ocean."

Ves was quite happy with the rapid progress. It didn't take much time to earn a princely sum of merit that other Journeymen needed years or decades to accrue.

"The only reason why you managed to earn so much merits was because the Nyxian pirates we attacked weren't fully prepared for us. It's different now. There are hardly any pirates in Maynard Fields who aren't aware of our threat. Ulimo Citadel isn't too far from the last pirate fortification we hit, so the Dry Snakes should definitely be on high alert. It will take months or word of our task force's departure or annihilation for the pirates to lower their guards."

He made a very good point. There was a huge difference between prepared and unprepared targets. Ulimo Citadel was already pretty strong to begin with. Now that the Dry Snakes called for reinforcements and elevated their guard, there were many chances for an assault to go wrong!

Ves curiously turned to Calabast. "You don't seem as pessimistic. Do you think we have a chance to succeed in assaulting Ulimo Citadel?"

"It.. depends." She said. "Ordinarily, I agree with Major Verle that it is not worth the risk to attack Ulimo. However, after examining some scattered intelligence, I have reason to believe that this fortress is of considerable interest."

"What is it?"

"There is a small chance that Ulimo Citadel's marketplace is one of the places where B-stones are being sold. In fact, the Dry Snakes may even be the ones who have mined it, processed it and put on sale!"

"What?! Are you sure?!"

Chapter 2248 - Depth of Ulimo

Ulimo Citadel appeared to be quite challenging to attack. For over several weeks, Task Force Predator rampaged through Maynard Fields with impunity. Various roaming pirate fleets as well as immovable pirate bases all succ.u.mbed against the might of the Larkinson Clan!

Yet the existence of this strong, prepared and reinforced pirate fortification risked stalling the task force's momentum!

Certainly, Major Verle had a good point. Against a foe that was too powerful to overcome without suffering major casualties, the Larkinsons had no obligations to hit their heads against the wall.

They could just walk around it and merrily go on their way!

The defenses of Ulimo Citadel only threatened the space surrounding the pirate fortification. The secret weapons that Ulimo definitely held in reserve posed no threat to a fleet that only flew further and further away!

Though Ves understood the logic of it, he felt a bit upset at leaving such a juicy target behind. As one of the few open marketplaces in the Nyxian Gap, Ulimo must certainly hold a lot of valuable goods, perhaps far more than the Larkinsons ever plundered from Xiphard Base!

Yet the more he stared at the projection of Ulimo, the more his intuition for danger became roused.

The stronghold was dangerous. That was for certain.

He even had a hunch that Lucky's infiltration might not go smoothly this time. The presence of the Xona Stalkers meant that the pirates residing at Ulimo gained a formidable amount of stealth and anti-stealth capabilities!

He jolted in realization. "Calabast, are we sweeping our perimeter for enemy stealth vehicles?"

"My Black Cats are already on the lookout for hidden presences around our fleet." The spymaster casually replied. "This is my craft, remember? From the moment I knew that the Xona Stalkers are affiliated with the Dry Snakes, I have put my surveillance specialists on full alert. The Penitent Sisters are especially helpful as their anti-stealth measures are just as good as any Hexer outfit."

In the Komodo Star Sector, there weren't many organizations who could circumvent second-class sensor technology. In a place like the Nyxian Gap, the chances of any pirates being able to run rings around Hexer sensors should be slim.

However, Ves did not feel reassured. Anything could be beaten as long as someone came up with the right solution. The task force had done so several times over the past month as Lucky's stealth and intangibility turned him into a highly-effective infiltrator.

Since Ves was able to field something that the pirates couldn't handle, what if the pirates could do the same to him? He only had to cast his memories back to his travel through the frontier to know that some pirates possessed their own strangeness!

The more he thought about attacking Ulimo, the more he felt deterred by its hidden strength.

Still, he couldn't just give up. When Calabast told him that B-stones had changed hands at Ulimo, Ves had locked his sights at this base.

If Ulimo only held one or two B-stones, then Ves didn't think it was worth it to attack it. If Ulimo held an entire container's worth of B-stones, then that was another matter entirely!

Aside from that, Ulimo sat in the center of a field of asteroids which contained deposits of higher grades of exotics. Even if their quantities were small, the Dry Snakes must have certainly accumulated quite a pile of them in their vaults!

Looting all of these valuable materials might not allow him to design and build a powerful mech right away, but they should be more than enough to upgrade his personal gear!

For a long time, Ves dreamt of building a supreme suit of combat armor, one that protected him against both material and spiritual threats.

Yet gathering the powerful materials necessary to build such an extravagant piece of gear was daunting. Just the B-stone needed to protect him against formidable entities such as Cassandra Breyer and Nyxie required him to get a hold of at least a couple more samples!

Aside from these benefits, Ves felt certain that Ulimo held more riches. As long as the Larkinsons captured the base reasonably intact, he might be able to obtain numerous rare goods that couldn't be found elsewhere!

He gazed towards his two advisors. Major Verle's objection to attacking Ulimo was understandable. What Ves did not expect was that Calabast did not share the same views.

In fact, from the way she presented Ulimo Citadel to him, it sounded as if she was driving him to attack this formidable pirate base!

Ves narrowed his eyes at her. "Calabast, normally you tell me to dial back and take less risks. Why don't I hear the same from you this time? What is it about Ulimo that makes you reluctant to pass it over?"

Both Ves and Verle stared curiously at the black-clad woman. Calabast endured their stares without a wink.

"You're pretty observant, Ves. You're right. Ulimo is not just a regular pirate base in my eyes. There are two reasons why we should pay attention to it despite its formidable defenses."

She raised a finger. "First, its connection to one of our old enemies. After decrypting various sensitive trade logs stored in the data banks we've ripped from Xiphard Base, my analysts have ascertained that Ulimo Citadel likely maintains ties with the Allidus Alliance."

Ah, the Allidus Alliance. With a formidable heavy cruiser in the form of Gravada Knarlax, this powerful pirate organization was one of the few that maintained a foothold in the perilous core regions!

The Larkinson Clan attracted a lot of enmity from Allidus after defeating Lord Drogen and his trade convoy. Ves wasn't sure at that time whether he would bump into them again.

"What is the Allidus Alliance doing here?"

"Did you remember last time during the Battle of Xiphard Base where the Allidus trade convoy arrived unscheduled? My Black Cats found out later on that Allidus is embarking on a huge project and requires lots of materials. Aside from gathering huge amounts of Kavenit, the pirate organization is also demanding a lot of other exotics. Whatever Allidus is building has caused them to reach out to many resource producers in the Nyxian Gap."

This sounded incredibly concerning. Allidus was famed for two particular feats. First, it openly paraded around a warship. Second, it secretly sold considerably advanced superweapons to various pirate customers.

Now that Allidus sought a lot of materials, Ves couldn't help but grow a little concerned!

Was Allidus building a second cruiser? What about a fleet of smaller warsh.i.p.s? What if they were building some sort of apocalyptic superweapon instead?

Technically speaking, Ves shouldn't give a damn about what this pirate organization was up to. Ves only planned to stay in the Nyxian Gap for six months at most, and a considerable amount of time had already passed.

In fact, if Ves wanted to make it back to the Sentinel Kingdom in time for his wedding, he could only afford to play around in Maynard Fields for just one or two months before needing to race back to civilized space!

Once he left the Nyxian Gap, whatever schemes the pirates had hatched should bear no relation to him. If Ves left the Komodo Star Sector afterwards, then the Nyxian pirates became even more irrelevant!

Ves did not feel particularly threatened by the Allidus Alliance. Instead, he became curious whether Allidus maintained some sort of presence on Ulimo Citadel.

"Why does it matter that Allidus is at Ulimo Citadel?" He asked.

"Aside from the goods and intelligence that we might wish to obtain, it's highly likely that Allidus has made some big trades with the Dry Snakes. Ulimo Citadel produces a fair amount of high-quality exotics, which is exactly what Allidus needs. Now think on what the Dry Snakes might ask in exchange for these goods."

It didn't take long for Ves to connect the dots. "Superweapons!"

"Exactly." Calabast smiled. "Our analysis suggests that the Crona Lords is only a collateral trading partner to the Allidus Alliance. While Xiphard Base mines a good amount of Kavenit, this material isn't rare at all and can be found in many other places in Maynard Fields. In fact, Kavenit is also present in other zones. In contrast, Ulimo Citadel harvests a small number of very rare exotics that isn't available in the rest of the Nyxian Gap. This is why we suspect that Allidus genuinely cares about their trade relationship with the Dry Snakes."

"Do you have a list of those exotics?"

"Here."

She transferred the file to his comm. He immediately accessed the list through his implant.

She was right. Though Ulimo Citadel mined a lot of materials that were prevalent elsewhere in the Komodo Star Sector, Ves had never heard of some of the potent exotics in the list!

Their properties were vague as none of the intelligence sources that the Black Cats had access to could describe these unique exotics in greater detail.

Nonetheless, they should be of particular value to the Allidus Alliance's unknown construction project.

Ves tapped his finger against his desk. "I see why this is meaningful. However, there are still too many unknowns while the payoff is obscured as well. This shouldn't be enough to make you interested in Ulimo."

"You're right. There is a second reason why I want to investigate it further. While I have my suspicions, I am unable to confirm whether Ulimo holds something that is of great interest to me but especially you. I dare not say anything careless."

Neither Ves nor Major Verle looked amused at her vagueness. Wasn't it the job of spies to tell them something informative?

Then again, they also had an obligation to be as accurate as possible. If their intelligence wasn't backed by enough proof, then it might do more harm than good to pass off unverified rumors as fact.

In any case, Calabast did not advocate to attack Ulimo Base outright. Instead, she wanted to scout it first in order to see whether it held something worthwhile.

This happened to match his intentions. While Ves agreed with Major Verle that it was very dangerous to attack Ulimo Base, as long as they scouted it instead, their task force shouldn't be exposed to any danger.

He turned to Lucky, who had been enjoying his petting all this while. "Are you up for another infiltration?"

"Meow."

"This is likely going to be more dangerous than before. The Dry Snakes are on high alert and the Xona Stalkers are presumably proficient at detecting stealthed opponents.

"Meow!"

"I know your gadget and your abilities are good enough to fool anything the Xona Stalkers can throw at you, but the stealth shuttle is a different matter! Once it gets blown up, you're pretty much stuck in enemy territory!"

"Meow meow meow!"

His cat was too conceited. Ves worried about Lucky's success this time. While there was a chance that he might be exaggerating the risks, he did not dare to be complacent. Time and time again, the pirates taught him the perils of underestimating his adversaries.

"No. You're not going this time." Ves definitively declared. "You're too irreplaceable. I think it's best to resort to a less costly method of investigating our target. Calabast, Major Verle, since Ulimo Base hosts an open marketplace, why not put up some disguises on some of our men before sending onwards?"

"That is exactly one of the options I had in mind." Calabast smiled. "I have numerous Black Cats who possess the necessary training to pass off as pirates. I'm sure that the Flagrant Vandals, Swordmaidens and Battle Criers are capable of adopting this disguise as well. As much as Ulimo Base is on guard against our forces, the Dry Snakes haven't closed their gates and shuttered their marketplace."

"I'm not sure. While it is true that some of our rougher clansmen can imitate ruffians, it's unrealistic to expect them to behave exactly like Nyxian pirates."

"Our Black Cats can remedy this problem. We have developed enough of an understanding of the locals to teach your men what to pay attention to in order to blend in with the crowd."

A quick discussion ensued on who to send to Ulimo Base. This was a very risky mission that demanded a lot from those who participated in it. Most notably, the group required someone who possessed an extensive understanding of technology.

Ves raised his hand. "I'm willing to take part in this scouting mission. I happen to be very good at observation."

"NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT!"

"YOU JUST STAY PUT!"

Both Calabast and Major Verle immediately shot him down!

Chapter 2249 - Different Infiltration

His own advisors prohibited him from visiting Ulimo Base.

It was too risky to dispatch Ves on such a high-risk mission. His status and importance to the Larkinson Clan was far too great to allow him to visit a formidable pirate fortress while he was heavily outnumbered and outgunned.

Once the Dry Snakes discovered that the infamous pirate killer sneaked into their own home, They would certainly lock down Ulimo and seek to kill or capture Ves at all cost!

The entire point of dispatching a small force of Larkinsons disguised as pirates was to limit the losses in the event of a disaster.

If the Dry Snakes and its vassals managed to identify and eliminate the Larkinsons, then the Larkinson Clan and the task force wouldn't actually suffer that much losses!

It was an entirely different story when someone indispensable to the Larkinson Clan such as Ves personally took part. A hundred or so disguised Larkinsons could never protect their clan patriarch against the entire might of the Dry Snakes and their allies!

Therefore, Calabast and Major Verle did not hesitate to shoot Ves down in the strongest possible terms. It didn't matter if he was in charge. In fact, it was exactly because he held the highest position why he shouldn't wander around so carelessly!

Ves grimaced at their strong objections. "I can take care of myself. This isn't my first rodeo. Last time, I managed to escape captivity and took over this very ship from some determined CRC guards!"

"You almost died when a missile struck close to you." Calabast immediately retorted. "And let's not kid ourselves that Lucky did most of the work. Without him, you would have turned into Lady Curver's obedient puppet by this time."

"I just want to visit a pirate base! What's the harm in that?! Just look at all of the traffic coming in and out of Ulimo Base! The pirates are unwilling to stop their trade activities, which means that the gates are wide open!"

"THAT DOESN'T MEAN THAT A LEADER AND A MECH DESIGNER OF YOUR STATURE OUGHT TO HEAD STRAIGHT INTO ENEMY TERRITORY!"

The argument raged on for several minutes. No matter what excuses Ves retorted to, he was shot down time and time again.

"Meow meow meow!"

Even his own cat joined his critics!

Ves sighed in exasperation. "Fine. I understand. There is no logic behind visiting Ulimo in person."

His reluctant admission finally caused Calabast and Major Verle to feel relieved. They were both aware of his penchant of getting into trouble, and they did not want to see him stir up a mess in the middle of a hostile pirate stronghold!

"Good. Now that we have settled this issue, we should prepare the necessary disguises."

The Larkinsons captured a number of pirate sh.i.p.s from the Crona Lords and various other pirate groups. The sh.i.p.s might not be in the best of shape, but the Larkinsons did their best to fix them up in order to make use of their space to haul more valuable loot.

Part of the loot consisted of salvaged pirate mechs. Though Ves and the task force originally intended to break them down and recycle the most valuable materials, they could easily turn around and restore them back to functionality instead.

There was one big problem, though.

"The pirate sh.i.p.s we captured may look shabby, but they are undeniably associated with one of our victims." Calabast noted. "What do you think if one of the sh.i.p.s we stole from the Crona Lords shows up at Ulimo?"

"The Dry Snakes will immediately suspect that we're Larkinsons!"

This was not the only possibility, of course. Task Force Predator left a lot of slaves behind at Xiphard Base and other pirate bases who didn't commit any crimes against humanity.

In order to cultivate an upright and honorable mindset in the Larkinson Clan, Ves explicitly pushed his people to act properly whenever possible.

This was why he deliberately encouraged his clansmen to deviate from the customs of the Peacekeepers, who often resorted to expediency and executed everyone in a pirate organization regardless of their status.

So far, it seemed to be working. From what Ves had observed from the monitoring systems throughout the sh.i.p.s of the task force, his clansmen remained relatively pure and uncorrupted in this filthy environment.

In any case, while it was possible for the disguised Larkinsons to pass themselves off as freed slaves, that would only invite the local pirates to kidnap them wholesale!

Ves had a better solution. "Unlike most pirate groups, we have a lot of mech designers and naval engineers in our task force. The pirate sh.i.p.s and mechs we've plundered from our enemies are like putty in our hands. With the abundant amount of raw materials we've acc.u.mulated, we can easily modify the structure of those sh.i.p.s and mechs until they become unrecognizable. While there aren't a lot of people in the Nyxian Gap, there are thousands of pirate gangs roaming around. I don't believe the Dry Snakes are familiar with every single outfit."

After a bit of thought, Calabast looked interested. "This can work. How long will it take?"

"As long as we allocate enough skilled personnel to this task, we can probably perform this transformation in a couple of days. Changing the exterior of any machine is very easy. As for the internals, as long as we limit the modifications to some quick and dirty tasks such as partitioning one big cargo hold into two smaller compartments, then that shouldn't take up a lot of time."

The time spent on preparing their disguises was very crucial. With the wedding looming closer and closer, the Larkinson Clan couldn't dilly-dally around in the Nyxian Gap!

After Ves threw this suggestion to Calabast and Major Verle, the two could take care of the rest. There was no need for Ves to concern himself too much with the planning and execution of this initiative.

One way or another, the Larkinsons were determined to take a look inside Ulimo Base!

In the next couple of days, Task Force Predator busied itself with transforming two pirate sh.i.p.s.

Ulimo Base strictly prohibited the entry of large groups of pirates. The Dry Snakes wouldn't be able to maintain control anymore if too many outsiders ran around inside the public spaces of their stronghold!

Various ship specialists and engineers carefully modified the exterior and small portions of the interior of the pirate sh.i.p.s. They carefully worked away the marks that revealed their ship class or prior ownership.

It didn't matter whether the sh.i.p.s didn't conform to any particular class anymore. There were so many ship classes in existence that not even the CFA maintained a complete database. In addition, it was very normal for ship owners to steadily modify and upgrade their vessels over time, thereby causing any aging vessel to gain unique identities.

Ves actually appreciated this treatment. Sh.i.p.s lasted a lot longer than mechs, so their owners developed a greater affection for them. The more responsible among them always treated their sh.i.p.s as more than floating coffins in space.

If more people adopted the same mindset towards mechs, then maybe Ves wouldn't have to work so hard to make people appreciate these majestic machines.

What interested Ves more was the people assigned to enter Ulimo Base. There were plenty of ruffians and ruffian-like characters in the Larkinson Clan.

The Swordmaidens had the distinct honor of possessing an actual pirate pedigree. Though they pursued an elite path, that still did not change the fact that they lived the life of a pirate for a very long time.

They only possessed two flaws. First, they were very distinct and did not work well alongside other people. Second, most of their in-depth knowledge related to the Faris Star Region.

This was why Major Verle decided to assign only a small number of Swordmaidens. They just needed to be there in order to help the others make sense of obscure pirate customs and culture.

The second group that had to take part in this mission were the intelligence operatives of the Black Cats. Though Ves never paid much attention to this group, he trusted in Calabast's ability to raise competent spies.

These underlings of her had studied a lot about Nyxian Pirates and were up to date with most region-specific events. They were also excellent at passing themselves off as genuine Nyxian pirates.

The downside was that reading about the Nyxian Gap was one thing. Living the Nyxian pirate life was another! This was why Major Verle did not dare to trust the Black Cats could handle every situation.

The bulk of the fighting forces of this exploration mission would be supplied by a combination of battle Criers and Flagrant Vandals. Commander Cinnabar and Commander Orphan both picked out their roughest, most unruly personnel in order to fill up the ranks of their fake pirate outfit.

Of course, their ruffian-like nature would likely be fairly tame compared to real sc.u.m, but that was not a huge issue in itself. After encountering various pirate groups in the Nyxian Gap, Ves and everyone else learned that pirates could be quite disciplined and orderly when they needed to be. Pirates pursued strength, and there was no better way to squander it than acting like idiots!

When Ves scanned through the list of people who were assigned to take part in the mission, his eyes widened as he spotted two notable names.

He decided to call both of them to his stateroom for a personal talk.

The first one to arrive was the mech and technical consultant for this mission. Ketis marched through the hatch with firm, steady steps. Her floating greatsword hovered after her like an obedient pet.

"You called, Ves?"

He nodded. "Take a seat."

When she sat down, she looked at him with confidence. "Did you want to discuss my participation in the upcoming mission?"

He nodded. "I have serious doubts about that. I heard that you actively volunteered to take a look. Why?"

"I feel restless, Ves. The Nyxian Gap reminds me far too much of the frontier. I find it frustrating to coop myself up in this ship when I could be out there."

"You're a very promising mech designer. This is a sensitive period of time for you. You were already making so much progress in your advancement towards Journeyman. If you just design a couple more mechs, I am sure you will be close to breaking through. By then, your status inside and outside the Larkinson Clan will change completely."

Ketis crossed her arms. "I can't stand it, Ves. Designing mechs day-in day-out is not my style. Just like you, I need to go out and challenge myself. I think this mission is a great opportunity for me to widen my horizons. Maybe I'll even be able to gain some

inspiration that will sharpen my design philosophy. I haven't made that much progress in it ever since I was able to develop my own superpower."

The two talked some more. Ves continued to try to talk her out of participating, but she resolutely wanted to go. Clearly, this was something her entire mind, body and spirit yearned. He became increasingly more reluctant to bar her way.

After weighing the pros and cons, Ves eventually sighed. "It's going to be risky, you know that? If you ever end up in trouble, I will do my best to bail you out, but it will be difficult."

"I'm not a fragile flower. I can handle it. Besides, with all of our preparations, I'm sure we'll be able to slip in and out of Ulimo Base without attracting any suspicion. The Dry Snakes don't really pay too much attention to the sc.u.m that visit its marketplace."

As a mech designer, Ves understood how much Ketis could benefit from this little adventure. It was the same reason why he wanted to go as well. He became a little softer because of that.

His student knew the risks and accepted them. Whether she could truly gain something from observing Ulimo Base or not, she might very well become a much better mech designer after broadening her horizons. Ves didn't have the heart to stand in the way of her passion.

"Fine.. but take good care of your safety. In fact, let me see all of your gear. Our clan has collected some very good materials, and I'm willing to use some of them to strengthen your equipment."

"Sure!"

Chapter 2250 - Battlegear

Letting Ketis take part in the exploration mission filled Ves with a lot of misgivings. Yet he also felt proud of her. Out of all of the mech designers in the Larkinson Clan, he felt she matched his inclinations the most.

Of course, they were two very different people. Ves was raised in the Bright Republic and enjoyed a relatively normal, civilized upbringing.

Ketis had to fight to survive from the moment she was born. If Lydia's Swordmaidens hadn't recruited her, she would have likely suffered a much worse fate!

From the start, the two led completely different life trajectories. The fact that they encountered each other and developed a close friendship was remarkable.

This was because no matter their differences, it was their similarities that bonded them together.

Both of them liked to get up close and personal.

Both of them were passionate about designing mechs.

Both of them adopted similar approaches when it came to their respective passions.

Ves saw a younger and female of himself in Ketis, and she likely looked up to him as a guide and role model.

Though they pursued very different design philosophies, Ves highly respected her pursuit towards sharpness. Her unusual upbringing along with her swordsmanship practice provided her with a much more intimate relationship with swords. Almost no other mech designer had seriously trained in swords and used these weapons to kill people and exobeasts.

Ketis was a true Swordmaiden!

While Ves could not match her in terms of pure combat prowess, his pursuit of his own design philosophy was just as intense. They were very similar as mech designers, and some of his ideals even rubbed off on her. He looked forward to how far she would be able to go once she made some more accomplishments.

They eventually entered the Scarlet Rose's mech workshop. The pair brought out all of the gear that Ketis planned to bring on the mission.

Ves only performed a cursory inspection on the smaller gadgets and knives. What truly caught his attention was her combat gear.

He first inspected the Udor. He remembered buying this large laser hand cannon for Ketis when they visited Renny's Outfitters on Bentheim.

The shop was probably gone, drowned in sand like the rest of the once-industrious planet.

The most remarkable aspect about the laser pistol was that it was a masterwork. A gunsmith invested a lot to create this exquisite weapon. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been priced at a whopping 39 million bright credits!

"Did you ever fire this weapon at someone?"

Ketis shook his head. "I never ended up in a situation where I needed to make use of it. Even when I fled the Bentheim System alongside Raella and Vincent, there was no need to shoot at the agents of Spotlight."

"Mmmhmm." Ves hummed for a moment. "While the Udor is an excellent third-class masterwork pistol, it's not powerful enough. Any casual laser pistol of the Penitent Sisters can easily overwhelm this gun in terms of firepower."

"I know. It's the only ranged weapon I have, though. I'm not upset, though. As a Swordmaiden, my greatsword is everything. As long as I have a good sword in my hands, I can take on any enemy!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Ketis. Even if you don't particularly care for pistols, it's better to have something more effective by your side."

After a moment's thought, Ves decided to give her another weapon. He withdrew a surprisingly small and unassuming weapon from his holster.

"What is this?" Ketis frowned.

"It's a very powerful laser pistol. I stole it from a female Benny when I took over the Scarlet Rose. Don't think it's weak because it's small. The power of this weapon is enough to pierce through dozens of armed guards under the right circumstances!"

They did not dare to test fire the weapon in the workshop. Ves merely transferred a document that detailed all of the specs and features of the pistol.

As a mech designer, Ketis could easily read and interpret the numbers. She raised her eyebrow. "This is indeed a powerful pistol! It's better than any rifle. Don't you need this gun for yourself?"

Ves smirked. "Don't worry about that. I already have something better."

After a bit of discussion, Ketis decided to keep both pistols. The Udor may be weak but it largely looked the part of a ferocious pirate weapon.

In general, pirates disliked conveying weakness. The small and compact Fridayman pistol wouldn't intimidate any pirate. Ketis intended to store it in a hidden pocket and only bring it out when it was absolutely necessary.

Ves picked up the Udor and studied it from various angles. "While this weapon is fairly weak, we can still upgrade it. I have a very great understanding of laser weapons and I'm sure I can enhance its firepower by at least fifty percent."

At the time he purchased this masterwork, the new generation laser technology hadn't become public yet. The Udor actually worked on outdated technology, so it was trivially easy to integrate some replacement parts.

In addition, his extensive knowledge on laser weapons did not only apply to mechs. He could also apply much of the principles he learned on smaller-scale weapons. In

particular, with his knowledge on crystal laser technology, he believed he could synthesize some custom crystals that substantially increased the weapons firepower and energy efficiency.

The question was whether it was worth it to do so. Ketis looked reluctant.

"I know we can improve this gun. It's just.. if you make too many changes, it won't be a masterwork anymore, right?"

Ves frowned. "You're right. Small, gradual changes are okay, but if you change too much, the original character of the Udor is lost."

While Ves was sure there were methods for masterworks to retain their original character even if they underwent huge overhauls, he was not familiar with any of them. Masterworks possessed a very mysterious trace of spirituality and potentially other energies that elevated them above products. His understanding of the workings of all of these phenomena was too shallow for him to mess around.

"Since you gave me this second-class pistol, there is no need for me to rely on the Udor. We can just make it look fiercer in order to impress the pirates. I can bet you that a lot of pirates will envy me for parading this weapon around!"

Ves suddenly chuckled. "I see what you are trying to get at. If the pirates are aware that you own a masterwork gun, they will all think that it's your main weapon. They won't spare a look at your sword!"

Speaking of swords, both Ves and Ketis directed their attention to the ostentatious greatsword. As a first-class CFA-built weapon, its sharpness and resilience was practically off the charts! If Ketis possessed enough strength, she was even able to cut through the hull of the Scarlet Rose with this incredibly deadly weapon!

However, neither of them were optimistic about this weapon. It was too big and iconic!

"There are plenty of public recordings of you in the company of this weapon." Ves stated. "If the Dry Snakes has performed any studies on the Larkinson Clan, then they will have certainly uploaded all of that footage into the data banks of their monitoring system. Once Ulimo takes a good look at the profile of this weapon, the Dry Snakes will certainly discover your true identity!"

The answer was obvious. Ketis frowned and stroked her finger against the blade of her favored weapon.

"I hate to leave it behind, but it's for the best."

"It's okay, Ketis. We can build another sword for you, one that is not obviously tied to the Swordmaidens."

They began to swap some ideas and sketch out some swords. Ketis eventually settled on a broad, saber-like cutlass.

Compared to her greatsword, its blade and heft was still considerable, which suited the swordsmanship style of the Swordmaidens.

It was lighter and shorter than her greatsword though, which meant that Ketis could easily wield it with a single hand. This allowed her to hold her cutlass in one hand and a laser pistol in the other hand like a glamorous space pirate!

The primary material for the sword was Breyer alloy, which allowed the cutlass to resist strong impacts without deforming or breaking.

In order to enhance the sharpness and various other properties of the weapon, Ves decided to throw in some low and medium-grade exotics. This not only increased the lethality of the cutlass, but also made it difficult for scanners to recognize the traces of Breyer alloy.

This was a very important detail! Breyer alloy was not common in the Komodo Star Sector and the Nyxian Gap at all. Of all the entities who made extensive use of this material, the Larkinson Clan was pretty much the only one in this corner of space!

Ketis lovingly made the weapon by hand. As a quick learner, she had vastly increased her fabrication ability. She had even made some other swords in her spare time!

It didn't take too long for her to craft her new pirate cutlass. The only reason it took so long was that many of the materials were difficult to work with and because she wanted to add some pirate-like flourishes to the hilt and pommel.

In the end, the cutlass looked like a weapon that came straight out of an action drama. The skulls, flowery gilded patterns and other little touches turned it into quite an impressive cutting implement!

Ketis grasped the cutlass and instantly entered into a focused state. Ves clearly felt the differences. It was as if her entire spirit became concentrated at once!

Her ability to focus was so frightening that the edge of her cutlass even shimmered for a bit! This was her so-called superpower!

Unfortunately, a cutlass was not as easy to empower as a butter knife. Due to her lack of spiritual strength and development, her attempt of sharpening her cutlass quickly failed.

"Damn. I thought I made more progress."

Ves gently patted her back. "You're still an Apprentice. Wait until you become a Journeyman. I bet that you will quickly be able to add more sharpness to this weapon."

Now that they settled the weapons that Ketis would bring on the mission, the two moved on to her combat armor.

The Rising Red Dragon was a suit of combat armor that served Ketis well during their first visit to the Ylvaine Protectorate. Together with his Sparous Vize, they managed to survive a church collapsing on their bodies and fend off numerous false flag fanatics.

Though the feminine, mobility-oriented combat armor had served Ketis while a few years ago, Ves believed she deserved better this time.

He thoughtfully knocked his knuckles against the surface of this impressive piece of protective equipment.

"We don't have the time to design and fabricate an entirely new suit of combat armor. What we can do is to replace the armor plating and much of the internal structure with stronger alloys. We can use a mix of Breyer alloy and other tough materials."

Ketis didn't care so much about her armor. "That's fine. We can also make use of this opportunity to change its look and add some extra decorations. Right now, it's too obvious that this is a product that is sold to the upper class of civilized space."

This was not a big problem. When they began to scan the Rising Red Dragon and studied its design, they began to plan out some quick and easy overhauls.

They couldn't change too much because much of the integrated electronic systems couldn't adapt to radical changes. It took too much time to reprogram them in case they made any drastic changes.

One question that came up to Ves was whether he was willing to integrate a layer of B-stone to the armor.

He only possessed a couple of rocks, and each one was extremely precious.

"Maybe the helmet is enough." He muttered.