

Mech 2251

Chapter 2251 - Upgrading Ketis

Upgrading the gear of his student gave Ves a lot more reassurance about her survival in the upcoming exploration mission.

Ketis continually insisted on taking part, saying that she was completely unlike the lab nerds who were content to fiddle with designs all day.

As Ves deeply understood her need, he allowed her to take part in the risky mission despite his many misgivings.

Inwardly, he asked himself whether he would stay still if anything ever went amiss. If the Dry Snakes ever captured the Swordmaiden mech designer, Ves would certainly commit his entire task force to rescuing her no matter the cost.

If they managed to kill Ketis, then Ves did not even dare to think how he would react in such a situation!

Ketis noticed his inner struggle and placed her strong hand over his own. "You Larkinsons always say that we need to be courageous in seeking greater opportunities. What I'm doing is no different. I've also learned from you that we need to pay the price for our decisions. If anything happens to me... just take care of the Swordmaidens for me, will you? I love my sisters, and they deserve to pilot the mechs of their dreams. If I can't give them that, then I hope that you will do so in my stead."

She sounded as if she just heralded her own demise!

How could Ves possibly stay calm at this moment? Right now, his imagination ran wild with tragic images of her death or capture. As long as the Larkinsons made just a single mistake at Ulimo Citadel, there was nowhere for them to go! The tight security and nearly impenetrable wall of mech patrols meant that there was almost no chance of escape!

In an instant, Ves began to develop various different plans.

"I don't feel assured of your safety." He stated. "I'll tell Lucky to be on standby close to Ulimo. He'll give you a hand if you ever end up in trouble."

"Meow?" His cat looked puzzled at him from a nearby desk.

Ves pointed at his cat. "You're going, and that's that! If anything happens to the entire group Larkinsons entering Ulimo Citadel, don't bother with protecting them all. Just cover Ketis and make sure she survives long enough to escape. I'll tell Calabast to prepare her stealth shuttle and try and sneak it close to the base."

This was very risky as the Xona Stalkers might possess the ability to detect the stealthed vehicle. The entire point about dispatching Larkinsons in disguise was that it wouldn't trigger any suspicion from the Dry Snakes.

In order to keep the chances of detection at a minimum, the stealth shuttle had to be parked some distance away from Ulimo. This would delay Lucky's entry into Ulimo if an emergency ever took place.

Ves rubbed his chin and studied all of her gear. After integrating a bit of B-stone in her helmet, not even Ves could spiritually penetrate her head when he faced her head on. It was a different story if she stood on the deck above. The helmet didn't offer any protection against spiritual probes sent from below.

This was why he prioritized the acquisition of a lot more B-stones. In order to provide him with omni-directional protection, he needed to acquire enough materials to cover his entire body. Only by closing each and every possible port would he feel assured of his protection.

The scattered whispers about B-stone being sold on Ulimo was one of the reasons why he couldn't let it go. Though it wasn't relevant at the moment, Ves was pretty certain that he would need a lot of B-stone in the future. Against huge threats such as the Five Scrolls Compact, he did not feel confident that his own feeble Spirituality was enough to resist their sophisticated and bewildering spiritual tricks!

Speaking of spiritual tricks, Ves began to rub his smooth-shaven chin while he stared at Ketis with a thoughtful expression.

"What are you thinking about?" Ketis asked.

"I think I have a way of making you stronger. It's just that my measure is a bit experimental. I'm not sure if it's safe or helpful enough to make a difference in your upcoming mission."

His student grew curious. She sat down next to him at the workshop table that held all of her gear.

"You never think of something trivial, Ves. Tell me what you have in mind. I won't oppose any measure that can make me stronger."

He hesitated a bit. "Let's head somewhere more private. This workshop isn't secure enough."

They first moved to a nearby office before Ves changed his mind. He instead directed his group to Compartment G-13, which was the safest, most secure and most isolated section of the Scarlet Rose.

Along the way, he also paid a quick visit to the vault in order to retrieve a special P-stone.

Only Ves, Ketis, Lucky and Nitaa were present at the moment. After activating a jammer, not that it was needed, Ves felt fully assured that he could speak what he wanted.

"This is new." Ketis idly commented as she looked around.

The surprisingly-packed compartment was filled with automated industrial equipment and stacks of Breyer alloy bars. The forging machine rumbled as its insides burned with incredible heat as it burned Cassandra Breyer's corpse for the umpteenth time in order to melt down another advanced escape pod.

Since he hadn't entered for some time, Ves took the time to perform a thorough spiritual check. He did not detect anything amiss. No matter the weirdness surrounding this old and undead spiritual sorceress, Ves did not believe she had the energy to spare to mess around with him once again!

He turned back to Ketis. "Before I introduce my idea, I'd like you to repeat your little trick with the butter knife. I need to study you closely when you perform this technique before I am sure about my suggestion."

"Okay..? I'll get tired if I do it too much, though."

"Just a few seconds is enough."

She had plenty of knives on her person. She pulled out one of her smaller ones from a hidden compartment in her boots and began to concentrate her mind.

The air around her seemed to grow sharper and more charged. Anyone who was spiritually sensitive would know that Ketis was trying to accomplish something exceptional!

Slowly but surely, a shimmering glow appeared over the sharp edge of her blade. While Ketis didn't cut anything, the threat that Ves was able to sense was no joke!

This time, Ves did not study the spiritual patterns that overlaid the knife. Instead, he directed his senses towards Ketis' mind.

Though she lacked a design seed, her active spiritual potential boiled with excitement. Several specific spiritual attributes related to sharpness, swords and other related aspects had become unusually active, though by and large her actions lacked form.

Ves developed some more theories as he observed her in action. He soon waved his hand, signalling her to drop her strenuous exertion.

She quickly loosened her concentration and pulled herself back in. Her little knife no longer held any special cutting power.

"Did you get what you want, Ves?"

"I did. Let me think for a moment."

He did not really possess a good understanding of the 'superpowers' that extraordinary individuals could perform. High-ranking mech designers and expert pilots were able to influence reality and the people around them in various ways.

Nonetheless, the way that Ketis excited her own potential seemed simple and straightforward. Ves grew a bit confident in his plan to strengthen her ability to call upon her cutting ability.

Still, he wasn't completely sure, and he hadn't performed enough experiments to say for sure.

"I've performed a lot of experiments recently." He started. "Many of them have to do with the mind. While I'm not incredibly familiar with this field, I think I know enough to improve your trick."

"Oh? Do tell, please!"

Ves grimaced. "It doesn't come without a cost, and I'm not sure whether it will work out the way I planned. If it works, you'll grow stronger. If it doesn't, you might sustain permanent brain damage. Are you sure you want me to proceed?"

"I trust you, Ves."

Those words made him feel warm. "Okay. It's like this. It's a bit complicated to explain and entails many different factors that you aren't supposed to know. I'll explain it as simply as possible. I think I can shape a part of your mind into a sword. This sword will capture some of the essence of your beliefs and principles, and you'll be able to use it to strengthen yourself, though how exactly that will play out, I have no idea."

She quickly grew interested. "That sounds really interesting!"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"You wouldn't bring something up if it isn't useful. From what I understand, you're basically telling me you can help me condense my sword intent!"

"Uhh... I don't know if it's accurate for you to view it that way."

"Let's find out, then!"

With her willingness to try out his suggestion, Ves hesitated no further.

Just before he concentrated, he halted for a moment.

"The mind sword I want to make needs to take on a specific shape. What kind of sword do you want to host in your mind?"

"Do you even need to ask? Take my greatsword as a model!"

She turned around and unsheathed her CFA greatsword from its scabbard. She laid it down on a pallet of Breyer alloy bars for him to examine.

Ves touched the hard and smooth surface of the blade. The alloys incorporated in the weapon were even harder to damage than Breyer alloy!

Though the weapon was just a lifeless sword, Ketis already treated it as her most cherished possession and her lifelong companion. Though Ves did not sense anything spiritual about the weapon, he believed the bond she shared with it was real.

"Hold out your hand."

In order to make his work easier, he placed one hand on the flat of the blade and gripped Ketis' fingers with his other hand.

He then proceeded to go to work. He concentrated his mind, causing him to acquire an intensity that Ketis had often seen from him when he worked at his hardest.

"Open your mind to me." He whispered. "It will hurt if you don't. Just think of welcoming me in the depths of your mind. The more you trust me, the less your mind will rebel from my presence."

One of his spiritual projections cautiously entered her mind. He hardly felt any rejection along the way. It seemed Ketis indeed trusted him a lot. Only Gloriana welcomed his presence with greater enthusiasm.

This made his subsequent steps so much easier. He cautiously began to approach her spiritual potential before deriving a minute portion of it to mold into a mind sword.

As he began to shape a literal part of her spirit, Ketis frowned and felt ill at ease.

"Don't resist! Try and endure it as much as possible."

"I'm trying."

It was deeply uncomfortable for anyone whose spirits underwent substantial changes. After half an hour's work, Ves completely reproduced a small portion of her spiritual potential into a facsimile of her favorite weapon.

In its current form, her prototype mind sword looked rather weak and feeble. In order to prevent it from collapsing, Ves quickly isolated a small portion of the spiritual attributes that Ketis drew upon when she performed her superpower and stuffed it into her mind sword.

The new spiritual augment gradually turned solid and cohesive. Already, Ketis widened her eyes as she sensed something remarkable forming in her mind!

Due to the relative weakness of her spiritual potential and the tiny size of her mind sword, the spiritual augment did not seem very potent.

It was difficult for Ves to draw upon more without seriously impairing his student's ability to design mechs or work with swords. He only drew just enough of her spiritual energy to create a stable construct. Potency and effectiveness did not come to mind at this moment.

He had a different solution in mind. He had arrived at the riskiest step of his plan. He directed his attention to the life stone that he placed by the side.

The life stone was nothing more than a P-stone that held a trace amount of life-attributed energy that he had derived from the high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. It constantly swelled with vitality to the extremely high quality of the energy locked within.

The sheer potency of this life energy was enough to blow up someone's head! Ves still remembered what had happened when he recklessly inserted some of this incredibly powerful energy into Peter Seterin's mind.

The last thing Ves wanted to do was to repeat the outcome on Ketis!

Chapter 2252 - Mind Sword

Failure was the mother of success. Just because Ves accidentally exploded Peter Seterin's mind did not mean he intended to fail again this time!

The stakes were higher this time. Ves did not care a thing about the life of a former slave turned bad.

Ketis was different! Ves genuinely cared about her life and wellbeing.

So far, Ves learned many lessons from his human experimentations. Many of his captives suffered horribly from his callous spiritual manipulation.

Due to his penchant for limit testing, Ves often tended to pursue extremes, much to the detriment of his unfortunate test subjects.

He did not feel guilty for harming them, distorting them or killing them. To Ves, they were irredeemable pirates who deserved to die. At least this way they at least contributed back to society before they inevitably succ.u.mbed.

His test subjects did not suffer in vain.

Ves gathered a huge amount of research data and discovered many new rules. He possessed a deeper understanding of various spiritual mechanisms.

Most importantly, by constantly exploring and breaking different boundaries, he became much better at judging how much he could get away with. As long as he did not go overboard, the risk of inflicting permanent damage was much less.

All of this research progress made him feel confident enough to proceed with his latest experiment.

Ketis was no test subject though. He treated her as his patient and client. This meant that he did not dare to act recklessly. Rather than exploring new horizons, Ves tried his best to stick to familiar ground.

This was not the time for him to engage in limit testing!

Though Ves had not executed this exact series of steps on someone else, Ves had already performed them in isolation plenty of times for him to feel somewhat confident about the outcome.

The only real uncertainty was that he never performed any spiritual manipulation to this degree on a mech designer. None of the test subjects that fell into his hands were mech designers, let alone Apprentices with notable spiritual potential and nascent design philosophies.

Nonetheless, at this stage, Ketis was not much different from an ordinary person with spiritual potential. Hers was just a bit more developed towards her interests and her design philosophy.

Perhaps the strongest measure of the confidence was the careful experimentations he made in his own mind. After forming various different spiritual augments in order to store as templates in his implant, he was certain that the mind sword would not inflict any harm.

That said, too much power was not necessarily a good thing. Right now, the mind sword was pathetically small and weak, so much so that Ketis barely noticed the difference.

This was why Ves wanted to feed and grow the mind sword. He wanted to accomplish this without harming her existing potential as a mech designer, so he could not draw out more of her spiritual energy than he had already done.

For that reason, he drew out a portion of the life-attributed energy stored in the P-stone placed at the side.

If he was experimenting on a pirate, then Ves wouldn't care too much about controlling the dose of energy. Any outcome was acceptable as long as he didn't squander it recklessly. Causing a few heads to explode was no big deal as long as he learned something different.

This time, Ves did not set out to learn anything new, so he carefully sliced away just a modest portion of high-quality life-attributed energy.

Even though the potency and activity of this diminished portion had dropped significantly, Ves learned enough not to underestimate its threat to people.

While Ves was able to handle it with care, too much energy was basically poison to someone much more spiritually weaker!

This was why Ves estimated a dose that was safe enough for Ketis to contain, and then cut it even further just to be safe.

When he checked to make sure the life-attributed energy he withdrew did not contain any surprises, he turned his attention to his patient.

"If you concentrate deeply, you should be able to sense the presence of a sword in your mind. Can you feel its sharpness?"

"I.. think so?" Ketis scrunched her face. "I sort of felt you rummaging in my mind. If I think hard enough, I think I can grasp an invisible sword."

"Keep sensing it, but don't try to activate it. Just get to know it better."

"This sword.. how is it supposed to help me, exactly?"

"It's mainly a tool to allow you to perform your superpower with greater ease, but aside from that I'm not too sure." Ves shook his head. "Before we begin, I think it is best for you to center your mind and think of your core ideals. Why do you pursue extreme sharpness? Why do you prefer to wield large swords?"

"Because they're the best at cutting powerful enemies. In mech combat, cutting an enemy mech apart with a single successful attack is much more worthwhile than slashing several times with a feeble sword. Bigger swords are not as quick and agile, but as long as you are skilled enough, you can overwhelm any opponent!"

"Not everyone agrees with that premise. In the mech community, there are many mech pilots and mech designers who believe that finesse is more important than power."

Ketis snorted with contempt. "They are mostly used to dueling against humans. None of them have faced off against an exobeast that weighs at least twenty times than their own bodies! If they have went through the Swordmaiden graduation ceremony like I have, they would have been gobbled up at an instant as their toothpicks is barely able to make a feral exobeast bleed!"

That was a very brutal image. The Swordmaiden's preference for bigger swords stemmed from their desire to challenge themselves against inhuman opponents. There were plenty of wild and untamed planets in the frontier that boasted many dangerous predators and beasts.

To challenge them in single combat and chop them apart was one of the greatest glories a Swordmaiden could earn!

Talking about her ideals and her ambition caused her mind to become more intimate with her mind sword. The spiritual augment seemed to resonate with her a bit. This was an important process, because the more she communicated with the mind sword, the closer the imaginary weapon conformed to her nature!

Unlike many of his other constructs, Ves tried something slightly novel and designed the spiritual construct in a way that offered plenty of room for growth. He wanted the mind sword to be able to grow alongside Ketis as she advanced and reached greater heights.

Right now, Ves planned to kickstart the mind sword's growth by injecting the life-attributed energy into it. This was something very risky and could blow up the spiritual construct if it wasn't capable of absorbing so much juice.

In order to regulate the feeding process and to give him time to stop, he carefully fed just a trickle of life-attributed energy.

Just as he predicted, the mind sword did not reject the energy derived from the serum. It immediately grew in size and strength as it rapidly digested the universally-compatible energy.

"Ah! I feel as if you dumped something hot in my mind!" Ketis suddenly grabbed the side of her head.

"Hold on! Don't lose focus! Endure! I know you can do it, Ketis!"

Her willpower was not that much lower than those of expert candidates! Her capacity to live through pain and hardship was incredibly high due to her Swordmaiden heritage. She resolutely bore the drastic changes in her mind.

Ves couldn't do much to make it easier for her. The mind sword, which was previously just a small and weak construct, rapidly grew in strength! All of its sharpness and sword-related attributes began to proliferate as the energies inside the mind sword rapidly grew in quantity.

If not for the fact that he designed the mind sword to be able to grow, it would have exploded by now! As it was, the stretchiness factor of the mind sword could barely keep up with the rapid absorption of high-quality energy!

Though Ves had not expended all of the life-attributed energy he drew out, he instinctively felt as if he was nearing a safe limit. If he grew the mind sword any further, then its spiritual strength would surpass that of his student's original spiritual potential.

He had no idea what would happen in her mind if that became the case! She might lose control of the mind sword. It might even supplant her original spiritual potential as her main 'spirit', which would likely strip her of much of her humanity!

Since the risks vastly outweighed the benefits, Ves cut off the supply of life-attributed energy and put the remainder back into the life stone.

What he had managed to foster in her mind was already strong enough for his liking! In his spiritual vision, he observed a vibrant, imaginary sword that exuded a lot of sharpness!

The presence of such a powerful mind sword was already starting to affect Ketis. Her spiritual potential seemed to resonate and grow closer to it. A wondrous expression appeared on her face, which signalled that she was already starting to embrace the changes.

The expansion of the mind sword had slowed dramatically when he no longer fed it with nurturing energy. Soon enough, its growth would settle, allowing the spiritual augment to solidity a bit and gain stability.

"It's almost over." He whispered to her. "Your mind sword is settling down. Keep feeling it out. Don't reject it. No matter where you might find yourself in the future, you will never be without a sword. You will always have one in your mind!"

His words inspired her. Her eyes gained an even greater intensity as her spiritual potential roiled with excitement! Her bond with the mind sword that Ves created had become stronger. There was no way she would lose control of it with such an intimate connection!

Seeing the way that Ketis embraced her mind sword with such love and dedication inspired him as well. He developed a small but radical idea on how he could empower the mind sword even further.

At this moment, the mind sword was nothing more than a spiritual construct made from Ketis' own spiritual energy and attributes. Ves managed to create a very sharp spiritual sword from these ingredients that fully conformed to Ketis.

Though Ves already believed that this outcome was a success, he became more and more tempted to add an additional ingredient to the mix.

A normal mind sword was already pretty impressive. What if Ves made it alive?

He immediately recognized the dangers of attempting to make it alive. He had not performed enough experiments in this direction to be able to tell for sure whether his wild idea would succeed.

However, he was too excited to dismiss this idea out of hand!

Intuitively, he felt that this might just work, though that did not mean that everything would go smoothly.

He decided to try it! At this critical moment, once the mind sword fully ceased its growth, it would be too late for him to pull off this measure.

Similar to the formation of new design spirits, Ves began to impart some of his own spiritual energy into the mind sword. He did not dare to inject too much for fear of exceeding what Ketis could bear.

The small seed of life that he injected in the mind sword significantly increased Ketis' discomfort!

"What are you doing?! I feel as if the sword in my mind is going crazy!"

"Focus! Don't lose control! Bear with it. What I just did was to make your mind sword alive."

"What?!"

"Think of what I have been doing to mechs. It's the same for what is happening at this moment! You don't need to think so much. Just keep your mind open and embrace the birth of your mind sword!"

Under his constant guidance, Ketis no longer put up her guard against her mind sword no matter how much it convulsed. Her acceptance and closeness towards it helped the mind sword absorb and integrate the foreign spiritual energy.

If not for her trust and friendship to Ves, she would have never been able to integrate his spiritual energy!

Even so, the process went anything but smoothly. Ves partially regretted moving so quickly ahead of his experiments. Everything that took place now was completely new to him. It was useless to perform this experiment on pirates because they hated him so much that their minds and spirits always rejected his spiritual energy.

Fortunately, his assumptions and theories did not lead him astray. Spiritual energy was intimately intertwined with thoughts and emotions.

With a silent cry, the mind sword had completely integrated the energy that Ves had donated. An exultant wave of emotion spread from Ketis' mind as her mind sword had succeeded in coming to life!

"I can feel her!" Ketis status with wonder! "My sword! She's perfect!"

Ves managed to create his first living spiritual construct!

Chapter 2253 - The Grand Cutter

Minutes passed as Ketis quietly basked in the birth of her living mind sword. Ves carefully observed her integration with the new living entity.

Ves had not injected it with too much of his spiritual energy, so its sentience and intelligence was incomparable to his design spirits.

It acted more like a puppy in the form of a sword more than anything else. It held no complex thoughts and was still very dependent on Ketis. The two were one in the same, mostly.

He was glad that the living spiritual construct embraced Ketis wholeheartedly. What little foreignness he injected into the mind sword did not cause it to forget where it originally came from. Ves had no doubt that something bad would happen if the living spiritual weapon was taken out of her mind!

The formation of this wondrous living spiritual construct had been an eye-opening experience to Ves. His understanding of life had progressed and he figured out a number of new promising applications.

As soon as he began another design session, Ves intended to see whether he could augment the triggered abilities of the Valkyrie Redeemer by making them alive!

It sounded ridiculous, and Ves had no idea whether it would work at all, but he really wanted to see what resulted from basing triggered abilities on actual living spiritual constructs!

While Ves began to fantasize about implanting abilities into his mech designs that could grow and adapt over the course of their existence, Ketis began to get a better grip on her young but eager mind sword.

She smiled brilliantly at Ves. "My sword intent has become alive! This is amazing, Ves! While I feel a bit disappointed at myself that I haven't been able to form her on my own, I would have never been able to form something so vivid and sharp on my own!"

Hardly any of her earlier discomfort remained. At this stage, she fully accepted the new addition to her mind. Likewise, the living mind sword fully embraced Ketis as her sole partner.

The only thing strange was that Ves didn't see anything about the mind sword that suggested that she was female.

Ves didn't bother too much with it. As long as this little quirk helped increase her compatibility with her mind sword, it should be fine.

An odd thought came to his mind. He chuckled a bit at its absurdity. "I guess I have finally fulfilled my promise of gifting you with a new pet! Congratulations!"

The mind sword was not quite a pet. She was actually a piece of Ketis that gained some independent life with his help. Ves actually didn't really know how to regard her existence. Living spiritual constructs differed from the design spirits he was familiar with, so he did not have a good grasp of what they were capable of at the moment.

Nonetheless, Ves did not believe that the mind sword would become a burden to Ketis. Already, he could see that her spiritual potential was slowly growing more vigorous. Her path to advancing to Journeyman just became a little smoother.

In fact, Ves had a suspicion that the formation of the mind sword might even trigger the process of forming a design seed right away!

That was actually an undesirable outcome to Ves. While Ketis was a fine Apprentice Mech Designer and knew a lot about mechs and swords, he did not believe she designed enough mechs to reach a sufficient degree of maturity with regards to her work.

Letting her advance to Journeyman while she was still in a relatively immature state would only doom her career later on! Only by climbing up through her own power would she be worthy to a higher rank.

As Ketis acclimatized to her new 'pet', she suddenly stood up and grabbed her sword from the stack of Breyer alloy bars. She lifted her greatsword over her head before concentrating her mind!

"What are you doing, Ketis?!"

"Look at this! My sword can cut all matter!"

A strong glow appeared along the entire length of the sword! Though it looked a bit wobbly and unstable, this was the first time she was able to apply her superpower onto such a huge weapon!

His vision seemed to freeze as Ketis unhesitantly swung down her sword! The glow around her CFA greatsword left a bright moon-shaped imprint as the sword parted straight through every single bar of Breyer alloy in the way without encountering any hindrance!

If not for her conscious control, her sword would have cut straight through the reinforced deck that isolated Compartment G-13 from the rest of the ship!

Ves looked wide-eyed at the result. While the CFA greatsword was already strong and sharp enough to cut through armor plating, in practice it was not that easy for her to cut through so many bars of second-grade alloy.

Yet with the help of her superpower that had been augmented by her living mind sword, she was able to cut straight through by relying on a phenomena that defied the natural laws!

If his suspicions were right, Ketis could even cut through the chest armor of a Bright Warrior with a single swing!

Ketis released a victorious war cry after cutting through so many bars! The strength she exuded was magnificent, and both her spiritual potential and her mind sword seemed to change and adjust after she had tested her own prowess!

Unfortunately, she couldn't repeat her trick again. Her mind sword looked exhausted after this exertion. It would be better for her if she stuck to her new cutlass for now.

Once her excitement finally faded a bit, she turned to Ves with a smile. "This is a fantastic gift, Ves! My sword intent is so sharp that I can study it for hours. I have formed so many new ideas."

"Well, before you get lost in them, aren't you forgetting something?"

"Uh, what?"

Ves smiled. "Since your new sword is now alive, she deserves a new name!"

"I forgot about that! Let me think.."

It took around thirty seconds for her to come up with a name.

"From now on, my sword intent is called Sharpie, the Grand Cutter!"

Ves felt like puking blood when he heard that name. He expected Ketis to call her living sword something grand and ostentatious like Excalibur or Durandal. If not, she at least should have been capable of giving her sword a dignified name.

He overlooked the fact that she grew up as an uncultured daughter of the frontier!

Though Ves wanted to suggest an alternative, he stopped when he saw that Ketis had become inordinately pleased at the name she bestowed on the new sword. Likewise, the newly-named Sharpie did not know any better and enthusiastically embraced his new designation!

"Forget it.." Ves sighed.

Names had power. For Ketis, it might not be bad for her to give her new sword a pet-like name. Her love, appreciation and intimacy towards Sharpie constantly grew. This was something that would only help Ketis bond even further with her living mind sword.

In order to make sure that Ketis did not suffer any wounds during the experiment, Ves brought her away from Compartment G-13 and handed her over to Dr. Ranya in order to perform a complete medical inspection.

"What's up with her?" The former Hexer frowned. She disliked getting pulled away from her research into the life-prolonging treatment serum. "She looks much.. happier than before."

"I can't really explain, doctor. Just make sure there isn't anything wrong in her body. Pay close attention to the state of her brain and head. If there are any anomalies, inform me right away."

"Okay, sir." Ranya skeptically replied. "So far, the preliminary scans haven't uncovered anything that deviates from her usual state. This is a good sign."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "Since I'm here, I might as well check up on you. How are you these days?"

"I'm okay. While I'm not happy to be in the Nyxian Gap, some of the biological materials your fleet has plundered has given me a lot of interesting options."

"Oh?"

"Every different environment breeds a different form of life. While the Nyxian Gap is most famed for its endless, barren asteroids, even life can bloom in this strange region."

She directed him towards a lab machine that seemed to incubate some unusual-looking exoplants. The chamber was almost completely dark and cold. Ves couldn't immediately find out what provided the plant with the energy to grow.

"Strange, isn't it?" Dr. Ranya grinned. "These nameless plants are considered weeds by the Nyxian pirates. They are treasures to me, though. They are actually feeding on Kavenit to grow."

"Really?!"

Ves studied the soil and found out that it largely consisted of finely-ground Kavenit ore. The unknown plants seemed to derive almost all of their energy and all of their nutrients from this sole material.

This must be why the plants looked very stiff and rigid.

"So what is the use of this plant?"

"On its own, it's not that useful. It's when they are combined or altered that they become of use to us. It will take a lot of research, though. I don't have enough samples to start a big research project."

"Don't forget your primary responsibilities."

"I know. This is just a side activity."

He quizzed Ranya a bit further. While she hadn't made any major breakthroughs in her current research projects, she still figured a bit more useful insights about the high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum.

None of them immediately helped him, though. After he finished his questioning, he left Ranya to conduct her examination on Ketis and returned to his stateroom.

He sent a quick message through his comm before sitting down to wait. He played around with Lucky for a time.

"Meow."

Ves tossed his cat into the air in a spin. Lucky didn't look dizzy at all. Instead, his metallic frame seemed to drift up and down as if he was as light as a feather.

"You haven't produced a gem in months, Lucky. When are you going to pay your rent?"

"Meow!"

"C'mon! You ate so many valuable exotics from the pirate bases we've raided! Where is all of that going?!"

The argument lasted until his latest guest arrived. Ves stopped arguing with his cat and instead stood up to welcome the new arrival.

"Dietrich! It's good to see you again!"

"Hello, Ves."

Though the two hadn't been in touch very often, they were still friends.

Both of them soon sat down.

"So, I believe you'll be a part of the group that will pay a visit to Ulimo Citadel in disguise, right?"

Dietrich nodded. "Yup. I've already become familiar with the fake pirate outfit we've invented. I know many of the fellows who will be a part of this charade. We have had a lot of fun trying to plan out our disguise."

"That's good to hear." Ves was already aware of some of the details. "Let's get to the reasons why I called you here. First, I told you to bring your gear along so that I can upgrade them in person. How are you faring with my old stuff?"

"The Peaceful Repose is very powerful, though it doesn't quite fit me. The Sparous Vize possesses many functions that are too complicated for me. It's frankly a waste for me to wear such an advanced suit."

"I don't think so. Our Larkinson Clan already has better. Since you have some misgivings about your gear, I'll go ahead and make some additional modifications while I upgrade them. I'll automate some of the hacking and scanner functions."

"That will be very helpful. Thank you, Ves. I don't really deserve all of this attention from someone important like you. There must be better ways for you to spend your time."

Ves smiled and faintly shook his head. "I don't think so. While I am showing some favoritism, I don't give a damn. You're one of the few Larkinsons in the clan that doesn't look at me like I'm some sort of great figure or a superstar."

He shrugged in a nonchalant manner. "It helps that I've been in your chair, if only for a brief amount of time. Becoming the leader of an organization is a huge burden. The moment you became the clan patriarch is the moment you put yourself on top of other people. I figure you don't want to lose the few close relationsh.i.p.s you have."

He was right. Ves found it hard to make any new friends among the Larkinsons. He mostly clung to his existing circle. This was a bit shortsighted as the clan had absorbed many new talents and notable people.

"I'll pay more attention to this issue." Ves pledged.

Chapter 2254 - Slow to Change

After almost a week of frantic preparation, the task force finally prepared their fake pirate outfit.

Ketis, Dietrich and several hundred other Larkinsons each donned their pirate disguises and boarded one of the two sh.i.p.s.

Each vessel had been overhauled in a deliberately sloppy manner that made them appear more shabby and derelict than before. The Avatars even fired their weapons onto their hull plating in order to make their disguise more convincing!

In fact, the damage to one of the light carriers was so severe that it desperately required repairs. If the damaged vessel couldn't be patched, then she would certainly shut down in a matter of weeks!

With such a disaster hanging over their heads, the so-called 'Mirror Raiders' possessed ample reason to approach and dock at an unfamiliar pirate base!

As the sh.i.p.s and mechs of the Mirror Raiders carefully left the bosom of Task Force Predator, Ves watched them go on the bridge of the Scarlet Rose.

Though he felt great concern for the Larkinsons who left, he had no way to influence their situation anymore. Due to several reasons, smaller pirate outfits generally didn't possess any quantum entanglement nodes.

Even if the sh.i.p.s of the Mirror Raiders did possess one, there wasn't much of a point. Ulimo Citadel locked them all down as a rule. The Dry Snakes who reigned over the base did not want any visitor to coordinate their actions with people outside.

Information was power. Communication was power. Now that the Mirror Raiders were suddenly deprived of their quantum entanglement nodes, they could only rely on themselves to solve their problems.

"The people we've sent can take care of themselves." Major Verle spoke at his side. "I understand what you are feeling, but this is part of being a leader."

Ves wrung his hands. "I kind of regret allowing Ketis to participate in this mission. I also feel as if I should have been a part of this mission as well."

"Stay calm, sir. While only a few years have passed since you served alongside us in the Bright-Vesia War, you are no longer the inconsequential Apprentice Mech Designer that we knew. You are a clan patriarch, a Journeyman and a galactic citizen with wealth and power. Fighting on the trenches is no longer an option for you when the future of the entire clan rests on your shoulders."

"I know that, Verle. It's just that my Larkinson blood is still restless."

Ves had gone through way too many scraps and crises to feel at ease with staying away from the excitement. Otherwise, he wouldn't have entered the Nyxian Gap in the first place.

He reflected on his own behavior and knew that his life experiences prior to advancing to Journeyman played a large role in solidifying his own inclinations.

All of the thoughts and emotions that he had in his mind during the formation of his design seed became a permanent part of his personality. He knew that it would take a very long time to mill down those traits so that he could feel more comfortable with the fact that he should stay in the rear.

It would take at least a week or two before he heard back from the Mirror Raiders. The time the task force invested into attacking Ulimo Citadel was already considerable. Ves only agreed to do this in the first place because he expected the payout to be huge.

Aside from all of the plunder he hoped to gain, Ves also salivated over the merits he might earn. A big and established pirate fortification such as Ulimo must be hosting a lot of weapons prohibited by the Big Two!

The Dry Snakes possessed their own trump cards, and so should their subordinate outfits. The Xona Stalkers, the Farmund's Own and the Hapid Qlinters were all capable of fielding hundreds of mechs, so they should definitely be able to afford their own secret weapons!

Aside from them, some of the clientele that frequented Ulimo Citadel ought to carry nasty surprises on their sh.i.p.s as well.

This was one of the biggest reasons that visitors weren't able to land their sh.i.p.s or any other vehicle in the vicinity of Ulimo Citadel. Instead, they had to land hundreds of kilometers away at various barren landing zones across the moon-sized asteroid.

Special transports operated by the Dry Snakes were the only vehicles allowed to convey passengers and cargo to Ulimo Citadel. The base operators inspected every single person and piece of cargo at multiple points.

The Dry Snakes took their inspection duty seriously and couldn't be bribed. Otherwise, someone could just smuggle in a superbomb that could destroy Ulimo from within or import some virulent agent that killed off every human infected by it within minutes!

Such events had taken place enough times in the Nyxian Gap for organizations like the Dry Snakes to wizen up. At the very least, the halls open to the public were placed some distance away from their core base complex, and this made it a bit difficult to scope out the most important sections of Ulimo Citadel.

Infiltrating these parts of the pirate base was the biggest challenge of the Mirror Raiders.

"Well, there's no use procrastinating any further." He muttered. "I might as well do something more productive."

He reluctantly left the bridge and returned to the design lab. After handling some miscellaneous tasks, he called out all of the Braves who were preoccupied with working on their respective projects. He also allowed Zanthar and Maikel to sit next to him in order to observe the meeting.

Ves clapped his hands. "Alright, almost two months have passed since we entered the Nyxian Gap. All of us have spent plenty of time on designing the mechs in the pipeline. Let's pause for a moment in order to see how much we have accomplished."

The LMC's Design Department worked on four minor design projects. Ves and Gloriana assigned three design teams to every minor project, of which at least one consisted of Braves and one consisted of Erudites.

In the first couple of weeks, a lot of friction occurred between the Braves and the Erudites. The former preferred to work briskly while the latter wanted to be thorough. It took a lot of coddling from Ketis and Miles for the two groups of assistants to settle some of their differences.

By now, the Braves should have gotten into their groove. As long as none of the projects fell behind schedule, Ves didn't really care how the assistants organized themselves.

He gestured towards the Ninth Design Team. "Miss Rina Orion, please report the current status of the Crystal Lord Mark II Project."

The heavily mechanical augmentations on her body were partially visible to the n.a.k.e.d eye. This made her look like a cyborg. She looked just like any other citizen of the Coman Federation.

It was too bad the Coman Federation existed no longer. The sandmen engulfed the state before crashing headlong into the defensive lines of the Bright Republic and other prepared states.

The woman stood up. "The Crystal Lord Mark II Project is proceeding according to schedule, though our progress is uneven due to the addition of luminar technology."

Ever since Ves struck a deal with Master Willix, he gained access to exclusive MTA research on luminar or crystal builder race technology. Aside from improving his understanding of laser weapons, he also gained the capability to integrate better alien crystals in the design of the Crystal Lord.

Due to the sensitive nature of the classified MTA research data, only Ves and Gloriana worked with this new tech. Their busy schedules and lack of time meant that they couldn't contribute as much as they wanted to this project.

On the other hand, this freed up Rina and her fellow assistants from some of their duties, allowing them to invest more work in other aspects.

Since Ves had not upgraded its design spirit yet, he refrained from engaging in any spiritual engineering. He still needed to see how the upgraded Crystal Leader turned out before he knew what kind of glow and triggered ability he wanted to impart in the mech.

Even without them, Ves still believed the Crystal Lord Mark II could make a substantial impact on the battlefield.

"What are the most serious challenges facing this project?"

"There are several problems slowing down our work. The lack of coordination between the work on the luminar crystals and the rest of the mech design makes it difficult for us to expect what is necessary. Another problem is the lack of testing facilities. Even if we are far from fabricating a prototype, it is still useful to produce some incomplete models and test their performance under specific circumstances. The last significant issue we are dealing with is trying to elevate its performance as much as possible in order to justify its high sales price."

"I'm already aware of those issues." Ves replied and waved his hand. "The Crystal Lord Mark II won't be easy to sell, but as long as we enhance its value through combining superior performance and a unique glow, it will have a place in the market."

They discussed some more issues, allowing the rest of the Braves to gain a better understanding of the state of the Crystal Lord Mark II Project. Occasionally, they even provided some feedback!

Ves turned to Moltar Ringer, the team leader of the Fifth Design Team. "Report on the Sanctuary Project."

"It's proceeding slightly ahead of schedule." The former Reinaldan spoke. "As a third-class space knight, it is not that complex compared to other spaceborn mech types. Since the Sanctuary's main selling is its glow, we focused on designing a durable support mech that is mobile enough to move around but also defensible enough to withstand significant attacks."

The projection of the incomplete Sanctuary design showed a mech that shared some resemblance to the Blessed Squire.

The latter may be a second-class landbound knight mech, but they both centered around the utility they could provide.

For this reason, the Sanctuary followed many of the same design choices that Ves and Gloriana applied on the Blessed Squire. This meant that the sanctuary was decent in mobility and defense.

Just like the Blessed Squire, the Sanctuary possessed a good amount of endurance. A lot of energy cells filled up its capacity, allowing the space knight to maneuver and provide its glow to friendlies and enemies alike for the duration of an entire space engagement.

"The biggest downside of this mech is its very low offensive threat." Moltar stated. "The Sanctuary is paired with a very large and heavy tower shield. This not only slows down the mech, but also makes melee combat unwieldy. The sword that it holds in its other hand serves more as a measure of last resort than a primary weapon. In fact, we believe it is better for the Sanctuary to hold its heavy shield with both arms."

Ves nodded in understanding. "This can't be helped. Mechs can only be good in so many areas, and prioritizing defense while ensuring decent mobility means the acceleration, range of motion, agility and reaction speed of the Sanctuary has sunk to the bottom. This is a price that I can accept as long as the mech is already useful without ever needing to attack."

They could have paired the Sanctuary with a rifle instead of a sword, but the accuracy and overall offensive performance of the mech wouldn't be great. Providing it with a laser pistol was already sufficient.

So far, the Sanctuary did not stand out as a mech design at all. Its current strengths and weaknesses did not result in a product that the market would embrace.

Ves still needed to create a new spiritual product that possessed the ability to stifle other glows. Once he formed the design spirit for the Sanctuary, he could quickly round out this minor project.

He was a bit unsure whether he should publish this mech right away, though. Right now was a sensitive period for him as numerous Masters sought to develop solutions that countered his glows.

It would be pretty stupid to publish a mech onto the market that just happened to point out a possible solution!

Chapter 2255 - Dukan French

Both the Crystal Lord Mark II Project and the Sanctuary Project risked losing direction because Ves had not begun to work on their spiritual properties.

While his assistants would still be able to complete the technical designs of the two mechs, the lack of glows and design spirits meant that none of his people were completely aligned to their projects.

Ves already noticed this because he often had to clean up after the messes the assistants left behind in the spiritual foundations of his mech designs.

Even if he taught them how to focus their minds and free their minds from distracting thoughts, their insufficient concentration and lack of awareness meant that they deposited plenty of pollution.

This was a persistent problem that Ves always had to address in person. No other mech designer was able to design as focused as him, because he could immediately perceive the consequences of his own sloppiness.

Not even Gloriana, who prided herself on her precision and thoroughness, could keep a spiritual foundation pure!

Ves knew that he couldn't address his problem in person in the long run. He was a busy mech designer and would only become more preoccupied once he advanced to Senior or Master.

He felt as if he was a cleaning bot assigned to a decrepit bathroom in some pirate base. Even if the toilets were perfectly functional, the careless pirates and the hopeless slaves didn't always follow instructions.

When pirates spilled some of their messes onto the floor, which they always did, Ves the cleaning bot had to hover out in order to remove them! Failing to do so would ruin the bathroom!

Thinking about this analogy sparked an interesting idea in his mind.

What if he could automate this process? What if he created some spiritual construct or something that would automatically wipe away the incongruities?

Ves noted down this idea in his implant. This wasn't the time to go into it and he hadn't reached the point where he was unable to pay attention to every minor project.

He turned his attention back to Moltar. "The Sanctuary is not as challenging to design as the other mechs in the pipeline, so I expect more from you and your team. Don't think that the way forward is smooth sailing. I will provide some specific feedback to you later on how to improve some of the areas that look a bit iffy."

"Yes, sir." Moltar obediently bowed his head.

Over the course of the Sanctuary Project, Ves hoped that Moltar would suggest something new or interesting. His chosen specialization was signal disruption, which meant that he should have a good affinity with a mech that sought to still every glow.

It turned out that Ves expected too much from him. His progress in his chosen field still hadn't left the starting line, which meant it would take a good amount of years before Moltar even came close to advancing to Journeyman.

At the very least he hadn't wasted his time up until now. Moltar possessed quite a broad range of knowledge due to all of the books he studied. He just needed to transition from learning to innovation. No matter how pathetic the results, every Apprentice had to start somewhere with their original research.

Ves quickly moved on to Catherine Evenson, who led one of the design teams assigned to the Ferocious Piranha Project.

"Our work is proceeding exactly on schedule." She began. "As a spaceborn light skirmisher, we have tried our best to turn it into a peak performance machine that can disrupt and assassinate enemy elements. While we don't have its adapted fear glow to work with, we believe that the mech should be more than capable of disrupting the rhythm of enemy mech pilots."

"How is the endurance of the design?"

"Pretty bad, even if we account for its generous budget. It's not suitable for extended deployments and can't perform too many attack runs." Catherine looked a bit helpless at this admission.

"This is a deliberate design choice on our part, Miss Evenson. You don't have to feel too ashamed at this shortcoming. We just have to make sure that the mech provides sufficient value in the short time that it is active."

In this regard, the Ferocious Piranha possessed the opposite performance profile to the Sanctuary.

Part of this contrast emerged due to their diverging roles.

The Ferocious Piranha had to leverage its terror glow to disrupt and break enemy formations in the shortest amount of time.

The Sanctuary did not engage in any risky maneuvers. Instead, it was merely expected to keep up with friendly formation while staying alive as long as possible.

Another reason to design these two mechs in opposite directions was the capacity they boasted. A light skirmisher did not possess a lot of internal space for energy cells and other components that increased their run time.

Space knights were much less limited in this aspect. Even if much of their volume consisted of armor plating, they were still big enough to fit plenty of energy cells inside.

Knowing that a light skirmisher like the Ferocious Piranha would never be able to last hours on the battlefield, Ves and Gloriana did not even attempt to do so. It was already good enough for the mech to be able to maneuver around and engage in medium-intensity combat for thirty minutes straight.

Perhaps the only saving grace for light skirmishers such as the Ferocious Piranha was that they expended much less energy. Their lighter mass allowed them to accelerate with ease, which meant that their flight systems didn't have to be as powerful and wasteful as those of bigger mechs.

Another mitigating factor was its budget. While the Ferocious Piranha cost 50 percent more than the Doom Guard, its size and dimensions were considerably smaller!

This allowed the design teams to implement a much better armor system to the light skirmisher. Even if it looked thin and fragile, its compressed armor meant that it shouldn't go down after suffering a couple of direct hits!

The situation of the Ferocious Piranha was relatively close to the Valkyrie Redeemer in that regard. The latter might be a medium mech, but both of them emphasized mobility.

The Valkyrie Redeemer actually boasted much better armor that could withstand much more damage. The only problem was that it was a second-class mech designed to fight against the best the Friday Coalition could muster. The firepower it faced was either very powerful or very varied, which made it difficult for the Hexer marauder mech to remain intact.

Third-class mech combat was much less intense. The Ferocious Piranha should enjoy plenty of freedom on how to act. Its thin but resilient armor plating provided the mech with enough survivability to escape intact after performing a risky attack run.

Overall, the Ferocious Piranha was supposed to be the offensive counterpart to the Doom Guard. It allowed its owners to project the Doom Guard's characteristic terror

aura directly to the enemy. The main charm of it was its ability to induce fear without hitting any friendlies.

Ves had actually done some work in this area. The theoretical premise for the spaceborn light skirmisher's glow wasn't all that complicated. He did not need to birth an entirely new design spirit such as in the Sanctuary Project nor upgrade an existing one such as in the Crystal Lord Mark II Project.

He just had to combine Zeigra, Nyxie and Qilanxo in a threesome.

"Wait, that sounds wrong." He quietly muttered.

He already experimented with combining them. The results weren't pretty.

Trying to balance two antagonistic design spirits wasn't all that difficult. Adding another one in the mix immediately complicated matters!

The main problem was that their strengths were not even.

Zeigra was by far the weakest of the three.

Qilanxo was very strong since she used to be a sacred god that lived for multiple centuries.

As for Nyxie, his strength already exceeded that of the former despite being constrained by the Ancient Sarcophagus!

What Ves sought to accomplish was to protect the mech pilot of the Ferocious Piranha and any friendlies from becoming affected by the terror glow.

THis meant that Qilanxo had to resist both Zeigra and Nyxie.

When Ves made her presence strong, Zeigra's presence became completely suppressed despite his heavy footprint in the design while Nyxie merely drew even!

When he weakened her presence, her influence dropped so that Zeigra could breath. Unfortunately, Nyxie easily pierced passed her barriers at that point!

As a result, Ves had to solve a very complex puzzle by manipulating and balancing out the strengths of three different design spirits. Their changing reactions and their own peculiarities made it difficult for Ves to find a sweet spot where the Ferocious Piranha exhibited the glow that he specified.

It was only a matter of time before he solved this puzzle. Ves did not feel the need to be concerned.

He turned his attention back to Catherine. "Are there any issues that are troubling you and your design team?"

The former Sentinel noblewoman took her time to answer.

"The Ferocious Piranha's projected performance is very impressive. It is just..."

"Expensive?" Ves smiled in a teasing way. "It's deliberately made that way in order to increase the value of its glow. Making the mech tougher and integrating higher-quality components in its design is an added bonus. No matter what, the value of this mech already exceeds several ordinary light skirmishers put together."

Of course, whether the market would see it that way was not entirely clear. One of the potential problems that might occur was that the release of the Sanctuary or some other mech that could restrain glows countered the Ferocious Piranha too well.

If the light skirmisher's glow no longer became a factor, then it devolved into a very expensive light mech. While its technical performance parameters were mostly good, it wouldn't achieve as much once its greatest advantage had been stripped.

Ves inwardly shrugged. He needed to become accustomed to the idea that his mechs might lose their glows. His machines could no longer reign over the battlefield with impunity very soon.

He directed his attention to the team leader that worked on the final minor project.

"How is the Chiron faring?"

"The Chiron Project is doing well. The two Erudite design teams deserve much of the credit. The technical complexity of designing an adjustable, morphing teaching mech is very daunting. All of us are forced to spend a lot of time on designing the different mechanisms."

Ves nodded. "Designing a mech that does not stay in a single form is always difficult to design. What do you think about the budget?"

"It's a lifesaver to us." Dukan French replied. "With 6 million hex credits, we can outfit the Chiron with excellent, sturdy materials that possess a high tolerance for abuse. The current iteration of the Chiron would have never been as feasible if it was made out of cheaper materials."

"That's not a good way to approach the Chiron's design, Mr. French. We need to get away from our dependence on using the Chiron's superior fault tolerance as a buffer for our failures. The mech needs to work even if its frame was made of materials that are just a third as strong."

The team leader reluctantly nodded. "We are trying, but it will take time."

Dukan French happened to be one of the mech designers that Ves recruited right away without undergoing any of the bravery tests. He who possessed amazing spiritual potential and used to be a bright talent as well.

The reason why he ended up joining the Larkinson Clan was that he used to be a citizen of the Chuko Republic!

Ves remembered visiting the state on his previous tour. He had already sensed plenty of decline back then. Dukan French was one of the local Chukans who managed to get out quickly enough to escape the butchering of the state by its three greedy neighbors.

Though Dukan possessed plenty of talent, Ves found that the former Chukan lacked a bit of passion and resolve. Hopefully, spending more time in the Nyxian Gap would remedy this problem.

Chapter 2256 - Mirror Raiders

Two light carriers slowly flew past the asteroids as they made their way to a famous pirate stronghold.

The Bloody Fang and the Cruel Intention were light carriers that served as the main possessions of the Mirror Raiders, a small and forgettable pirate outfit. There were so many different pirate gangs operating in the Nyxian Gap that it didn't matter if the Mirror Raiders possessed no prior history.

Due to the inherent instability of pirate society and the devastating consequences of losing battles, a lot of pirates were used to forming and disbanding outfits within the span of a few years.

The larger pirate organizations that managed to build and protect a stronghold possessed much more permanency. Once they began to become productive members of the rudimentary pirate economy of the Nyxian Gap, they were no longer under the threat of falling apart due to suffering a single, devastating mishap.

Not everyone could be like the Dry Snakes. Bottom feeder outfits that barely managed to eke out a living were much more common.

In that regard, the Mirror Raiders were slightly better off despite their damaged state. They had two sh.i.p.s instead of one, and both of them were light carriers. Even though they suffered moderate 'battle losses' that dwindled their protection to just 57 mechs, that still provided them with enough strength to fend off many opportunistic enemies!

Even so, the carriers were not in good shape. The Cruel Intention still looked rather decent, as most of the damage only marred her hull plating. The Bloody Fang was worse off as one of her thrusters suffered some direct hits that impaired her mobility.

What was worse was that the rest of the Bloody Fang's propulsion system had begun to deteriorate!

Any naval engineer who looked at the Bloody Fang would immediately know that the ship would soon become dead in the water if she did not receive timely repairs.

The damaged pirate ships along with the decent but shabby-looking pirate mechs that escorted them looked no different from any other pirate outfit that was down on its luck.

That did not mean the Mirror Raiders was on the verge of falling apart. Their battle scars told of a hard fought battle which they eventually won. A considerable amount of containers rested in the cargo holds of the Bloody Fang and the Cruel Intention. Each of them was filled with either Kavenit or a random assortment of other valuable minerals.

This was the capital the Mirror Raiders relied upon to replenish their strength and rise up from their setback.

Before their arrival at Ulimo Base, the five most important members of this fake pirate outfit gathered in a meeting room aboard the Bloody Fang.

Ketis wore her upgraded Rising Red Dragon that had been decorated with numerous pirate trophies. She looked completely unlike a mech designer with her large laser pistol and her broad cutlass.

She now went by Avery, and her official function was infantry captain. Absolutely no one should ever be able to know that she was technically adept and a very capable mech designer!

Dietrich wore the lighter Sparous Vize which had been modified to look deliberately more gauche. It looked like a poor pirate's attempt at adding some class onto a serviceable suit of combat armor.

He played the role of Bo, the heir to the Mirror Raiders and a slightly foolhardy and inexperienced pirate.

Sitting quietly next to him was Lieutenant Sodo Rodan, a Black Cat intelligence officer trained by Calabast. While he didn't excel in fighting, he was very good in hacking and communications. He played a key role in trying to scope out Ulimo Citadel's defenses.

Leaning against the side of the bulkhead was Lieutenant Sendra, a rough-looking woman who clearly hailed from the Swordmaidens. She only looked kindly at Ketis and

her fellow Swordmaidens. She put up a gruff face to everybody else, which didn't make her very popular.

Sendra took on the guise of Captain Itris, the strongest mech pilot and the second-in-command of the Mirror Raiders.

The final person to enter the compartment was Lieutenant-Commander Abis Firelight, a mech officer of the Flagrant Vandals.

Major Verle chose the commanding officer of the Mirror Raiders carefully. After contemplating several options from several mech forces, he settled on Abis. Not only did Verle know him well, but he was also known as a calm, thoughtful leader who rarely made any mistakes.

Though it sounded rather strange to put someone timid in charge of the Mirror Raiders, Major Verle and several other people believed that acting too boldly in Ulimo Citadel was just a recipe for disaster!

Abis adopted the role of Commander Domis, the founder and leader of the Mirror Raiders. His history was a bit murky, but he possessed obvious military traits which suggested that he was a military veteran or deserter.

All of them were Larkinsons. All of them were in disguise.

"From the moment we split up from the task force, our mission has begun." Abis began. "Please embody your role as best as possible and do not let down our guard. Call each other by the new names that we have received, but do your best to avoid them as much as possible. The only way to minimize mistakes is deprive them of opportunities."

The other four nodded in acknowledgement.

"Let us begin by reviewing our initial steps. Our first hurdle is to pass the initial inspections and land at our designated zone. Then we need to pay our fees and arrange transportation to the marketplace. Once there, we need to establish a foothold in the local community while ostensibly seeking repairs for our damaged sh.i.p.s and mechs."

This was a simple plan, but a lot could go wrong at every step of the way. With their 57 refurbished pirate mechs, here was no way they could last more than a minute against 3,000 enemy mechs!

Lieutenant Rodan spoke first. "Passing through the initial checkpoints should not pose a problem. Our sh.i.p.s contain few traces that allude to the Crona Lords or the Larkinson Clan. The only uncertainty is that Ulimo Citadel is on high alert at the moment. It is very likely that the pirate patrols will perform much harsher inspections. We might also be

limited by the amount of mechs, sh.i.p.s and personnel we are allowed to bring to the surface."

"We will adapt according to the situation. We can do no better than that. If the Dry Snakes impose too many demands, then I have the discretion to abort the mission and turn us back."

The meeting proceeded as the five Mirror Raiders discussed various problems. Many of them were already aware of what they faced. They merely brought the issues up again in order to refresh their memories and make sure that everyone was on the same page.

The discussion soon turned to another important step, which was to establish some sort of footing in Ulimo Citadel.

"While the Dry Snakes don't like it when stronger pirate groups knock on Ulimo's doors, they are actually quite tolerant towards smaller groups. The public areas of Ulimo is home to tens of thousands of people. Most of them consist of unwanted pirates, escaped slaves, lost refugees or descendants of the above. This has led to the emergence of a chaotic city that is ruled by several gangs."

"That sounds messy." Dietrich remarked. "How does this benefit the Dry Snakes?"

Lieutenant Sendra snorted. "The livelier a pirate base, the more secure it is to visit. If the Dry Snakes and their lackeys are the only one who occupy Ulimo, then that alone would scare away any visitors. There is no protection against an unscrupulous base owner! It's much easier to get rid of their victims as well."

A bigger base that was home to a thriving community of outsiders provided a lot of reassurance to pirates. This meant that the pirate authorities protected the property rights and other rights of outsiders. Another benefit was that it was much harder to cover up a misdeed on their part with so many people around!

This was good to the Mirror Raiders in several ways. They could not only blend in with the local pirate community, but also seek to infiltrate it. The best option would be to investigate one of the strongest factions and attack the weakest ones so that the Mirror Raiders could take over their position!

Ketis, Sendra and Rodan knew that this presented them with the best follow-up opportunities to investigate the restricted sections of Ulimo Citadel. The Mirror Raiders needed to join the hierarchy of Ulimo before they could even begin to do anything else!

"I say we should just march up to the weakest-looking local gang and just beat them up straight away!" Sendra shouted. "We don't have much time and we don't need to delay that much. All of us are strong. All of us are prepared. There is no way that the weakest faction in Ulimo can resist our attacks!"

Abis held up his hand. "This option is too risky!"

"How so?" The Swordmaiden questioned back. "Pirates don't care too much about laws and rules. The Dry Snakes won't stop us if we launch an unprovoked attack. In fact, they might even cheer us on! Strife among the lowlives who rule the public marketplace keeps them in check. If the local factions are constantly eying each other, then that means they spend less time questioning the authorities from above!"

"That does not mean we should initiate a surprise attack just after entering Ulimo!" Commander Abis exasperatingly replied. "There are better ways to usurp a local gang's place."

As a Black Cat, Rodan agreed with this assertion. "We can employ trickery and subterfuge to undermine one of the local gangs. From assassinating an important cadre to inciting competitors to gang up on our target, there are many ways to effect change without directly shooting at them. We might even avoid most of the blame."

"Too slow!"

Though Commander Abis wanted to adopt a low-key posture upon arrival, not everyone agreed. While he was nominally in charge of the Mirror Raiders, his authority was actually rather weak.

This was one of the adverse consequences of mashing different people from different forces together. No one knew each other well aside from the folks who already worked and fought alongside each other.

Dietrich slowly began to frown as he witnessed the growing contradiction between Commander Abis and Lieutenant Sendra. The Flagrant Vandals and the Swordmaidens may have a history with each other, but their mindsets differed a lot.

The Vandals still possessed a core of military discipline and expectations, while the Swordmaidens had always clung onto their savage pirate heritage.

Still, despite their quarrels, Dietrich believed that they knew better than to mess around. Once they arrived at Ulimo, they all needed to cover each other's backs.

"Ketis." Commander Abis changed the topic. "Aside from Lieutenant Rodan and his Black Cats, we will be leaning on you to keep your eye out for any details the task force needs to know."

"I know what to do." She replied. "I will do my best to stay in the background and pretend to be a dumb guard."

"I'll assign you to act as Dietrich's bodyguard. He will be heading out with a small group in order to make new 'friends' among the locals. It would be best if we can befriend a

direct member of the Dry Snakes, but that will be challenging. Whatever you do, don't stray in the more dangerous parts of Ulimo. From what we know, the security and monitoring system of the marketplace is quite good, but the more remote portions can be jammed long enough to launch an ambush and leave before the base patrols arrive to enforce order."

The monitoring system mainly existed to prevent pirates from unleashing mass destruction. As long as the visitors and locals refrained from making excessive moves, the Dry Snakes didn't care whether someone shot another person on the street.

The law and order on Ulimo was very mixed!

Chapter 2257 - Thorough Inspection

The Mirror Raiders slowly limped towards the vicinity of Ulimo Citadel.

The Bloody Fang battle damage was not cosmetic at all. The inherent instability of her propulsion system caused the ship to vibrate, shudder and sometimes even skip. It was as if she was a wounded pig limping back to safety while leaving a bloody trail on the ground!

Due to their damaged state, the Mirror Raiders adopted a defensive posture. Their mechs might not be in the best of shape, but with danger potentially lurking around every corner, the 'pirates' did not dare to drop their vigilance!

Their course led them closer and closer to Ulimo, but not in a direction that suggested they were familiar with the route. They acted as if they stole the route from hacking an enemy ship's navigational database or beating it out of a captured ship captain.

This disguise appeared to work. The Dry Snakes soon noticed the arrival of a small outfit and diverted a patrol. A small frigate and a squad of mechs slowly came into view. Their green and yellow coating along with the symbol of a snake immediately caused the Mirror Raiders to slow their approach.

The pirate frigate transmitted a message to the newcomers.

[HALT! YOU ARE ON APPROACH TO ULIMO CITADEL. CEASE TRANSLATING FORWARD AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED FOR INSPECTION. RETRACT YOUR MECHS AND SHUT THEM DOWN. TRANSMIT YOUR CARGO MANIFESTS, YOUR MECH ROSTER AND YOUR PERSONNEL ROSTER WITHIN 120 SECONDS. FAILURE TO COMPLY WILL LEAD TO BLOCKING YOUR ENTRY.]

As if expecting these demands, the Mirror Raiders quickly complied. All of their mechs that currently guarded the two sh.i.p.s meekly withdrew into the hangar bays. This was a fairly time-consuming process as only so many mechs were able to land at a time.

During this time, the two carriers also accelerated backwards in order to stall their forward momentum. This was no joke. If the vessels strayed too close to Ulimo without undergoing any inspections, the Dry Snakes would definitely shoot them to pieces!

After some time, the Dry Snake frigate coasted forward. The pirates affixed a large, modified sensor array on her bow. The vessel soon began to pump a prodigious amount of power to the sensor array, causing it to perform powerful active scans that penetrated straight through the hulls of the two carriers!

Such a brute force scanning method was very invasive and discomforting. Though there were ways to block or frustrate the scanning, the Mirror Raiders did not dare to voice a protest.

Along with scanning the newcomers, the Dry Snake frigate also dispatched a shuttle. After landing inside the cramped hangar bay of the Bloody Fang, a pair of inspectors in uniformed vacsuits emerged from the vehicle.

Lieutenant-Commander Abis Firelight of the Flagrant Vandals along with some of his officers greeted them immediately.

Unlike the clean and utilitarian uniforms they wore when they were part of Task Force Predator, they had all changed into flamboyant, trophy-laden dress uniforms.

Their simple black and white uniforms were barely visible under all of the bones, banners, pelts, emblems and other trophies they adorned on their bodies!

In most cases, it was easy to judge the status of a pirate. The Dry Snake inspectors quickly glanced at the quality and quantity of the trophies adorning the officers of the Mirror Raiders and made a silent impression.

In their experienced judgement, the Mirror Raiders were experienced but not that successful. None of the trophies on their officers were exceptionally valuable or came from strong opponents. The fact that they dared to wear so much was a signal that they had been in the pirate business for some time.

"Welcome aboard the Bloody Fang." Abis welcomed. "I am Commander Domis, the boss of the Mirror Raiders. We are seeking a harbor where we can repair our ship, buy some mechs and recruit new crew. We are not short on Kavenit."

The lead inspector smiled. The open tone of 'Commander Domis' meant that the Mirror Raiders weren't trying to hide their condition. This underscored their submission towards a stronger and more superior pirate organization.

Only the most deranged among their 'noble' profession ranted and raved against stronger pirates. Those idiots that dragged down the reputation of pirates never lasted long, though there always seemed to be more taking their place.

"We have detected plenty of Kavenit in your holds. I am sure that you will be able to obtain what you desire." The inspector spoke in a firm but slightly amiable tone. "We are slightly concerned about some of your cargo and the areas that appear fuzzy on our scans. Please allow us to inspect your two carriers. We cannot allow any threats to approach Ulimo."

"Please feel free to observe our ship. Mind you, some of those areas contain.. sensitive goods."

"We understand. We care not for your business. Our job is only to ascertain your threat to our base."

The inspectors took their time to do their jobs. If not for their piratized uniforms, this process looked no different from the inspections carried out in civilized space!

Along the way, the pair of inspectors behaved very professionally and did not ask any questions that did not relate to their duties. When Abis attempted to slip a K-bar into their hands, the lead inspector silently accepted it but did not alter his standard.

This was an unspoken custom among savvy pirates. 'Commander Domis' did not bribe the inspectors in order to gain an exception or be allowed to bring something dangerous into Ulimo. He merely wanted to grease the wheels and avoid any preventable delays.

Whether the inspectors intended to stir up some trouble in the first place was not important. All that mattered was that the Dry Snakes were so overwhelmingly powerful that they could do anything they wanted to Mirror Raiders. The only reason why the Dry Snakes refrained from doing so was to keep Ulimo attractive, but that did not mean that they could put up a fuss!

Fortunately, the lead inspector appreciated the K-bar enough to provide some helpful tips.

When they entered one of the hidden compartments, they faced a trio of very special bombs that were secured in their own separate protective and shock-absorbing harnesses!

The faces of the inspectors grew slightly grave.

"You are not allowed to land on Ulimo with these nuclear bombs in your cargo holds."

Abis looked reluctant. "These are our trump cards. I heard that the landing zones are placed far apart from the main base. Surely these bombs can't threaten you at all, right?"

"I don't know who made these bombs or where you have obtained them, but their yields are powerful enough to inflict serious damage to the asteroid where Ulimo rests upon!"

"Really?!"

Ves secretly cobbled these nuclear bombs together from the warheads taken out of the disarmed Alpha Bombs of the Crona Lords. Though Ves did not specialize in nuclear bombs, he knew enough about explosives to be able to build fairly simple bombs himself.

He deliberately added in some other energetic exotics into the mix in order to alter the distinctive composition of his new bombs. He had no idea if the exact formula of the Alpha Bomb was unique to the Crona Lords.

After a quick discussion, the lead inspector issued a demand. "You have three options. You can leave this perimeter entirely. You can allow one of your sh.i.p.s to stay outside our security perimeter. You can land both sh.i.p.s on Ulimo, but you will have to temporarily surrender these nuclear bombs into our care."

No pirate liked to be robbed of their trump cards. That was their strongest deterrent and guarantee of safety against stronger opponents!

Abis acted as if he found it difficult to accept the three options that he had been presented with. However, he also appeared to be in control of himself. It was as if he already expected to hear such demands.

"I choose the last." He squeezed out of his lips. His face looked pained. "Where will you take my bombs?"

"Do not be concerned, Commander Domis. Your bombs will not be confiscated. We are merely holding them for you until you are done with your business on Ulimo. We shall store them carefully in one of our outer vaults dug into one of the many asteroids in this asteroid field."

This was critical news! Abis only stirred a tiny bit. The existence of these vaults and the practiced way in which the Dry Snakes demanded to take over custody of dangerous superweapons meant that their vaults must contain quite a number of taboo weapons!

"What are the fees." Abis asked.

The inspector grinned. A lot of visitors overlooked this seemingly trivial issue. "A single K-bar is enough to guarantee the safety of your bombs for a couple of months."

"We will not be staying at Ulimo for long. I will prepare several hundred K-coins instead."

"Good. You may deliver the coins to us when we complete this inspection."

They exited the hidden compartment and headed down to the brig. Along the way, the lead inspector gave out another tip.

"Oh, by the way, our vaults contain a sizable number of 'unowned' trump cards. If you are interested in bolstering your arsenal, please let us know."

"What happened to their previous owners?" Abis asked.

"They fell apart and lost their claim. They broke one of our rules and suffered our punishment. They traded their secret weapons to another pirate group who left before receiving their purchases. They no longer possessed any sh.i.p.s to take their goods away. They made a foolish gamble and lost their bets. They fought in our arena and lost their lives."

There were many different reasons why so many pirate outfits left lost their ownership of these valuable trump cards. The causes mentioned by the lead inspector proved that Ulimo Citadel was not safe! Every visitor needed to pay close attention to their lives and possessions.

"How can we acquire these powerful weapons?"

"We conduct a periodic auction where a selection of these goods are put on the block." The inspector proudly explained. "We also import these types of weapons from our other partners, so there is always something that fits your budget and your needs. I heard that we have recently received a batch of ship-grade lasers that can be mounted on light carriers such as yours. For a reasonable commission, we can install these weapons onto your sh.i.p.s. The Gap has grown more dangerous as of late. Your bombs may be powerful, but they are also consumables. You would do well to add a more sustainable trump card to your arsenal."

Bribing the inspector sure paid off! This was critical news that the Larkinson Clan needed to know as soon as possible!

Abis did not hide his excitement too much. The inspectors probably thought the Mirror Raiders were desperate to acquire the powerful laser weapons.

"When is the next auction? How can we take part? With all of the unrest stirring in the Gap and crazies such as the Larkinson Clan rampaging in Maynard Fields, there is no use keeping all of our Kavenit in our cargo holds. The sooner we obtain those lasers, the greater our chances of survival!"

The inspectors stirred a bit as soon as Abis deliberately mentioned the Larkinson Clan.

By now, practically every pirate had heard how the Larkinson Clan completely broke the status quo in Maynard Fields. Their strength and ruthlessness turned them into even greater demons, on par with the bigger pirate alliances that truly ruled the Nyxian Gap!

Even the inspectors expressed a bit of fear.

"Don't talk about the Larkinson Clan when you arrive at Ulimo. Mentioning it will only spread more panic. There is no reason for you to fear these ignorant brutes. Ulimo Citadel is fully prepared to repel the Larkinsons. If they think that Ulimo is just as exploitable as Xiphard, then they are sorely mistaken. Even their pet Hexers shall fall if they dare to enter our security perimeter!"

Though the inspector might be exaggerating, Abis did not think so. The Dry Snakes seem fully confident that they were able to defeat the full might of Task Force Predator!

Chapter 2258 - Don't Eat The Food

The inspectors examined a lot of suspicious compartments that were difficult to scan. Some of them contained sensitive or valuable goods.

This was normal pirate behavior. It would have been odd if the Mirror Raiders didn't squirrel their most valuable trade goods in these hidden nooks and crannies.

The only concern for the inspectors was to see if they posed a threat to their base. The value and providence of these valuables were not their concern, and the Dry Snakes weren't stupid enough to rob them from their visitors.

The Dry Snakes already earned plenty of Kavenit coins from collecting fees and taxes! This was the kingly way of doing business, no matter if it took place in a lawless region like the Nyxian Gap or in a bastion of civilization at Centerpoint.

The pirates, at least the clever ones, had more in common with the MTA than most people thought!

They inspectors paused a bit once they reached the brig. Locked inside the cells were dozens of prisoners who appeared to be in awful shape.

They were obviously pirates or slaves that the Mirror Raiders had captured. What was odd about them was that they weren't physically injured.

Instead, they looked broken or listless. Some of their eyes looked dull and their bodies rarely moved. Others twitched and shook at irregular intervals.

Some of them even spoke gibberish.

"Gghwehwll."

"Aughweofwe."

The inspectors frowned at the prisoners as he passed by the cells. "What is wrong with these prisoners?"

"We were a little too rough with them." Abis casually dismissed the issue as if it was just a trivial issue. "We considered voiding them into space, but they should be worth at least something, so we're keeping them here until we can sell them at Ulimo."

The lead inspector shook his head. "Your merchandise is spoiled. While their physical states look decent, they are no better than clones. Slaves are valued by their capabilities. What can they do if their minds are broken? Hardly anyone is interested in low-quality goods like these! If you can sell them to anyone at Ulimo, I suggest you bring your slaves to our nutrient processing plant and sell them for a modest price. We can at least recycle their biological matter to produce a couple of batches of nutrient packs."

Abis silently reminded himself to tell his crew not to eat any of the food sold at Ulimo.

"I'll look around." He replied non-committedly. "It took too much effort to capture and subdue these slaves. I don't want to end up with a loss."

"Suit yourself."

The inspection proceeded on to the bays and stables that held the mechs of the Mirror Raiders.

None of the machines looked impressive. The pirate mechs that the Larkinson Clan had refurbished to look even rougher and trashier all appeared as if they had been serviced by three-year old monkeys.

The mech technicians that were supposed to repair all of the battle damage were instead spending their time on drinking beer, playing Pirate Empires or injecting their bodies with recreational stimulants!

The deplorable sight immediately caused Abis to grow angry! He stormed over and kicked a stoned chief technician!

"You lazy gits! What the hell are you doing at this time?! Do you think that you can put down your work just because we've reached safety?!"

"B-B-But boss, can't we just hand over our mechs to the fixers at Ulimo and let them do all of the work?"

"We'll only get ripped off if we do that, and who knows what they will slip into our machines when we aren't looking! Now stand up and get your butts back into gear! We aren't stopping until we have finally landed on Ulimo!"

"Yes, commander!"

The mech technicians all grumbled and grudgingly went back to work. Their sloppy, lazy demeanor hardly grew weaker. As for those who were too out of their minds like the chief technician, it was impossible for them to perform their duties at this time!

The shameful sight embarrassed 'Commander Domis' quite a bit. Even so, the inspectors didn't say a word. They were mainly tasked with inspecting the mechs. They had already witnessed many sights like these in their positions.

Abis coughed. "As you can see, these are our mechs. They're not pretty, but they have not failed me so far. Once we patch them up, we'll be ready to fight anything."

The quality of the pirate mechs were actually quite decent. They were not as cheap or awful as the economy mechs used by bottom feeder pirate outfits.

In general, most of the mechs of the Mirror Raiders consisted of decent budget mechs on par with the likes of the Desolate Soldier. It was just that they suffered from varying degrees of corrosion, accumulated battle damage and fairly poor maintenance.

Against a brand new budget mech, these pirates mechs likely performed thirty percent worse!

While some of that was due to the recent 'battle' that the Mirror Raiders had fought, some of the problems stemming from lack of care truly dragged down the performance of the mechs by as much as ten to twenty percent.

This was one of the many reasons why pirates never fared too well against Peacekeeper outfits! The latter were better funded, possessed access to legal channels and could easily recruit some competent technical personnel.

"Mhmm." The lead inspector made a conclusion. "You are allowed to keep these mechs inside your sh.i.p.s, but must allow us to lock them once you land. You will not be allowed to activate your mechs or take them away without our express permission. Is that clear?"

Though Abis looked uncomfortable at the thought of being unable to defend himself with his mechs, he knew that this was a mandatory rule.

"You are free to do so. How much does that cost?"

"Right now, we charge two Kavenit coins per locked mech per day. We suggest you pay in advance. If you do not pay this fee in time, then do not blame us if we confiscate your mech!"

Abis winced at the thought. "We understand. I'll hand over a K-bar when we land."

The Mirror Raiders hadn't even landed on Ulimo yet, but already they were being swept by several fees!

Running out of money or valuables while remaining in the clutches of the Dry Snakes was a very bad idea. As long as the Mirror Raiders failed any payment, endless troubles might ensue!

Was the founder of Ulimo Citadel a Reinaldan or something?

The round of inspections soon ended without any remarkable events. The Bloody Fang and the Cruel Intention proceeded onwards at a controlled pace under heavy escort.

Along the way, a small pirate transport flew close in order to carry the three potent nuclear bombs of the Mirror Raiders to a remote vault built into one of the surrounding asteroids.

Soon enough, the two carriers traveled close enough to approach the moon-sized asteroid that hosted Ulimo up close!

A formidable amount of mechs, sh.i.p.s and fixed defenses patrolled the entire space. The sh.i.p.s that belonged to visiting pirate outfits meekly obeyed the instructions issued by the Dry Snakes and did not dare to stir any trouble.

With all of their fighting assets locked or taken away, there was no way for them to win even if they all simultaneously rebelled!

Moons came in various sizes and dimensions. Some were as big as terrestrial planets while others were about as big as a large island. The rocky asteroid that the pirates simply called Ulimo looked rather underwhelming.

It was big enough to exert a bit of gravity, but small enough for any ship to land on its surface without sustaining damage.

Under the guidance of what passed for traffic control in these parts, the Mirror Raider sh.i.p.s slowly descended and entered a large hall built into a high mountain range.

A dozen other vessels had already parked in this specific landing zone. Their markings and colors signified that they all belonged to separate pirate outfits.

Once a couple of clamps moved to anchor the two sh.i.p.s in place, the Mirror Raiders started to reach out to the Dry Snakes. Their sh.i.p.s were in bad shape and urgently needed repairs.

Large groups of Mirror Raiders began to exit their vessels. Each of them smelled the rusty air that was filled with various smells.

When Ketis and Dietrich stepped out in their exaggerated trophy-laden suits of combat armor, they both experienced different emotions when they breathed the air.

To Ketis, it smelled just like home.

Meanwhile, Dietrich shook with nervous tension. Now that they managed to land on Ulimo, their real mission had started. If any of the Mirror Raiders slipped up even once, their identities as Larkinsons might become exposed!

A squad of armored guards stepped behind him. As the supposed son and heir of Commander Domis, it was only fitting for him to be surrounded by formidable guards. Each of them exuded a ferocious or bloodthirsty vibe, causing them to resemble some of the crueller pirates in the Nyxian Gap!

The group waited for a moment until Abis, Lieutenant Sendra and Lieutenant Rodan both arrived with their own entourage of officers and guards.

"Let us enter the citadel. We have a lot of business to conduct." Abis remarked.

The large group of Mirror Raiders stuck together as they stepped aboard a transit vehicle. The bus proceeded to zip through a tunnel that led straight to the citadel at rapid speed.

Once the transit vehicle arrived at its destination, the Mirror Raiders stepped off and became astounded by the sight that greeted them at an instant.

A modest underground city unfolded before their eyes! Even though the ceiling was made out of nothing but carved rock, the lights affixed to them cast a rather pleasant shade onto the surface.

Tens of thousands of pirates resided in the city. Most of them weren't actually 'pirates' in the truest sense of the word. Most of them had been born in the Nyxian Gap and lived their entire lives in lawless space.

Despite the presence of violent criminals and cruel robbers in the boisterous underground city, the Mirror Raiders hardly noticed any signs of fighting or robbing.

Of course, that did not mean that the public area of Ulimo was safe. The large amount of Dry Snake patrols at the entrance of the city exerted a strong deterrence at any pirate who wanted to stir up trouble.

A few minutes passed as the Mirror Raiders slowly passed through the checkpoints and entered the city proper.

Street urchins ran through the alleys. P.r.o.s.t.i.t.u.t.es plied their services. A lonesome old man set up a market stall on the side of the street in order to sell a fresh batch of

locally-produced nutrient packs which were renowned for their unique texture and complex taste. Dozens of pirates quickly swarmed the stall and eagerly paid for their purchases in K-bits.

The value of a solid K-coin was quite high. Using them in mundane transactions was as ridiculous as paying an MTA credit for a simple shuttle transit!

Ketis grew a bit curious at the nutrient packs on sale. She knew that Ves was actually a big lover and a casual collector of them. Cheap and long-lasting, they fed the stomachs of a significant proportion of humanity every day!

Just as she was about to approach the stall, Abis reached out and halted her. "Don't buy any of the food on sale here."

"Yes, sir." Ketis obediently nodded.

If she was in her normal guise, she wouldn't pay attention to Flagrant Vandal officer. Sadly, she was just a simple guard right now. There was no excuse for her to disobey.

"Bo, explore the city and make some friends if you can. Make sure not to stray anywhere that looks sketchy."

Dietrich lazily saluted Abis. "Yes, dad."

"Be serious! Don't piss anyone off and don't throw your weight around. While you're making friends, we will be spending some of our spoils on buying some much-needed mechs and supplies. This is just the first day of our stay here. There is no need to do too much. Scout out the city first. We need to know the lay of the land before we do anything else."

The disguised Larkinsons eagerly explored the pirate city!

Chapter 2259 - Not Enough Room

While the Mirror Raiders scoped out Ulimo Citadel, the remainder of Task Force Predator had backed off in order to reduce the chances of discovery.

Though Ves constantly worried about Ketis, he really couldn't do much this far away. The only consolation he had was that Calabast dispatched a stealth shuttle bearing Lucky to the vicinity of Ulimo Citadel as backup.

He missed his cat a bit, but he didn't let the absence distract him from his many duties.

Aside from progressing his mech designs, he also paid a bit more attention to his subordinates.

Many of the Braves he recruited merely possessed a lot of potential at the start. Whether they would bloom or not in the LMC remained to be seen.

Luckily, every new hire in the LMC's Design Department adjusted well to their new life and job. None of them were unmotivated or neglected their work.

The enterprising Larkinson energy along with the subtle influence of the Larkinson Network made sure that each of them fostered genuine belonging to the Larkinson Clan.

Whether they l.u.s.ted after the rewards offered by the Larkinson Merit Exchange or wanted to offer their support to the clan, the assistants under his care all worked dutifully to keep their projects on schedule.

Enough time had passed for the differences to become clear.

For example, Catherine Evenson performed well enough to keep up with most of the Erudites when it came to solving complicated technical problems. Her noble temperament attracted the friendship of mech designers with better backgrounds.

Moltar Ringer exuberant unleashed his passion during every design session. His solutions were slightly more original and innovative as a result, though they weren't always executed well. He was still struggling to make something special out of his chosen specialty of signal disruption.

Rina Orion made few friends due to her cybernetic implants. Her design philosophy was very interesting, though. She specialized in targeting systems, which was something that was useful to all ranged mechs.

She had already accomplished a decent amount of progress in her nascent design philosophy before she joined the Larkinson Clan. After spending her merits on a select number of Clarion University textbooks, her understanding in her chosen field grew by leaps and bounds.

Aside from her competence, leadership ability and interesting specialty, Ves had another reason to pay attention to the former citizen of the Coman Federation.

She possessed spiritual potential. That was always remarkable, but hers was a little special.

It looked dim. For some reason, Ves felt as if he was looking at a starved puppy that had been leashed onto a pipe and left in the yard for hours or days.

Ves scratched his head at the perplexing sight.

Why did Rina possess such a defective spirituality?

From what he observed of her work, she was truly passionate and engaged in her craft and specialty. While Rina might be overly bossy towards the members of her design team, she didn't behave too excessively.

A mech designer like her should possess a more vigorous spiritual potential. While she may not be as talented as Dukan French, at the very least she should be slowly getting closer to advancing to Journeyman!

She presented an odd puzzle, and Ves felt the urge to take her aside and see what was wrong with her. He refrained from doing so after he figured that it might be weird to talk to her about a strange problem out of the blue.

For now, he intended to keep her in observation and monitor the changes to her spiritual potential. If it remained stagnant or began to deteriorate, then Ves would step in no matter whether it was appropriate or not. He did not wish to see a potential Journeyman get ruined by some weird spiritual affliction!

Aside from that, he also made sure to spend more time on guiding his two Larkinson seeds. Maikel and Zanthar were still too young to his liking, but they behaved like sponges as they observed the design teams at work.

Ves was also pleased with their studies. He had fed enough Attribute Candies to them to give them a leg up, but not so much as to distort or unbalance their personalities too much.

Their high Concentration allowed them to absorb knowledge from basic science textbooks for hours on end without getting distracted by their comms. Unlike many other boys their age, they did not play any virtual reality games or shared silly memes with their friends on Commbook during their study time.

Before Ves knew it, Maikel and Zanthar had already absorbed some fundamental knowledge that every mech design student learned in their first year at university.

He decided to call both of them into his office to discuss their future study trajectory.

"Maikel. Zanthar." Ves folded his hands over the desk. "The two of you have begun to dip your toes into mech design. While you have only studied the foundational sciences so far and have not yet performed any practical design exercises, I believe that both of you have already developed an impression at what is possible."

Maikel nodded. "It's really fascinating to learn how mechs are put together. Every day I see a mech, I think I understand a little more how and why it is designed that way."

"What about you, Zanthar?"

"There is something about building machines that can fight that is awesome. I can't wait to design my first real mech."

Both of them expressed genuine enthusiasm in mech design. It was difficult not to. Spending so much time in the design lab while occasionally mingling with Ves or the assistant mech designers increased their intimacy towards mech design.

Even if they didn't really understand what any of the mech designers were working on, simply witnessing the diligence they performed their craft was inspiring.

This was actually something that Ves deliberately set out to do. He did not want to waste his investment into the two adolescents.

By making them spend so much time in the design lab, Ves hoped that some of the passion and dedication of the assistants would rub off on them. It was like taking advantage of institutional isomorphism on a smaller scale!

However, at this stage in their learning, Ves did not want them to follow an ordinary study trajectory.

As his next batch of students, Ves wanted to turn them into innovative mech designers who weren't afraid of blazing their own trail!

From his observations of many low-ranking mech designers, Ves knew that they had to meet two requirements.

First, they needed to develop spiritual potential. So far, Ves didn't know how they emerged, but Maikel and Zanthar had plenty of time to foster their own potential. He could do nothing but facilitate their passion in mech design with the hope that this was one of the methods to develop spiritual potential.

Second, competent mech designers had to develop a mindset towards innovation. Even if human science was incredibly advanced, even if many innovations had already been done before, a mech designer needed to develop an unflinching conviction in their own inventions!

This was why Ves pushed Moltar towards researching and developing his own homegrown solutions in signal disruption.

Ves knew very well that if he wanted to buy a good jammer or interference device, he could just license a highly-optimized module from the MTA's internal catalog.

Yet that did not mean that the innovations of an Apprentice or Journeyman were obsolete. As long as their specialties developed to the point where they were able to augment their inventions with their own spirituality, the performance of their mechs reached a higher level!

In any case, it was far too easy for beginner mech designers to get caught up in the cycle of learning. Ves did not wish for Maikel and Zanthar to become accustomed to spending all of their time absorbing knowledge.

At some point, every capable mech designer had to generate new knowledge. This was the only way for them to become something more than an imitator whose future was limited.

Ves theorized that mech designers should start innovating in their first year at university. This was very early, but it was much harder to instill the correct mindset into his students when they grew older!

"Both of you must have developed a decent overview on the specialties that people of our profession can devote towards. Choosing a specialty is one of the most important choices in your lives. While I don't expect you to have made any solid choices, it is helpful to explore what inclinations you developed during your studies. Could you please tell me which fields interest you the most? Maikel, you go first."

"Oh." He grew more nervous. "Uhm, to be honest, I'm more interested in the glows of your mechs. It's so fascinating to see how they are alive despite their nature of machines. I.. I would like to learn how to design a mech as remarkable as yours."

Ves blinked. He should have expected such an answer.

He didn't know yet whether he was willing to pass on his core trade secrets. His design philosophy was very unique and he didn't even know if Maikel was capable of adopting the extreme mindset that Ves adopted whenever he thought about mech design.

He coughed. "You have a bright future ahead of you. Don't let success fool you into believing that you will become just as renowned as I. Try and find something that interests you that doesn't directly depend on another mech designer's work."

"What do you mean?" Maikel looked confused.

"I'll give you a quick example. If you are still interested in my design philosophy and what I can do, then don't try and develop the same design philosophy as mine. Only the direct disciples of very renowned Masters can do so boldly. You are better off finding a path that is more suitable to your interests."

"What if I don't want to do something different?" Maikel stubbornly asked.

Ves developed a bit of a headache after hearing that. Obviously, spending so much time around LMC mechs had turned Maikel into a devotee of his own work! This was not necessarily good!

"Every mech designer is different." Ves stated. "This means that some mech designers are better suited to some specialty than others. Right now, I don't believe that my specific field fits you best."

"If that's the case, why can't I change myself so that I do fit well with your field? Anyone can change as long as you work hard enough!"

That.. was true. Ves believed in this statement, which made it difficult to reject Maikel's suggestion.

He bowed his head. "Let's return to this topic when you progress your studies some more. Both of you have only scratched the surface of mech design so far. There are many more possibilities out there for the two of you to explore once you graduate into fully-fledged mech designers."

Both Larkinson seeds nodded.

"Zanthar, let's start with you. What interests you the most right now?"

"I.. uhm.." Zanthar grew a little nervous. "During this expedition, I got to take a look at big and powerful weapons. I am no stranger to mechs. Even though your LMC mechs are great, I'm rather bored of seeing them all day. It's only when we started attacking pirate bases that broke up the monotony. Seeing the Alpha Mines, the Omega Lasers and those other huge and powerful weapons up close is very exciting! The sheer might they contain is impressive! I... well.. I know it's wrong, but... I want to build something like that too one day. In a mech! Legally, of course!"

Ves glowered at Zanthar when he heard those words. The young man grew nervous.

"At least you are honest." Ves eventually said. "Not every interest is healthy, Zanthar. Let me note down your initial fascination as an admiration of extreme firepower. Taboo weapons aren't the only impressive weapons that mechs can wield. I highly suggest you expand your horizons. First and second-class mechs are very diverse when it comes to their armament!"

Though Ves believed that every mech designer should follow their passion, that did not mean he was okay with letting Zanthar go down a crooked path! The Larkinson Clan only possessed room for one war criminal!

Chapter 2260 - Ruination Witch

The Marrakath System slowly succ.u.mbed to the Hexers!

With the introduction of the amazing Blessed Squire model, the Wrathful Doves Mech Army Group embraced the new addition with remarkable speed.

Initially, DIVA pushed the Blessed Squire onto the Wrathful Doves through backroom deals and secret agreements with the upper ranks. Later on, the positive reactions of the rank-and-file mech pilots who drew strength from the new model ensured that no one would be able to reverse the tide.

No one within the Wrathful Doves wanted to deprive their fighting boys and women the incredible utility offered by this odd new supportive knight mech.

Even if its design was not as optimized as regular Hex Army models, the Blessed Squire somehow possessed its own slightly foreign charm. Even when word started to spread that a boy of all people played an integral role in its design, the Wrathful Doves simply accepted the news without any controversy.

This was because anyone who experienced the Blessed Squire's simply couldn't imagine getting rid of it! Many Hexers believed that the mech was literally blessed by the Superior Mother.

With such a mythical Supreme revealing her presence through a mech model of all choices, how could the Wrathful Doves reject this sacred mech?

No amount of external pressure would convince them to give up a mech that had helped them achieve victory after victory!

Weeks after the Blessed Squire energized the ground forces of the Hex Army, the territories of Marrakath III quickly fell to their offensives in quick succession. Like falling domino stones, the rapid conquests rapidly caused the defenders to lose an enormous amount of supplies and war materiel.

In too many cases, the Hexers advanced so rapidly that the Fridaymen were only just beginning to evacuate their exposed fortifications!

The Fortune Legion and more specifically the Opal Trident Mech Army Group suffered calamity after calamity. The constant defeats and retreating actions depressed the morale of every Fridayman mech pilot.

The dark cloud looming over them not only caused the Opal Tridents to lose their edge, but also made them more susceptible to the Blessed Squire's glow!

Only a fourth of the available land surface of Marrakath III remained in Fridayman hands.

Ordinarily, any invasion would slow down at this point. If the Opal Tridents kept pulling off orderly retreats, then they would have been able to concentrate their remaining strengths across a much tighter defense line.

This was not the case this time! Too many times, the Fridayman failed to retreat in order. They either sacrificed too many valuable supplies or failed to make it back to friendly lines.

Without enough mechs, supplies and other equipment, the Fortune Legion simply couldn't resist the Hex Army on even ground!

With the rear of the Fridayman-occupied territory in disorder, the Hexers pushed themselves to the limit. They had to advance as fast as possible! The sooner Marrakath III fell, the sooner they breached the gates to the interior of Carnegie Group space!

The momentum of the Wrathful Doves couldn't be stopped at this point. High command decided that the cost of slowing down the enflamed Hexers was too much for them to bear, and began to issue orders to evacuate from the fortress planet!

"Marrakath III will fall!"

"We've given up on this planet!"

"Those damn Hexers!"

The Fortune Legion elements attempted to retreat as orderly as possible. Crucial production equipment and other heavy machines were shipped away first. After that, various mechs and high-value supplies were taken away next.

The war-stricken orbit of Marrakath III became even more hazardous due to the non-stop struggle for orbital supremacy.

The battle in orbit and in space unfolded more evenly as the spaceborn elements of the Hex Army lacked the support of the Blessed Squire. Yet even that started to change as the Wrathful Doves started experimenting on putting Blessed Squire in space!

From attaching external flight system harnesses to its frame to simply placing it onto an armored flight platform, the Hexers tried many ways to deploy this remarkable mech in space.

Some of these inelegant solutions actually worked!

While it was very wasteful to employ Blessed Squires in this fashion, the amplification effect provided by their glows made the calculus worthwhile to the Wrathful Doves. The performance of every spaceborn mech increased remarkably!

Under these circumstances, the Fridaymen became more desperate than ever to evacuate their ground troops and as much equipment as possible.

Near a large, military spaceport, an entire city had almost become flattened and cratered due to the sheer amount of fighting that unfolded recently.

Much of the structures had been built with large amounts of bulk exotics, making them as thick and tough as starship hull plating. Some key structures even boasted better protection than capital ships!

Now, many of these structures had either collapsed or exhibited a lot of holes. Just a day of fighting had turned a key defensive bulwark into a broken mess. Mechs from both sides trampled over fallen debris, broken mech parts and other junk.

The air constantly cracked and thundered with exchanges of energy beams, projectiles and missiles. Entire mech regiments advanced and retreated along a slowly-receding line.

The Fortune Legion put up a stiff but increasingly hopeless resistance as the hotblooded Hexers relentlessly assaulted their lines without stop!

Flying very low over the ruined streets was one of the few morale boosters left among the Fridaymen that had gained more prominence during the current campaign.

The Charlemagne and the Scara had become famed in a matter of weeks! After its foreign expert slayed seven Hexer expert pilots in total, the Fridaymen no longer turned up their noses in front of Venerable Ghanso Larkinson.

His heroism and valiant performance paved the way for the introduction of other foreign expert pilots. The Coalition Reserve Corps would have encountered a lot more resistance if Ghanso and his Charlemagne hadn't killed so many enemy expert pilots.

Unfortunately, the blood on his hands enraged the Hexers!

After losing a string of valued expert pilots to the Charlemagne and his fifty quasi-expert mechs, the Wrathful Doves finally put down their arrogance and treated Unit L as a serious opponent.

The Hex Army analyzed Venerable Ghanso and his assets and tried to figure out a way to counter him. With all of the protection that the Opal Tridents bestowed on him, it wasn't easy to take out the Charlemagne.

However, the Fortune Legion couldn't protect all of the Scara!

Above a ruined supply depot, the Charlemagne hastily flew back while firing a resonance-empowered positron beam!

The quasi-expert mechs that accompanied the expert rifleman mech fired their rifles as well. Unlike before, their volley of beams looked ragged and not as nearly overwhelming as before.

The Scara incurred many losses!

With the Hexers focusing their fire on the cheaper and less well-protected rifleman mechs, Unit L gradually lost more and more of its teeth.

By now, only twenty-three intact quasi-expert mechs accompanied Charlemagne in battle! Their beams, though still fairly potent, barely even scratched the armor of Venerable Ghanso's current opponent!

"Marrakath III shall fall, and so shall the Crestfallen Stars! The Carnegie Group will be the first to fall to ruin, and the rest of the Friday Coalition shall follow next!"

Ghanso did not even bother to reply to his current adversary's taunts. He was too busy with trying to keep the remainder of his Scara alive!

The loss of a couple of dozen quasi-expert mechs was not regrettable. They were just mechs that could be produced at any time, though they weren't cheap by any means.

What truly pained Unit L and Master Huron was the loss of their 'mech pilots'! Not even a powerful Master was able to replace the dimwitted clones so easily. Something about them made it very difficult to cultivate them in greater numbers. The losses suffered by Unit L might take quite some time to replenish!

Venerable Ghanso instinctively felt acute danger. He immediately responded by commanding his Charlemagne to dodge to the side as fast as possible no matter how disgraceful it seemed!

His urgency also passed on through the neural network, causing the surviving Scara to split up as fast as possible.

"Too late!"

A glowing shell rapidly reached the position that the Charlemagne occupied just half a second ago and exploded, unleashing a fiery blast that was large enough to engulf several quasi-expert mechs that hadn't moved away fast enough!

Venerable Ghanso felt a spike of pain and strange emotions. Three of the nodes within the neural network had disappeared, which meant that a single explosive shell had taken out three of his Scara at once!

"Damnit, you witch!"

He hastily reorganized his scattered Scara and began to unleash another empowered volley against his current attacker.

Twenty-one positron beams empowered by rage struck one of the largest mechs on the battlefield.

Though the concentrated attacks managed to pierce the resonance shield, the attacks had lost so much potency that they only managed to burn away some coating. The upper-most armor layer suffered negligible damage!

Surrounding by numerous mech companies, a Doom Crawler that was half as taller and much more wider than the Charlemagne steadily advanced with the help of its six, spider-like legs.

The armored limbs were thick and plated with broad slabs of armor. When linked together, they could even form an impromptu shield that could withstand nearly every form of attack!

This huge expert mech was the infamous Death Blossom, an extremely powerful doom crawler that outputted a mindblowing amount of damage at various distances.

It was one of the most renowned expert mechs of the Wrathful Doves! Piloted by Ginevra Costa, a high-tier expert pilot, the appearance of this infamous doom crawler spelled the end of the Fortune Legion's stand in this city.

This was because the so-called Ruination Witch was one of the most powerful artillery specialists in the Hex Army!

Six different weapon mounts fired in an alternating pattern at various targets on the battlefield. Even as the Death Blossom put the Charlemagne under pressure, entire Fridayman mech companies and defensive fortifications succumbed under its prodigious firepower!

Each and every attack unleashed by the huge doom crawler was powered by as much resonance as the Charlemagne's fully-charged attacks. Whereas Ghanso had to exert himself in order to magnify his expert mech's attacks, the Ruination Witch could easily empower all six weapons of her Death Blossom in quick succession!

A ruinous positron beam bore straight through a thick and powerful bunker, penetrating through meters of armor plating and inflicting untold damage from within.

Another weapon mount fired a split laser beam that lanced in over a hundred different directions, intercepting missiles, blasting through aerial mechs, taking out sensor arrays and more.

A thick and heavy gauss cannon fired a powerful projectile that slammed straight through the shield of a heavy knight mech. Immediately afterwards, the round pierced straight through the mech itself before punching through eight more mechs further backwards until it finally slammed into an evacuated headquarters, causing the entire structure to be blasted into pieces!

As the Charlemagne and the Scara continued to give ground, the Death Blossom's gravitic cannon fired a strange orb that rapidly landed in the midst of some of the quasi-expert mechs.

Soon, the orb expanded, causing four more rifleman mechs to be caught in a powerful localized gravity well!

"No! Not again!"

The plasma cannon mount of the Death Blossom ruthlessly fired, causing all of the trapped mechs to melt into pieces due to the incredible energy and heat impacting their frames!

Throughout this entire rampage, the largest weapon mount of all thundered once again. The howitzer placed on top of the expert doom crawler had fired an empowered explosive shell that arced over everyone's heads.

Despite the various mechs and turrets that attempted to intercept the incredibly powerful shell, the glow surrounding the shell easily resisted the hasty attacks!

Soon enough, the shell landed within the perimeter of the military spaceport many kilometers away.

BOOM!

A huge explosion engulfed several transports, hundreds of Fridaymen, and a large amount of critical equipment and strategic supplies!

An exultant war cry erupted from the ranks of the Hexers!

"Women shall reign supreme!"