

Mech 2261

Chapter 2261 - Trouble in Ulimo

While the Hex Army was on the verge of kicking out the Fortune Legion in the Marrakath System, the Nyxian Gap experienced more tension than ever.

The Peacekeepers and the Nyxian pirates confronted each other much more often.

Driven by greed and other reasons, more and more pirate gangs intruded into civilized space in order to raid the border region of the Sentinel Kingdom and other nearby third-rate states.

In response, the Peacekeeper Association heavily encouraged its affiliate outfits to invade the periphery of the Nyxian Gap!

While the Peacekeeper outfits managed to defeat many pirates, most of the sc.u.m they eliminated were decrepit, bottom feeder pirate gangs that rarely possessed any trump cards.

No matter how many incentives they received, the Peacekeepers were very reluctant to move past the outer periphery!

Once they entered a territory like Maynard Fields, the mercenaries in the service of the Sentinel Kingdom risked getting overtaken by the powerful, entrenched pirate factions that long held sway in their respective territories.

Therefore, the heated conflict didn't actually generate much concern among the higher ups of both sides. Yet everyone knew that this was just the calm before the storm. Much greater movements took place in the dark.

Right now, the Mirror Raiders that had been sent to scout out Ulimo Citadel learned a lot of new information.

The Black Cats underestimated the activity at Ulimo. In the past few months, its importance has risen as it stood out as one of the few accessible marketplaces where pirate outfits could acquire reliable superweapons!

The intelligence that Calabast and her analysts compiled from interrogating pirates and decrypting captured data banks weren't wrong. Their conclusions were just outdated.

With so many more pirates desiring to increase their deterrence power and self-protection ability, the demand of taboo weapons had skyrocketed!

Though owning them would make any pirate damned in the eyes of the Big Two, most pirates didn't care at this point. The MTA and CFA never entered the Nyxian Gap these days and whatever helpers they hired barely made an impact.

Sure, the Larkinson Clan razed several pirate bases, but no one on Ulimo believed that they were in danger.

Ulimo was too strong! The Dry Snakes enjoyed such a great reputation that even the latest scourge to have entered Maynard Fields hardly shook the confidence of the locals inside the public area of the pirate stronghold.

After a couple of days, the Mirror Raiders spent a hefty amount of Kavenit. Through a series of deals, Abis managed to arrange repairs for the Bloody Fang, the Cruel Intention and most of their mechs. He had also paid the equivalent of 25 million hex credits in Kavenit to acquire 23 second-hand pirate mechs that looked to be in decent shape.

While Abis could have spent more, such a choice did not make sense for someone in his position.

Ulimo Citadel's mech market was quite small and inadequate. Most of the mechs on sale were targeted towards the smaller pirate gangs that frequented this pirate base. This meant that most local vendors only sold the most affordable mechs!

To put it simply, Abis could choose between buying third-hand mechs, second-hand mechs, or some rare factory new budget mechs that were sold at twice or thrice their actual value!

The Mirror Raiders could only bow their heads and acquire some stopgap machines while they recruited more mech pilots.

So far, the recruitment drive did not proceed very smoothly. While the Mirror Raiders managed to rent a respectable hall, the pirates that strolled in were less than ideal.

A slightly overweight pirate burped and he took a swig of his beer. "Whadda ya mean you can't give me a midrange mech? I'm The Three-Shot Prince, you stinking turd! I shot more mechs than you have ever seen with your beady eyes. I refuse to pilot your trash!"

"A twenty times share is not enough. I deserve to earn a hundred times the share of the plunder! If you don't pay me a K-bar right away, I'll step out and tell my buddies that you are complete cheapskates!"

The ordinary pirates were already bad enough. The mech pilots among the pirates especially tended to push their weight around!

This couldn't be helped. The quality of mech pilots who turned pirates were wildly inconsistent. Just like in civilized space, the better mech pilots were largely monopolized by the big pirate alliances and more established groups such as the Dry Snakes.

A small, independent outfit with no reputation to speak of like the Mirror Raiders only attracted the dregs of the Nyxian Gap. Even then, there weren't that many of them around, as many awful pirate mech pilots tended to enjoy a very short lifespan.

This was why the Mirror Raiders only recruited a handful of pirates so far, and most of them were support personnel.

The new recruits all thought they had a chance to go back to doing some actual pirating. Sadly, the Mirror Raiders only took in these dummies in order to act according to their masks.

Once the Mirror Raiders dropped their disguises, the new 'buddies' they recruited weren't necessary anymore!

After observing the recruitment drive for a time, Lieutenant Sodo Rodan of the Black Cats quietly approached the Flagrant Vandal officer.

"We have a problem."

"How serious."

"It can ruin everything."

"What?! Let's head somewhere private."

They quickly entered an office where Rodan proceeded to sweep the area of bugs before activating a jammer. The intelligence officer faced Abis with a grave expression.

"Captain Itris and her group of women have bumped into a local gang called the Roid Rats and come to blows. Seven local thugs are dead and more of them are wounded. As far as we know, the gang is calling upon its friends to take revenge!"

The Swordmaidens among the Mirror Raiders were supposed to stay put! Lieutenant Sendra, who played the role of Captain Itris, was supposed to buy a batch of energy cells at this time.

"What is the case of this fight?!" Abis grew angry.

The captain and her posse of women barged into a gambling den and stirred up some trouble. It's safe to say that the conflict hadn't ended well for the locals.

"I told that woman not to wander off and pick a fight!"

According to their current plan, they should still be scouting out the local situation. What they had seen and learned only scratched the surface of the sheer amount of activity taking place in Ulimo's public marketplace.

During this time, the last thing that Abis wanted to see was to make enemies out of the locals!

Even if the local gangs didn't possess any mechs or sh.i.p.s, within the confines of Ulimo, heavy weapons were forbidden. As long as the gangs united together, not even the Mirror Raiders might survive!

The troublesome aspect about this was that Abis knew that Lieutenant Sendra strongly disagreed with his cautious and patient approach.

In her opinion, the Mirror Raiders didn't need to be so circ.u.mspect! The Dry Snakes didn't really care what took place within the marketplace area as long as nobody damaged the infrastructure.

In that case, why not attack the local pirates? As long as the Mirror Raiders took over their footholds, they would definitely become more integrated in Ulimo Citadel! Once that happened, the disguised Larkinsons would gain deeper access to the pirate base they intended to destroy.

Though Abis did not disagree with this plan, he wanted to take it step by step. They had barely finished the first couple of steps before the Swordmaidens recklessly sprinted a dozen steps forward!

"That woman is too reckless!"

"Blood has been spilled." Rodan grimly spoke. "Now that it has come to this, we can only take up arms and take the Roid Rats by storm."

The two swapped some quick ideas and formed a hasty plan. When Rodan finally shut down his jammer, their comms suddenly chimed.

Their worries increased further. "Bo and Avery are in trouble!"

At a lobby in one of the many small arenas that provided the most visceral form of entertainment to the locals, 'Bo', 'Avery' and a squadron of armed guards all held out their weapons as they faced ten times their numbers in gang members!

"Big Rat!" Dietrich shouted as he wore his excessively-decorated Sparous Vize Mark II. "Don't go too far! I don't fear your sc.u.mmy gang at all. Compared to true pirates like our Mirror Raiders, you are nothing but jumped-up gutter trash. Just look at your troops! Hardly any of your men wear fully-covered suits of combat armor. And those weapons! The Peacekeepers would laugh if they saw those toy guns of yours!"

"Stop! Don't shoot up the front entrance of my arena!" The arena manager stepped in. "I swear, if you attack someone, don't blame me for activating my turrets!"

Dozens of turrets slid out of the ceiling. Their menacing laser barrels pointed straight at the two opposing groups.

"You're not getting away from me, Bo!" Big Rat shouted. "You Mirror Raiders messed with the wrong gang. Once we call up all of our friends, we'll crush you all to pieces before taking your sh.i.p.s and mechs as our own! The Dry Snakes won't protect you if most of you are dead!"

"Heh. You should finish the job first before you lay claim to our stuff."

The arena manager pulled out a pistol and shot into the ceiling! The weapon discharge instantly stifled the argument.

"Boys! Stop it! If you have any differences, fight it over in the arena if you dare. If not, then get the hell out of my lobby!"

Both Dietrich and the so-called Big Rat eyed each other menacingly. After several seconds of staring, they nodded.

"See you in the arena."

"Say goodbye to your men!"

Under the arrangements of the arena operators, Dietrich's escort and mob of Roid Rats both signed a contract to hold a grudge match in the arena grounds.

Soon, word began to spread that a mob of more than a hundred local gang members intended to battle a small number of real pirates to the death!

Though the former brought vastly more people, their gear didn't look as good as that of the latter. No one really had a clue which side would win in an uneven group match, and that made the arena manager excited!

Locals and visitors began to flock to the arena and purchased tickets with their K-bits or K-coins. Even though the price of attending this impromptu arena match was low, the bets these people made quickly filled up the arena's coffers!

In one of the backstage areas, Dietrich faced his chief guard with concern. "Are you sure that we can take all of those enemies, Avery? Quantity has a quality all of its own. I'm not certain whether we underestimated that mob."

"Relax." Ketis replied behind her helmet. "I understand their gear the best. Nothing they have is better than the gear wielded by a typical pirate. While the armor of your guards

might not hold if the Roid Rats are smart enough to concentrate their fire, their protection is patchy. Just slaughter them quickly and we won't have a problem anymore."

Soon enough, the arena stands had filled up sufficiently to begin the match. Both sides began to enter the arena grounds. Dietrich held his modified Peaceful Repose tightly in his armored grip.

As for Ketis, she eschewed her Udor in favor of unsheathing her new broad cutlass!

A bloodthirsty glint shone on her medium combat armor. Its size and bulk along with its apparent quality had attracted a lot of wary glances from the gang members.

A few minutes passed as the arena manager hyped up the crowd. With the emergence of a rare grudge match, the battle in the arena wouldn't end until one side was completely wiped out! The amount of bloodshed the spectators would get to see would be enough to keep their tongues wagging for weeks!

Dietrich shook a bit as he attempted to pick out Big Rat from the crowd. He was a mech pilot, not an infantry soldier. Fighting people without a mech was a novelty to him. He felt both weak and excited at the prospect.

"Commence the match!"

The two sides began firing at each other right away!

Chapter 2262 - Drowning in Blood

The arena match between the visiting Mirror Raiders and local Roid Rats attracted the interest of a lot of people!

Both locals and visitors filled up the small arena until there was no room left. Even then, the late arrivals merely decided to stand wherever there was space.

Something as exciting as a grudge match between two organizations didn't happen every day!

The Roid Rats may have provoked this fight, but they weren't completely brainless. As unkempt and dirty as they looked, they actually made some preparations and brought in a lot of extra equipment.

The moment the match commenced, only half of the Roid Rats fired at the Mirror Raiders!

The other half kept their weapons on their bodies. Instead, they slammed down various large plates onto the arena floor. Most of the plates consisted of corroded or damaged

armor plating. All of them had been machined to the point where an average human could carry them around. A T-shaped base had been welded onto one of their ends in order to keep them upright.

"Cheaters!"

"You damn Roid Rats! It's not enough for you to outnumber those pirates by ten-to-one. Now you're building up your own fortress!"

Even though it wasn't quite proper to bring all of the extra gear, the critics were only making noise. The arena had witnessed many displays like this. As far as the arena operators were concerned, the Roid Rats were only leveraging their resources to give them a leg up in the match!

After layering the armor plates, most of the shots fired by the Mirror Raiders failed to overcome the defenses. This was because the materials were all built to resist mech attacks.

Even if the handheld plates weren't as thick as genuine mech armor plating, they offered a lot of resistance against small arms fire!

Dietrich immediately looked troubled. Out of his small group, only his Peaceful Repose managed to punch through the successive thin plates. Each time his pistol fired, A Roid Rat taking cover from behind dropped onto the arena floor in a bloody mess.

The power of the Peaceful Repose was not trivial at all! As one of the weapons previously chosen by Ves, the masterwork ballistic cannon possessed the power to end someone's life with every shot!

Unfortunately for Dietrich, he didn't carry enough ammunition to finish all of his opposition. The Peaceful Repose only fired specialized Exil rounds, which nobody in the Larkinson Clan could reproduce.

Perhaps Ves might be able to, but he had better things to do than waste his time on fabricating bullets.

As for his guards, their laser rifles only scored shallow grooves in the solid armor plating. The pirates weren't stupid enough to take cover behind the holes the Peaceful Repose had created.

While Dietrich and his guards were actually able to do more, they were reluctant to pull out any high-tech equipment. Exposing the altered Peaceful Repose was bad enough, but it at least made some sense for 'Bo' to own such an extravagant weapon. As the heir of the Mirror Raiders, it would be odd if he didn't own a powerful toy.

"Damn, how tough are these pirates? Did they steal them from the Sentinel military or something?!"

The combat armor of the Mirror Raiders all held. There were no objects in the arena that offered shelter against the rain of firepower, so Dietrich and his guards could only withstand the blows in the open!

The spectators sitting in the stands behind protective energy screens didn't think so much. They all cheered and screamed at all of the action! The volleys of lasers, the shocking boom of the Peaceful Repose and the constant impacts on armor plating caused everyone to become ecstatic.

Most arena matches mostly consisted of feeble brawls between debt-laden pirates. A large-scale battle involving so many fighters was a rare and splendid sight in these parts!

"You idiots! Those walls aren't going down by themselves! Why are you standing there?!"

"Are pirates always this stupid? Do they think that their combat armor can last forever?"

The trophies adorning the armor of Dietrich and the guards succumbed immediately. A lot of locals found it a shame to lose so many marks of honor, though most pirates tended to own copies in case situations like these took place.

Nonetheless, the crowd became increasingly more confused as the Mirror Raiders did attempt to close in. Every arena regular could tell that the improvised wall the Roid Rats had set up was too resilient to overcome with regular small arms fire.

If the Mirror Raiders kept shooting their rifles at these defenses, they would eventually use up their batteries!

Something needed to change, and the boisterous crowd eagerly offered suggestions.

"Charge forward! If you can't shoot past those walls, then just hop over them! I hope you brought some sharp knives!"

"Flank them already! Why are you clumping up together? Just split up in two parts and attack them from opposite directions!"

"That's stupid. The Roid Rats will just reform their walls to cover every direction."

The arguing went on and on until someone spotted a flicker in the edge of their vision. "Wait, what's that? Someone is sneaking up on the Roid Rats!"

Though most of the crowd hadn't noticed anything and kept shouting nonsense, a handful of perceptive spectators noticed that one of the guards had left the group of Mirror Raiders and circled around the arena grounds!

The Roid Rats didn't notice anything amiss. Neither Big Rat or his haphazard mob of gang members bothered to count the number of opponents. Whether they faced thirteen pirates or fourteen pirates was no different in their eyes!

The huge weight of fire unleashed by the Roid Roids drowned out every other consideration. Though the Roid Rats looked rather undisciplined, they still developed their own homegrown tactics that they could employ with very little conscious direction. Big Rat was not concerned that his men would go out of control!

Unfortunately, their lack of attention caused them to overlook an approaching form! By the time the Roid Rats in the rear felt the increasing vibrations from the arena ground, it was too late for them to turn around!

Crash!

Ketis made use of her upgraded Rising Red Dragon Mark II to charge right through the rear of the ranks of the Roid Rats!

Bodies after bodies flung away as the momentum of the powered armor smashed every Roid Rat away. Disarray instantly formed within the ranks as the other Roid Rats fearfully turned around and shot their weapons at the intruder.

Unfortunately, Ketis just happened to have reached the center of the Roid Rat formation. The panicked pirates hasty shots only occasionally hit her combat armor. The rest of the shots missed and instead hit the other Roid Rats!

Though most shots merely dented or melted the improvised armor plating on their bodies, some of the shots hit n.a.k.e.d flesh, causing numerous bodies to drop.

Big Rat immediately became alarmed! "YOU IDIOTS! STOP SHOOTING! YOU'RE KILLING YOUR OWN BROTHERS!"

Before the Roid Rats had time to reorganize themselves, Ketis did not stand still. She lifted her new cutlass and eagerly wished to baptize it in blood.

Inside her mind, Sharpie vibrated with excitement. The newly-birthing living spiritual construct shared a close bond with Ketis.

What Ketis liked, Sharpie liked. Simple as that!

With their intentions completely aligned together, Ketis turned into a human disaster! Her armored body outright ignored every weapon impact!

Even though the laser beams and ballistic rounds scarred her armor, the damage was contained at the upper layer. The top layer merely consisted of generic alloys in order to camouflage the fact that the lower layers actually consisted of Breyer alloy!

"My blade seeks your blood!"

For a long time, Ketis felt repressed. Spending time in the Larkinson Clan was alright, but she felt as if she was slowly starting to lose her edge.

In the frontier, every day was dangerous. In civilized space, she could go years without facing a single threat to her life!

It made her feel uncomfortable. She did not dedicate her life to become a Swordmaiden just to let her blade rust. She believed every warrior needed to fulfill her purpose in battle. What was the point of learning how to kill only to let these skills remain dormant all the time?

Even though she was a mech designer, she believed that exercising her skills in battle would help her design better mechs! How could she ever know what the Swordmaiden mech pilots truly wanted if she never wielded a sword and spilled blood herself?

Times like these allowed her to truly deepen her understanding of sharpness and swordsmanship!

New design concepts already started to fill her imagination!

With Sharpie supporting her all the way, she unleashed her repressed urges regardless of how many gang members attempted to take her down!

She swung her cutlass with a single powered arm. Though she did not employ much technique, the raw power and the sharp blade of her weapon cut straight through the exposed limb of the pirate shooting a pistol right into her helmet without much result.

"WEAK!"

Another pirate screamed and charged at her flank while swinging a hammer. The attack completely failed as the weapon bounced off while leaving a shallow dent.

Before the attacker could try again, Ketis reached out with her other arm and crushed the neck of the Roid Rat.

"More! I need more!"

She increased her pace and began to swing her cutlass in broad sweeps. No matter what flesh, bone or armor was in the way, her cutlass continued to reap lives as if they were worth less than nutrient packs.

The shocking sight astounded the entire crowd!

Rather feeling disgusted or horrified at the one-sided slaughter, the spectators went wild as they cheered on the red armored warrior!

"GOOO! BUTCHER THOSE ROID RATS!"

"More blood! More blood!"

"Cut them all from limb to limb! Don't leave any of their bodies in one piece!"

During this sensation massacre, Dietrich and the rest of his guards slowed their fire. Other than pinning the Roid Rats in place, it didn't seem as if they could contribute any further.

Dietrich almost couldn't believe that Ketis, who was supposed to be a mech designer, could be this strong!

It wasn't simple for her to keep killing right in the midst of the enemy. Even with her excellent equipment, she still risked getting mobbed if the Roid Rats all tried to pile on her armored form until she dropped onto the arena ground.

To prevent such an outcome, Ketis had to keep moving and pushing through the crowd of panicked Roid Rats. She had to anticipate any tricks the enemy might pull off and stay one step ahead.

Nonetheless, as soon as around twenty Roid Rats fell to her blade, the fear she exuded had left a permanent impression in the hearts of the gang members.

"Split up!" Big Rat shouted. "Split up and stay away from this demon! Kill those other bastards first!"

The Roid Rats finally left their walls and desperately tried to run as far away from the murderous butcher as possible. They focused their firepower on Dietrich and his guards, but their firepower hardly inflicted any serious damage onto their protection.

Instead, the Roid Rats fell rapidly as the Mirror Raider guards calmly picked the panicked and scattered gang members one by one. Though the infantry guards surrounding Dietrich were all good in marksmanship, they deliberately missed most their shots in order to hide their true skill.

Ketis had already revealed more than Dietrich wanted to show off in public!

"This woman." He inwardly cursed. "I thought she was a mech designer. Why is she so brainless?!"

Her little solo action was completely unplanned! She wasn't supposed to go out and flank the Roid Rats before cutting their bodies apart in the most bloody instances of butchery he had ever witnessed.

This madwoman spilled so much blood that the arena floor began to drown in blood!

Chapter 2263 - Inspiration From Carnage

Inspiration.

Mech designers craved it. They yearned after it like pirates lusted after plunder.

Without inspiration, how could they fuel their imagination?

Without inspiration, how could they design works that stood out from the competition?

Without inspiration, how would they be able to stand out from AI mech designers?

It took skill, effort, talent and serendipity to gain inspiration.

Not everyone was cut out to be an artist. Those who failed to get inspired when needed would not be able to create works that dazzled their target audience and put them ahead of their peers.

To some people, inspiration came as easy as breathing air. These blessed individuals possessed both a rich imagination and a mindset that was receptive to new ideas.

Most people lacked this blessing. There was nothing wrong with that. To those whose views were less than vivid, they could often compensate for their lack of vision by acting more proactively.

To mech designers such as Ves, it was enough for them to travel around and experience different cultures and customs. Every adventure, every war and every tour provided a wealth of inspiration to Ves. The majority of his mech designs directly originated from sparks of inspiration that he gained over the course of his travels.

As his student, Ketis developed a similar inclination to gaining inspiration from new experiences.

However, she was different from Ves.

Her mentor grew up as a relatively average third-rate citizen in a fairly normal third-rate state. His sudden improvement shortly after his graduation launched an eventful career that constantly propelled him towards new horizons.

He was living the dream he developed over the course of his fairly mundane life. Every average person yearned to become exceptional, and Ves was no different.

As for Ketis, she lived and breathed through danger ever since she became self-aware. She grew up in a typical rural pirate settlement in the frontier. Her life wasn't all that good in that lawless backwater.

If not for the Swordmaidens touching down and picking up some stray girls, Ketis would have lived a much worse life!

Since then, she drilled and trained under the harsh but ultimately beneficial regime of her sisters and succeeded in slaying an exobeast with her own sword.

The constant cycle of training, killing, studying as well as developing deeper bonds with her fellow sisters had shaped her entire mentality. She had become so indoctrinated in the creed and customs of the Swordmaidens that hardly anyone recognized her as a talented mech designer!

In fact, she knew that her ability in mech design wasn't all that great in the beginning. Despite Mayra's diligent tutelage, she had become too enamoured with practicing her swordsmanship to completely dedicate herself to mech design.

She was a bit better now. Under Ves, she discovered her love for mech design, found her design philosophy and learned how to marry her passion for swordsmanship with her primary profession.

Marrying swordsmanship with mech design was not something commonly seen in mech design.

Although it made absolute sense to Ketis, most mech designers were nerds who rarely entered gyms, let alone practice with any weapons!

Even Ves, who couldn't beat even the youngest Swordmaiden trainee in swordsmanship, dared to design sword-wielding mechs with great confidence!

This was the norm. Mech designers only possessed a limited amount of time and needed to devote most of it on absorbing new knowledge or designing more mechs. How could they ever waste their time on training their bodies and learning how to defend themselves?

If they needed protection, they could just invest in more bodyguards!

With Nitaa constantly by his side, Ves decided to completely let go of any opportunity to train his martial prowess. While he was eager to craft or acquire better gear, that was because it didn't take that much time to increase his ability to defend himself.

Otherwise, Ves would have relied exclusively on gear produced by other manufacturers to save himself the trouble!

As for Ketis, she was different. Lately, she vastly increased her knowledge base. Whatever Ves had fed to her had vastly expanded her cognitive abilities. Even without an implant, she wasn't that worse off from the assistant mech designers with average cranial implants!

Yet all the book learning in the galaxy did not help her make any progress in her heart for swordsmanship.

Some lessons couldn't be learned from passive study. Only active effort enabled her to advance.

Sparring with her fellow Swordmaidens and the other fighters in the clan helped a bit. Yet those restrained, rule-bound practice sessions failed to get her blood pumping.

How could she ever understand what it meant to wield a sword if she never fought to kill?

Even when she chopped up the prospective new hires for the Design Department, she hardly achieved any progress.

None of those weaklings wanted to beat her. Chopping off their limbs without encountering any meaningful resistance was fun, but pointless.

It was different now.

Standing in an expanding pool of blood, the corpses of dozens of chopped-up Roid Rats laid before her feet. With her strong and undaunted sword strikes, she leveraged the power of her combat armor and the strength and sharpness of her cutlass to the fullest.

The result became clear to every spectator who roared their jubilation at the impressive carnage that had unfolded earlier.

They had rarely seen a single pirate slam into such a sizable mob of enemies! The moment when she harvested lives left and right with her deceptively easy sword swings turned into an unforgettable moment to the people who paid to watch the grudge match.

The K-bits they paid had absolutely been worth it! Those who bet on the victory of the small group of Mirror Raiders were even more excited!

In fact, few locals and visitors who bet their K-bits and K-coins on the Roid Rats had any regrets. Some lopsided battles were boring to watch, but this was not one of them! The actions of a single cutlass-wielding warrior had made a remarkable impression on everyone!

Hardly anyone paid attention to the young heir of the Mirror Guards and his band of rifle-wielding bodyguards. Even though Dietrich and his companions killed the majority of Roid Rats when they broke, they were just doing some cleanup work.

The true champion of this match was Ketis.

Amidst the elation of the audience of thousands, an expression of extreme ecstasy appeared on her face.

With her thick helmet completely covering her head, Ketis did not restrain her emotions. She completely allowed her body and mind to become engulfed by the brilliant emotions that burst out from the depths of her being.

The sensation was indescribable.

"This is what I sought."

"This is what I want."

"This is what I need!"

Like a gladiator who gloriously vanquished his foes, Ketis spread her arms and raised the tip of the cutlass into the ceiling.

The cries of joy from the crowd instantly doubled!

"Blood! Blood! Blood!"

"Kill more people!"

"Where are the rest of the Roid Rats? Bring them here right now so we can dye the entire arena with red!"

The degenerate locals weren't squeamish at all. Every single individual who chose to attend this arena match lived for spectacles like these!

Dietrich and some of his disguised companions all frowned at the unrestrained bloodlust from the audience.

The star of the show paid no mind to how barbaric she seemed. In her exceptional state of mind, her bond with Sharpie had reached an even greater degree of intimacy.

During the grudge match, she not only baptized her physical sword in blood, but also her spiritual one!

A subtle flicker appeared on the edge of her cutlass. In her mind, Ketis imagined herself gripping the hilt of her mind sword!

A subtle aura surrounded her. If anyone stepped close enough, they would have noticed a strange intensity emanating from her body!

To Ketis, this was her sword intent manifesting!

The other Swordmaidens often spoke in airy terms about sword intent. A lot of sisters chased after it, but no one had ever developed it aside from Commander Dise.

Now, Ketis believed that she had taken an important step forward in nurturing her sword intent. The sharpness radiating from her would have stung anyone who approached her at the moment!

Since she fused her swordsmanship with mech design, something else took place as well.

Her mind and imagination churned and began to produce numerous mech concepts and mech ideas. Vague design schematics blended with her sharp sword intent, causing a portion of her mind to produce vivid mental simulations where mechs that resembled her current self unceasingly rampaged through formation of hostile mechs!

The moment passed too soon, much to her regret. Her aura disappeared as Dietrich guided her away.

After the handful of Mirror Raiders achieved an explosive and dramatic victory against the Roid Rats, the situation in Ulimo's public area completely changed!

The strength shown by the Mirror Raiders signified that their actual strength was far beyond a typical undisciplined bottom feeder pirate gang. There were signs of military training, and the rumors that their leader was a former military officer appeared to be true!

Word of mouth spread quickly. Even if those who passed the stories about the grudge match exaggerated a lot of elements, it became clear that the newly-arrived pirates belonged to a different class from the gutter trash of Ulimo!

"These outsiders are demons. Don't provoke them! Who knows what they will do?"

"Stop sending reinforcements to the Roid Rats. Those guys are out of luck for pissing off the Mirror Raiders!"

"Friends? What friends? Get out and don't come back! We don't want your trouble!"

Every local gang and faction in Ulimo turned around and refused to help the Roid Rats. All talks of solidarity against pushy outsiders and unfamiliar pirates turned into nothing.

Though the gangs were all confident that they possessed enough strength to demolish the Mirror Raiders, the losses would certainly be serious. If every Mirror Raiders possessed gear as good as the guards on the arena, then the poorly-equipped locals would likely die by the hundreds before they achieved victory.

Hardly anyone wanted to pay such a big blood price! This was especially so when helping the Roid Rats only benefited one of their rivals at the expense of their own strength. Why should those other gangs engage in meaningless charity?

As long as the Mirror Raiders did not attack anyone else, it was far more ideal to let them have what they wanted. If they wanted to destroy the Roid Rats and take over their territory, then that was fine!

Deprived of their allies, the Roid Rats found themselves alone.

Shortly after Abis and the rest of the Mirror Raiders received word about the victory that Dietrich and Ketis accomplished, they knew they had to move quickly.

"The Roid Rats should be discouraged and isolated after they suffered this loss." Lieutenant Rodan quickly advised his superior. "This is a golden opportunity to sweeten the territory of the Roid Rats. In fact, I believe that 'Captain Itris' should be on her way already. Don't let her and her confidants attack the main base of the Roid Rats by themselves!"

Though Abis never intended to set out on this path, now that they had been forced into it, he had no choice but to go all the way!

"Move out and don't stop until we roll over every Roid Rat!"

The Mirror Raiders hastily mobilized their combat troops and swept through the streets and buildings owned by the Roid Rats. Their thugs and cadre instantly folded and died under the ruthless aggression of the supposed pirates.

As for their main stronghold, the disguised Swordmaidens had already begun their assault on it! By the time Abis and Rodan along with the bulk of his fighting troops arrived at a dilapidated-looking building, they had just witnessed Lieutenant Sendra and her fellow Swordmaidens breaching through the gates.

In order to disassociate them from the obscure but not completely unknown Swordmaidens of the Larkinson Clan, the aggressive women in armor did not wield any swords.

Instead, they held submachine guns in one hand and combat knives in the other hand.

With their powerful suits of combat armor, most of the weapons of the Roid Rats failed to inflict any damage!

Only the few heavy infantry weapons such as the machine gun emplacements and a couple of thrown grenades managed to slow the Swordmaidens down.

Even then, the marksmanship of some of the Swordmaidens were not that bad! After concentrating their fire on some key targets, they managed to overrun the first line of defense and make their way inside after blasting through the gate with some directional explosives!

By the time that Abis and the main force of Mirror Raiders entered the Roid Rat stronghold, the enemy had already broken!

Chapter 2264 - The Pirate Way

It only took less than a day for the Mirror Raiders to annihilate the Roid Rats as a local gang.

Though plenty of sc.u.m had shook off their Roid Rat armbands or uniforms, no one cared about these smaller figures. The locals never believed in permanent loyalty, just like real pirates. They soon knocked on the doors of other gangs and managed to join them with ease, though their new employers placed them in the bottom of their hierarchies.

The quick and ruthless strikes initiated by Lieutenant Sendra had swept over the Roid Rats with undaunted aggression. The actions of the Swordmaidens completely forced the rest of the Mirror Raiders to play along in order to prevent any defeat due to splitting their strength.

In the aftermath of the sudden attack, the Mirror Raiders tentatively conquered much of the turf and some of the material possessions of their opponents.

A fair amount of Roid Rats had raided the armories and storehouses of the gang before they fled. The value of these goods were not that much, so no one bothered to follow up on these thefts.

What truly bothered Abis was the reaction from the true masters of Ulimo Citadel. Provoking the Roid Rats before annihilating them sparked a significant disturbance in the public area of Ulimo Citadel!

He decided to convene his command group.

Ketis, Dietrich, Rodan and Sendra gathered in one of the private rooms of the Roid Rat stronghold.

The corpses that used to dr.a.p.e over the table had already been removed, but the cleaning bots hadn't managed to wipe away the drying smears of blood.

Everyone except for Ketis glowered at Sendra. The Swordmaiden mech officer had completely defied Abis by acting out her own plans. Just because she succeeded did not mean that her actions were right!

The situation of the Mirror Raiders was precarious to begin with. Each and every one of them were Larkinsons. After attacking so many established pirate groups, the Larkinson Clan had turned into one of the most hated presences in the Nyxian Gap! Hardly any pirate would tolerate Larkinsons in their midst!

This meant that maintaining their cover was vital to the Mirror Raiders. Abis wanted to take it slow and steady, but Sendra disagreed from the start.

The Flagrant Vandal officer thought that the Swordmaiden lieutenant would abide his command. Why not? The chain of command was clear and Major Verle had unequivocally put him in charge.

Unfortunately, the Swordmaidens simply did what they wanted with little regard for his own priorities!

Back in the Mech Corps, such behavior was tantamount to insubordination!

Rodan looked at everyone with a tinge of guilt. As a Black Cat, he should have anticipated the willfulness of the Swordmaidens. His failure to anticipate Sendra's determination to executive her own plan was a massive oversight.

Even though they were all Larkinsons, that only meant they had something in common. There was still a lot of diversity in the clan and everyone developed different ideas on how to embody its values and principles.

He began the meeting.

"According to our investigations, the disturbances that emerged as a result of our war against the Roid Rats have not reached the upper levels of Ulimo. Their sights are set on far greater concerns than what is happening in their backyard. Aside from the concern shown by the middle and lower officers of the Dry Snakes, the pirate authorities largely don't pay much mind to turf wars at this level."

The Roid Rats were fairly weak and forgettable to begin with. They only occupied a tiny slice of the poorest sections of the marketplace. Capturing some gambling dens and killing a few hundred sc.u.m did not affect Ulimo's operation in the slightest!

The news caused Abis to sigh in relief. "That is good news. The last thing we can afford is to attract scrutiny from the Dry Snakes."

Lieutenant Sendra smirked. "I told you that the bosses wouldn't pay attention. Taking baby steps is completely necessary. If you want something, take it! That's the pirate way!"

"What if we lost?!"

"Then we only have ourselves to blame for lacking judgement and being too weak."

The Swordmaiden officer was completely unrepentant! Abis already began to feel a headache from this. Including the Swordmaidens into the ranks of the Mirror Raiders sounded great in theory. The words spoken by Sendra made it clear that she possessed a true pirate mindset.

Yet Abis would have rather kept her and her fellow Swordmaidens out of this mission! They were too high-profile and way too daring for his liking.

Just one mistake could spell their doom. In such a situation, it made sense to minimize their risks. Each step they took could end up triggering a landmine. This was why Abis deliberately wanted to move slowly.

As for Sendra? She just pointed her finger at a direction that she felt right before sprinting straight through a minefield!

To Abis and most of the Mirror Raiders, the Swordmaidens only managed to avoid stepping onto the many mines due to luck!

Abis argued with Sendra for a few minutes. The atmosphere in the room grew hotter as their opposing mindsets clashed.

Rodan stretched his hand in order to interrupt their shouting. "Stop! We have already fought the Roid Rats. Our enemies are no more and we have managed to avoid attention from the bigshots. What we should do now is to continue playing with the hand that we have been dealt."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Maybe we can make use of the territory we have conquered to set up a foundation in Ulimo. Once we take over the properties of the Roid Rats and operate them ourselves, we can become a permanent fixture in Ulimo Base."

"What does that matter?" Abis looked confused.

"We'll be on the same side as the Dry Snakes!" Sendra shouted with a grin. "Don't you realize what I have been trying to do? The first way to get closer to the pirates in charge of Ulimo is to become a part of Ulimo! Now that we are able to do this, we might have a chance to receive invitations from the Dry Snakes. They might recruit us or ask us to

become their subordinates. If we're lucky, some of us may even be assigned in the core sections of Ulimo!"

Ulimo Citadel was not a single underground stronghold. Instead, the pirates dug up multiple caverns in the moon-sized asteroid that they called home. There was a fair distance between the public marketplace and the restricted core sections of Ulimo.

Sneaking into the latter was incredibly difficult for that reason! Not even the Black Cats dared to use their infiltrator suits and stealth gadgets to cross over. Rodan and his fellow intelligence operatives had already scouted out some of the security checkpoints and discovered that they were partially manned by security experts of the Xona Stalkers.

The Black Cats weren't confident enough that their own stealth suits would be able to circumvent the anti-stealth measures employed by the subordinate pirate outfit!

Therefore, in order to complete their mission, the Mirror Raiders had to find a different way to get into the restricted sections.

Everyone in the room realized that they could only proceed onto the path opened up by Lieutenant Sendra.

"Fine. We will do what you say." Abis gritted his teeth. "I want you to be upfront and forthright about your intentions from now on. I will not tolerate any further independent actions. Have I made myself clear, Itris?!"

The disguised Swordmaiden officer continued to look smug. "Don't worry. I know my loyalties. I will do anything that allows us to complete the mission. Just keep in mind that I have been in the pirate business longer than all of you. All of you have been acting as if we are in the shadier parts of civilized space, but that is completely wrong. The rules are different in the Nyxian Gap. Since we pirates dare to employ taboo weapons, what else won't we do?!"

She made a very clear point. Abis felt as if it might not have been a good idea to put him in charge of this mission. Major Verle had good reasons to appoint him as the leader of the Mirror Raiders, but his understanding only stretched up to a point.

Standing at the side, Ketis and Dietrich didn't bother with joining this discussion. They were younger than the rest and didn't possess enough of a voice in command decisions.

They opened a direct channel with each other in order to chat in private.

"Your fellow sister's actions have really caused us all a lot of trouble." Dietrich said.

"She makes complete sense, you know." Ketis calmly replied. "The Nyxian pirates are the same as pirates in other places. Don't let Ulimo Citadel lack of anarchy fool you. Any law and order you see on the surface is just a shallow means of staying in power. The Dry Snakes possess cold hearts and really won't be bothered if we wipe out a single gang. They will only step in when the operation of the marketplace is under threat. As long as we don't affect their bottom line, we can do anything!"

That was something that Dietrich felt was a step too far. "You women are playing a dangerous game. I did not sign up for this. Will your sister keep stirring up trouble?"

Ketis chuckled. "I know her well. She has already plotted out her next three steps. As soon as she leaves this room, she'll immediately engage her follow-up plan."

The Swordmaidens disliked waiting around. They were women of action!

Her words only made Dietrich more worried. Before he signed up to the Larkinson Clan, he was just the son of the leader of Walter's Whalers. Back in Cloudy Curtain, his old gang didn't really amount to much. This modest background had quickly caused him to feel out of depth.

This mission was far more dangerous than he thought. With teammates such as Sendra who just did what she wanted with little regard for Abis' authority, who knew what enemies they attracted next!

Abis eventually put an end to the discussion. "Alright, that's enough. Let us proceed with taking over the former assets of the Roid Rats. We will have our hands full in the next couple of days. If we want to prove we are in it for the long run, then we will need to recruit a lot of locals to run the facilities that we have taken over. Let's do this quickly so we can proceed to the next step of our plan."

The meeting ended shortly after that. Everyone split up, though Ketis quietly met with Sendra somewhere quiet.

"I'm proud of you, sister." Sendra placed her gauntlet onto the mech designer's armored shoulder. "I missed seeing you in action, but when I saw the footage, I could feel you are truly in tune with your new sword."

"Adapting to a one-handed sword was easier than I thought."

The older Swordmaiden smiled at that. "It's a shame you aren't a mech pilot. You would have become a great swordsman mech pilot if you possessed the right genetic aptitude."

"It's okay, sister. I can do so much more for us after studying under my new boss. Just wait. After a year or two, I will completely transform the way we fight!"

The Swordmaidens all had high expectations of Ketis. With someone as good in mech design as Ves guiding her, there was no way she would become a mediocre mech designer in the future!

"Let's head out before the rest gets suspicious."

In the following days, the Mirror Raiders quickly made their apparent intentions known. The locals, visitors and rival gangs all heard how the newly-arrived pirate outfit intended to establish a foundation in Ulimo!

When it became clear that the Mirror Raiders truly wanted to join Ulimo's power base, the Dry Snakes finally sent an envoy to discuss important matters.

Chapter 2265 - Lovers of Mech Designs

The physical projection of Master Willix calmly inspected the design schematics of the Cat's Paw.

Ves casually stood in the isolated chamber while the Darkbreak module remained active.

Perhaps in the past, he would have never dared to call an esteemed MTA Master Mech Designer, especially for something as trivial as seeking consultation.

Yet after frequent contacts and talks with the Master, Ves slowly lost his apprehension towards Moira Willix.

Certainly, he did not dare to act too presumptuously in front of other MTA Masters. They enjoyed a very high status in one of the most powerful organizations of human civilization. Each Master from the Association could easily affect the lives of entire star sectors with their words and deeds!

The fact that they remained distant and aloof from the local space peasants made them even more unfathomable. Many ordinary mech designers who never interacted with the core people of the MTA developed all sorts of wild fantasies about the great organization that represented their profession.

Ves was no different, once. Yet now that he had come into contact with both the Rim Guardians and Master Willix, he realized that the elite humans who were part of the Association were not as obtuse as he thought.

Familiarity slowly tore away the veil of mystery in front of Master Willix.

The more he talked to her, the more he realized that she was a very pure mech designer.

Her heart for mech design was not bothered by temporal desires such as greed or power.

Ves recognized that she simply wanted to design better mechs. Nothing else.

Her status within the MTA merely served as a means to an end to her. That said, it would be a mistake to think of her as someone who stood apart from the Association. She lived and breathed its rules down to her very bones.

That was both good and bad.

The advantage to Ves was that she possessed a very generous mindset towards young talents like him. Every mech designer bore the responsibility of bringing up the younger generation. Even though Ves was barely older than thirty years old, he already started to take on this role by teaching Ketis, the Larkinson seeds and the rest of his assistants.

The bad news was that she was quite strict with the rules. There was no way he could gain an exception from her. The most she was willing to do was to bend the rules, but if something was absolutely forbidden, she would never acquiesce!

Ves admired her for that. She held onto her principles like a solid rock. Her steadfastness presented an extreme contrast to his.. flexible conduct in matters of principle.

Regardless, her nature as a teacher and her open favor towards him had made Ves a little bold.

Since Master Willix was willing to guide him, why not take advantage of it? As long as he no longer paid so much stock to her identity as a powerful and inscrutable MTA Master Designer, she was just a very enthusiastic lover of mechs.

Ves happened to love mechs as well!

Over the course of his interactions with many people, he gradually learned an important lesson.

No matter how different he was from others, he could still get along with them as long as he focused on what they held in common.

No one was the same, and there were many people who possessed completely different backgrounds, ideologies and principles than him. Yet by finding some common ground such as originating from the same state, fighting the same enemy or participating in the same mission, Ves got along with folks ranging from Ylvainans, Swordmaidens and other weirdos.

If he could befriend religious nuts and former pirates, why shouldn't he be able to have a normal conversation with one of the most influential people in the Komodo Star Sector?

Master Willix finally gathered her thoughts. To be honest, Ves didn't believe this was the first time she studied the incomplete Cat's Paw design. Ves had collaborated with Gloriana many times through the Darkbreak module, so Master Willix should have easily been able to peep at them while they slowly pieced the heavy artillery mech together!

"I didn't have to study your record to know that the Cat's Paw Project is your first heavy mech design." She began. "It is very arrogant for you to design a heavy mech of this caliber for the very first time. You also have no experience in designing artillery mechs. The rifleman mechs you have designed in the past are completely different from what you are trying to tackle."

Ves grew a little hot. "My partner has helped shore up my shortcomings."

"Miss Wodin is not a heavy mech designer. Just because she has been involved in some heavy mech design projects as an assistant in the past does not mean she understands the essence of heavy mechs. The two of you lack too much comprehension to design a competent heavy mech."

It hurt a bit when she told him that his work was inadequate, but Master Willix's judgement was probably correct. As a maturing mech designer, Ves understood the earnestness of her admonishment. She did not criticize him in order to step on his face. She pointed out his mistakes in order to set him onto a correct path.

"Please guide me, ma'am." Ves slightly bowed. "I have tried my best to apply what I have learned, and so did my partner. In our eyes, our Cat's Paw Project should have conformed to what we have learned."

Ves had studied several Clarion University textbooks that related heavy mechs. Gloriana possessed her own Hexer learning resources.

While the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony possessed slightly different interpretations of heavy mechs, there were a lot of universal principles.

"There is not much wrong with the design principles that you have learned. The issue is that you may know how to implement a solution, but do not entirely understand why you should choose a specific solution. The small errors that you and your partner are making is a problem of vision, not science."

Well that sounded clarifying. Not. Ves tried his best to keep his frown off his face.

"Uhm... could you elaborate?"

"Let me ask you this. Your experience with heavy mechs is limited, correct?"

He reluctantly nodded. "That is correct. Heavy mechs are not ubiquitous in my daily life. My design activities mostly intersect with the private sector. On some rare occasions, I accept commissions from government entities, but even then I rarely get in touch with heavy mechs."

There were very few heavy mechs in the Larkinson Clan. The Flagrant Vandals had brought over their Akkara heavy artillery mechs, but there weren't many of them. Ves never visited the Princely Jackal or other Vandal sh.i.p.s, so he had never studied those impressive mechs up close.

"You need to develop a better feel towards heavy mechs, Mr. Larkinson. Therefore, the first step you need to make is to see and study them up close. You need to understand the raw power they possess, the enormous amount of mass that make them solid and the many limitations they possess that make them vulnerable to certain attacks. While I am certain that you already possess a good amount of understanding of the theory, this is slightly different."

He understood what she was trying to convey. His perspective towards heavy mechs was too distant and too heavily based on theory. This caused him to develop a skewed and shallow understanding towards these majestic machines that was very flawed in the eyes of a high authority in mech design!

Normally, Ves would have sought to undergo a Mastery in heavy mechs, but this was not the time for him to mentally wander off for a week.

As long as Task Force Predator remained in the Nyxian Gap, Ves had to assume that a crisis could burst out at any moment!

"I will take the time to get up close to heavy mechs. Thank you for the advice. Do you have any other advice, ma'am?"

The physical projection of Master Willix began pacing around the isolated chamber. She wasn't in a hurry to open her mouth.

For a moment, Ves developed a strange thought. Since she projected herself in this chamber in this fashion, wouldn't it be possible for him to..

What was he thinking?! Ves immediately scrubbed his mind of irrelevant thought. This was not the time for him to think about the activities he performed with Gloriana's physical projection in this chamber!

Fortunately, Master Willix didn't seem to notice his impure thoughts.

"The basic rationale for heavy mechs are simple. They are large, heavy machines that possess so much mass that they are incapable of relying on their mobility to dodge or evade attacks. They are also slow to move, which is a disadvantage in many battles. Retreating becomes impossible, and so does advancing quickly. This is also why they are mostly fielded by state mech militaries. Heavy mechs are very potent in both large-scale battles and battles of attrition."

Ves nodded. "Another reason why heavy mechs are used by states is because they provide much more value relative to how much capacity they occupy on a carrier vessel."

"That is an important reason for their use, yes. With the various advantages and disadvantages of heavy mechs, it is rare for smaller private organizations to make use of them. Naturally, this rule applies less to larger organisations such as your Larkinson Clan. Tell me, what is the reason for you to design the Cat's Paw?"

"Our Larkinson Clan will soon acquire a factory ship and a fleet of combat carriers. Each of them are very valuable and require a lot of protection. Since they come with bunkers, we can make use of them by slotting in the Cat's Paw."

"Why design the Cat's Paw as a landbound heavy artillery mech?" She asked. "Why did you not design a spaceborn heavy artillery mech instead?"

"The mobility of the latter will never be good. Adding a functioning flight system onto a heavy mech is an enormous building and will take up way too much capacity. A lot of the energy that the mech can draw upon will have to be diverted to the flight system as well, thereby reducing the firepower of such a mech even further. I would rather design a flightless heavy artillery mech that I can fully devote towards maximizing firepower."

She nodded. "This is a logical reason. Spaceborn mechs have to devote a considerable amount of capacity to accommodate flight systems. This is a major burden that you must have already experienced in your previous mech designs. However, you are missing the point. There are many differences between spaceborn and landbound heavy artillery mechs, but why do they truly exist? Why has the mech community settled on defining heavy mechs within specific boundaries?"

Ves paused a moment. He dug up a lesson he learned long ago. "Heavy mechs should be big enough to fulfill their roles in a cost, resource and time-efficient manner. They should not exceed a certain mass or volume because doing so makes them less efficient in the areas that I have mentioned."

"That is a good answer, Mr. Larkinson, but it does not address the point I am trying to make. Mech designers develop heavy mechs along a substantially different paradigm from light and medium mechs. There are good reasons why most mech designers who choose to specialize in heavy mechs belong to a different category. It is not easy to span all three standard weight classes."

She provided another vague answer. Ves felt increasingly more irritated at her lack of clarity. Master Willix probably didn't want him to obtain answers from others. She believed it was best if he came up with the answer on his own!"

"Every mech designer develops a slightly different perspective towards heavy mechs." Master Willix noted. "Depending on how you view them, your heavy mech designs will take on different characters. This is something you must explore on your own. This is a deeply personal process."

"Understood. Thank you again for your guidance." Ves respectfully bowed yet again.

The guidance of a genuine Master Mech Designer neatly made up some of his weaknesses that he had developed as he rose up into prominence.

Despite his various thoughts towards Master Willix and the MTA, he earnestly appreciated her teachings.

As a mech designer, he could set aside everything else in order to learn some valuable lessons!

Chapter 2266: Kellandra Wodin

"Kellandra! You're finally here!"

Two Hexer women both approached each other before hugging each other with great affection.

A large number of Wodin Warriors and Glory Warriors stood guard around the landing zone of the Larkinson Clan's temporary base on Cinach VI. Both mechs and foot soldiers diligently scanned the perimeter for any threats.

The reason for their caution was because two of the Wodin Dynasty's descendants had both gathered on a foreign planet!

The identity of Gloriana Wodin had always been special. As the sixth child of Constance Wodin, she had always been the baby of the family. She enjoyed the love of five older siblings as well as her parents and many other relatives.

Yet it was only in the last few years that she made her mark in Hexer society. Ironically, she only managed to break into prominence by leaving the Hexadric Hegemony and entering into a relationship with a foreign boy of all people!

Many of the Hexers back home who knew Gloriana silently or overtly disapproved of her shameful actions. Why in the galaxy did she decline to choose from the billions of eligible and well-bred pretty boys of her home state in favor of pursuing a rustic space peasant?

Gloriana paid no mind to the jeers. She had already made a determination to stay with Ves forever and even her own relatives couldn't stop her from making her dreams come true!

Fortunately, the bet she made on Ves had paid off. With the help of his unique design philosophy, the so-called Miracle Couple shot up into prominence. With their reach expanding into other star sectors, there were hardly any Journeymen in the Yeina Star Cluster who had achieved more impact in the mech community!

The Wodin Dynasty eventually changed their mind around Ves. While there were still many conservative old women in the expansive dynasty who still opposed the relationship, Constance Wodin and many other forward-looking Hexers saw the potential to rise up and benefit from the Miracle Couple's rise.

The latter faction soon received vindication in the form of the successful reception of the Blessed Squire. The supportive knight mech designed by Gloriana and Ves not only caused the Marrakath System to fall ahead of time, but also inspired great fervor among the Hexers who fought under its glow.

Even though the Blessed Squire was very problematic in terms of quality and attribution, many Hexers believed it was only a matter of time before the council of matriarchs reluctantly approved the use of the unique new mech model.

In fact, Gloriana had even heard rumors that other units of the Hex Army had secretly begun to mass produce the Blessed Squire. As soon as the stubborn matriarchs ceased their resistance, a flood of mechs that was partially designed by a boy would quickly flood the battlefields across every frontline!

Under this enormous momentum, more and more people in the Hegemony paid attention to those who were pivotal in designing and realizing this huge contribution to the war effort.

Though it was hard to believe, in the perspective of the Hegemony as a whole, Gloriana Wodin had quietly become the most famous and prominent member of the Wodin Dynasty!

Not even Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin, the two-hundred year old leader of the dynasty, could match one of her descendant's fame!

This was one of the most universal quirks in human society. No matter how much the Hegemony differed from other states, most of its citizens never paid much attention to the leaders and politicians who governed the way they lived their lives.

Instead, celebrities such as famed expert pilots and prominent mech designers were much more dazzling from their perspectives!

The work they performed and the achievements they made resonated much more to the masses. The marketability of their efforts made it easy for the media to hype and promote their greatness.

In contrast, Matriarch Xiaphna and Minister Constance largely escaped the public eye despite their high positions and advanced ages. Fortunately, there was hardly any conflict within the Wodin Dynasty on this matter.

After Kellandra and Gloriana finished hugging each other, they separated and took a good look at each other.

Gloriana wore the typical red-and-white uniform of the Larkinson Clan. Even though she hadn't asked for permission, she added some extra emblems and markings to it to allow her to stand out of the other clansmen.

She also wore some tasteful Hexer jewelry this time in order to make a better impression on her older sister. In addition, she wore her opulent engagement ring with pride.

As for Kellandra Wodin, she wore the blue-and-grey officer uniform of the Wodin Warrior as if she was born into it. After letting herself go for a moment, she regained her impeccable, disciplined demeanor, causing her to exude the unmistakable aura of a senior military officer.

The various gold-rimmed markings and epaulettes on her shoulder signified that she bore the rank of mech colonel!

Within the Wodin Warriors, she commanded an entire mech regiment. With 2,000 mechs and mech pilots at her beck and call, she expected to be deployed to the frontlines of the Komodo War this year.

She never thought that the Wodin Dynasty delayed her deployment and instead directed her mech regiment to leave the Hexadric Hegemony and travel all the way to the Sentinel Kingdom!

And that wasn't all. She arrived alongside several other mech regiments and reinforcements to the Glory Battalion.

Right now, the Wodins appeared to have taken over the entire Cinach System. While regular traffic and commerce still kept the star system busy, the presence of hundreds of Hexer carriers and thousands of Hexer mechs loomed heavily on the local sentinels!

House Evenson and the other noble houses in the star system did not dare to make any peep. The Wodin Dynasty might not be a great power in the Hegemony, but they were more than strong enough to sweep their forces in a matter of days!

The increasing amount of Hexer combat assets reflected the growing value of Gloriana. The wedding scheduled to begin a couple of months had become an increasingly more notable event.

Some of the Hexers who had rejected Gloriana's invitation regretted their decision!

"I have waited so long for your arrival." Gloriana giddily said. "Let me show you around the Larkinson Clan! While they are rather.. rustic and misguided, they mean well. Don't let their shabbiness fool you. Once we get our hands on our new ships, our strength will soon transform."

Kellandra raised her eyebrows at her younger sister's choice of wording. She already showed an obvious belonging to the Larkinson Clan. This was not entirely proper, as boys usually married into the families of women instead of the other way around!

Still, Ves was such an exceptional boy to the Wodins and the Hexers that Kellandra opted to let this matter slide. The matriarch herself had issued some decisive commands.

"Miaow."

"Oh, let me show you my new cat that I've picked up from Centerpoint!"

Gloriana eagerly held out her hands, causing Clixie to jump into her grasp in a practiced motion. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat looked similar to a calico cat, but her glossy fur exuded a sense of class and elegance that was far superior to her more mundane cousins!

"Miaow~"

Even though Kellandra was an accomplished mech colonel, she couldn't help but drop her stern mask once again as she petted the cat's head.

"What a lovely feline. You have acquired two great companions instead of one. You have grown up so fast."

"I told you that I would be able to find my success once I left home!"

The pair of prominent Wodins continued to chat while they toured the base where the Larkinsons had made their home for many months. The clansmen who lived and worked at the expansive complex all distanced themselves from the large groups of Hexer soldiers and guards.

While Kellandra caught up with Gloriana, her eyes kept darting around. She paid especially great attention to the various LMC mechs that Gloriana expressly showed off. Their unique glows each left a profound impression on the older Wodin.

Before she left for the Sentinel Kingdom, Kellandra had already experienced the glows of the Blessed Squire. She had witnessed the performance of the prototypes during the testing phase and had become mildly impressed at the time.

Yet the mech model's actual performance in the Marrakath System completely exceeded her expectations! When the Blessed Squire's glow had reached its full form, its utility astounded every Hexer who experienced it in person.

This happened to be related to one of Kellandra's goals for visiting the Larkinson Clan today.

As they continued to tour the base as if it was their own possession, Kellandra and Gloriana soon discussed some of the new arrangements.

"The batch of Wodin Warriors that have just arrived with me won't be the last. There are more mech regiments on the way. During the wedding, we hope to have a full mech division in place."

"A full mech division?! That's much more than I expected!" Gloriana looked surprised.

"It's barely adequate. Mind you, your Glory Battalion will also play a greater role. We have decided to elevate its strength to a full mech regiment and implement some changes. From now on your personal protection detail will be called the Glory Seekers."

From Glory Battalion to Glory Seekers, the mech pilots and guards trained by the Wodin Dynasty still fulfilled the same mission. They were all expected to dedicate their lives to protecting Gloriana!

Though she was happy with the obvious sign of favor from the dynasty, Gloriana looked a bit concerned.

"Bringing twelve-thousand Hexers mechs to the Cinach System is a huge undertaking. Will our dynasty be able to bear it? Why bring so many mechs?"

"Your value to the war effort is immeasurable, sister. We don't want to take your protection for granted, especially since we have become aware that the Fridaymen are plotting to take your life and the life of your boy. Our Wodin Warriors are only needed in order to protect all of the guests who will arrive from the Hegemony in the coming months. Your mother and all of your brothers and sisters will attend, and so will our matriarch!"

Gloriana widened her eyes. The exaggerated troop movements all made sense once she knew that Matriarch Xiaphna planned to attend her wedding. The aged woman's presence was incredibly important, and showed that the matriarch was willing to commit her political capital to bless the coming union!

Even if Matriarch Xiaphna was her grandmother, Gloriana still doubted whether the leader of the Wodin Dynasty was willing to stand up to her relationship with Ves. Now, all of the uncertainty disappeared.

Thanks to the Blessed Squire, Gloriana had gained a great amount of credibility, enough to excuse all of her radical actions in the past few years!

The tour soon ended once they entered an underground warehouse guarded by the soon-to-be-dubbed Glory Seekers.

The tight security was warranted due to the extremely valuable treasure that resided within.

After passing through the security checks, the two Wodins and cat slowly approached the marble-like statue of the Superior Mother.

Ves had left it behind to keep Gloriana and her fellow Hexers happy. Each day, she and her Hexer bodyguards worshipped in front of the tall and imposing artwork.

Its face imperiously stared forward as it exuded both love and consequence.

"As expected of the Superior Mother!" Kellandra gasped. Her emotions grew turbulent as she experienced the raw glow emanated by the statue. "It's 'glow' so much more purer than the glow of the Blessed Squire!"

Gloriana smiled piously at the work of art. "This is my fiancé's mother. What you are feeling now is just an inkling of her power. During the ceremony that baptized this statue, I had the honor of experiencing the Supreme's full might!"

Kellandra slowly adopted a similar pious expression. "I hardly believed when you initially told me about it, but now.. I believe you. I believe in the Superior Mother. No wonder your fiancé managed to make a mech as remarkable as the Blessed Squire. He is truly the son of the Superior Mother!"

"That makes him a Hexer." Gloriana grinned. "Isn't that right?"

"Your logic is impeccable. It's a travesty to call him a Brighter! We should correct his citizenship right away!"

Chapter 2267: Ornamental Gem

"Meow."

Something small but hard smacked his cheek. Ves yawned and stretched as he sat up from the bed. He rubbed the faint stubble that grew over his face while he wearily looked around for whatever hit his face.

He became a bit more awake when a mysterious-looking gem rested on the side of his pillow!

The gem attracted his attention due to the pulsing glow emanating from its center. Though faint, its irregular rhythm reminded him of the heartbeat of a dying person. Ves felt a very faint sense of instability and danger from the purple gem.

He carefully pinched it with his fingers and brought it in front of his face. Soon, his System vision provided him with a description.

[Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. Carry this gem at your own risk.

"...That's it?"

Ves wondered if he was still dreaming. What kind of stupid description was this? The System's description completely failed to tell him what it could be used for! Could this mech even be used on mechs at all, or was it merely another baubling that was only useful as an ornament?

"At least it looks good." Ves muttered as he rubbed his eyes in the hopes that the description changed. No luck. "Maybe I can integrate it into one of my wedding bands."

He still hadn't worked on the bare but extremely high-quality wedding rings given by his mother. Even though they consisted of some unknown but exceptional high-grade exotics, their lack of color or decoration made them a little boring for the moment.

Someone as exacting as Gloriana would never accept such plain rings!

While Ves managed to keep her happy with the engagement ring he presented to her some months ago, he knew that he needed to come up with something better in less than four months or Gloriana would definitely become angry.

He frowned. So far, raiding pirates yielded a lot of Kavenit and random exotics. Yet none of the spoils aside from B-stone fit his marriage rings.

While some high-quality mechs and equipment contained trace amounts of high-grade exotics, they weren't stable or safe for humans. Ves needed to get his hands on materials that met all of his requirements.

Hopefully, he might be able to obtain what he sought from Ulimo Citadel. Since the field of asteroids around it was known to contain deposits of higher grades of exotics, Ves believed the Dry Snakes squirrelled away a decent amount of high-grade exotics.

He turned his body until he faced his cat, who floated curiously next to his bed. He lifted up the gem. "Is this what months worth of eating exotics has produced?"

"Meow!"

"You have literally eaten tons of metals! Why couldn't you have produced something of practical value?!"

"Meow meow!"

"What? The Nyxian Gap is upsetting your digestion system? Pff! What a useless gem. I can't use it at all on mechs. I'll only forgive you if you produce an identical one before the wedding, got it? Otherwise, you can forget about eating my Breyer alloy!"

"Meow?"

"You heard that right. I'm relying on you to decorate my wedding rings. I need an identical pair! At the very least, they need to look similar. Try and produce an orange or red gem, that would go nicely with this purple one."

"Meowwww!"

Lucky hissed and quickly dove through the deck. Ves merely shrugged at his cat's antics.

He climbed out of his bed and went through his morning routine. After undergoing a quick cleaning cycle, he dressed himself in his ordinary clan uniform while a grooming bot lightly styled his messy dark hair.

When it was time for him to shave, he held out his face, allowing the bot to shave off his stubble in a matter of seconds.

The bathroom's original grooming bot unfortunately perished when Ves used it as a decoy during his successful hijack of the Scarlet Rose. Gloriana generously gifted him with a high-quality Hexer grooming bot that was originally part of the inventory of the Stellar Chaser.

The Hexer model featured exceptionally effective shaving mechanisms. Ves was highly-impressed with the speed and thoroughness it displayed when it got rid of his stubble. The fact that it made his skin feel exceptionally smooth and supple throughout the day was a great testament of its quality.

"Female Hexers want their boys to look as young as possible, after all. It's difficult to infantilize the male half of their society if they are all wearing beards that make them look like actual adults."

Once he finished shaving, he ate his breakfast quickly before visiting the isolated communication chamber. After placing a call, Gavin's projection soon appeared to provide a daily briefing.

"A lot has happened, boss."

The assistant succinctly described the thousands of Hexer mechs that had entered the Cinach System as well as the revised plans for the wedding.

Though Ves had expected the upcoming wedding to change according to the circumstances, hearing that the Wodin Dynasty planned to station an entire mech division of the Wodin Warriors was out of his expectations!

"I thought the Wodins would only dispatch a mech regiment or something! And the Glory Battalion wouldn't have more than a thousand mechs!"

"The Blessed Squire finally caused the Wodins to acknowledge your great value to them, boss. It shouldn't be a surprise that they want to express their sincerity in this fashion. The matriarch of the dynasty and around fifty other Wodins will be attending the upcoming wedding!"

Ves did not look happy at all. To the Hexers, having a matriarch personally attend their wedding was a grand honor. To him, the presence of an old lady who was used to getting her way only represented trouble!

The Hexers took their matriarchs very seriously. Each of them were stately leaders or grand experts in their respective fields. Not any old Hexer could call herself a matriarch. Though Ves wasn't quite clear on how a female Hexer could obtain the title, those who obtained them had undoubtedly become part of the ruling class of the Hegemony!

"I'm more concerned about the transformation of the Glory Battalion into the Glory Seekers." Gavin spoke. "The Wodins are truly serious about giving Gloriana a private mech regiment for her to command. I don't know how they have done it, but every Glory Seeker is willing to leave the Hegemony and follow Gloriana for the rest of their lives! They have even adopted rules about recruiting foreigners to replenish or expand their ranks."

"And they will all fall under the nominal command of Gloriana? Not the Larkinson Clan?"

His assistant's projection nodded.

"Goddammit!"

Ves did not welcome this sudden development! Even though it sounded very nice to be accompanied by a strong, fully-equipped second-class mech regiment, they probably wouldn't listen to his orders!

He knew what was going on. His future in-laws wanted to make sure to maintain a strong Hexer influence around Gloriana. Now that she was about to marry into the Larkinson Clan, it would become increasingly more difficult for her to maintain her pure Hexer roots.

With thousands of loyal Hexer soldiers at her beck and call, it became a lot more difficult to shift Gloriana's mindset.

He sighed and rubbed his face. Though the Wodins valued him very much, that did not necessarily mean they listened to him. The Wodins were very justified in providing Gloriana with the best protection possible. Currently, the Larkinson Clan wasn't able to match the strength of the Glory Seekers when they completed their transformation.

"Do the Glory Seekers come with any fleet carriers or other capital ships at least?"

"No." Gavin shook his head. "They only brought the usual combat carriers and logistical vessels. They're not the Penitent Sisters, though. Their mechs and ships aren't second-hand castoffs."

The rapid growth in strength ensured that the Glory Seekers would easily be able to overtake the Penitent Sisters in strength! At the very least, the protection they offered gave Ves a lot more assurances in his upcoming journeys.

Gavin spent some time to detail the exact strength of the Glory Seekers. More projections came into view that displayed their formidable new ships and mechs.

Ves paid special attention to the mechs fielded by the Glory Seekers. He noted to his pleasure that the worst of them consisted of premium mechs while the best of them consisted of very expensive premier mechs.

What stood out to him was that the mech roster consisted of 1,000 spaceborn mechs and 1,000 landbound mechs.

The spaceborn mechs were able to fly under atmospheric conditions or fight on land, though they weren't optimized to fight under these conditions.

The landbound mechs on the other hand possessed limited boosting capabilities and could maneuver in space, though their acceleration was abysmal. This was because they lacked a proper flight system. Instead, they made use of several small-sized booster modules installed throughout their frames.

It seemed the Wodins weren't big believers in multi-environment mechs. They only compromised a bit, but not enough in his opinion.

"Did they dispatch any expert pilots?"

"No. According to Gloriana, Hexer expert pilots are very principled and it's difficult to convince them to leave the Hegemony and serve a foreign clan. The good news is that Venerable Brutus isn't one of them. The Wodins have decided to make his current assignment permanent. He no longer has to fight the Fridaymen in the frontlines in the Komodo War."

This was not a big surprise to Ves. The contribution he could make to the Hexer war effort was much greater than the presence of a single expert pilot. The Hexadric Hegemony benefited much more if Venerable Brutus kept guarding the Miracle Couple and prevent any potential assassination attempts.

The presence of an expert pilot, which the MTA regarded as a protected class, was more than enough to stop most opportunistic attacks!

All in all, the Wodin Dynasty completely showed their sincerity towards Ves this time, though they couldn't resist putting a Hexer spin on it. Their apparent gifts came with some very dangerous thorns.

The recent changes cleared up a lot of ambiguity about his relationship with his future in-laws. Ves felt grateful that the Wodins did not intend to force him to travel to the Hegemony.

There was one piece of news that irked him greatly.

"By the way, Gloriana and one of her older sisters attempted to change your citizenship status. They applied to 'correct' your current status from Brighter to Hexer. The reason they gave is.. your mother is a Hexer."

"What?! That's not true! My mother is a Brighter! I told her not to spread that nonsense around!"

"We all know it's fake, and the MTA agrees as well. The attempt failed."

At least the MTA was still sane!

Ves glowered a bit. It sounded as if Gloriana was not the only Hexer who thought that he was literally the son of the Superior Mother. Even if it was technically true, it was still wrong in his eyes!

"Is there anything else that needs to come to my attention?"

"We've begun to receive a deluge of requests to attend your wedding, boss. All sorts of prominent mech designers and other powerful individuals want to be there. Some of them have even come from other star sectors!"

"Why the hell do these foreigners want to attend?"

It was a lot of trouble to travel to other star sectors. Ves didn't believe that people did so casually.

"Some want to get closer to the Miracle Couple. Others want to brag about being a part of the most important social event of the decade. A few want to challenge you, while others want to partner up with the Larkinson Clan. A portion of these people aren't easy to deal with, so don't reject them too hastily."

Ves sighed. This smelled like more politics. He knew that he needed to take this warning seriously.

Chapter 2268: Comprehending Heavy Mechs

Once he got his morning routines out of the way, he decided to follow up Master Willix's advice and view some heavy mechs up close.

His first choice was to observe one of the few heavy mechs he was familiar with. He boarded a shuttle that brought him to the Princely Jackal. Aside from bringing Lucky, he also invited Zanthar Larkinson to look at some big mechs.

The adolescent student eagerly accepted the offer, not that he had any choice. Ves would have dragged him in the shuttle by the collar if he refused. Developing unhealthy fascination for illegal superweapons was a very quick way to get on the bad side of the Big Two!

Once the shuttle arrived at the Princely Jackal's hangar bay, Commander Rosa Orfan-Larkinson greeted him with a lazy wave.

"Hey kid. So what brings you here today?"

"I'm not here for an inspection or anything. Nor am I here to discuss official business. I just want to take a good look at the Akkara heavy mechs assigned to this ship. I always respected Professor Velten as a Senior Mech Designer. She gave me some very valuable advice and taught me how to manage design projects. It is only proper for me to study a portion of her legacy. Right now, I'm designing my own heavy artillery mech, so I'm hoping to acquire some useful insights."

"Huh." Commander Orfan's face lost some of its joviality. "The old professor was one of the bedrocks of our mech regiment back in the old days. She deserved more."

"She deserved more." Ves echoed. "At least she lived a long and peaceful life."

Professor Velten was already more than 150 years old, but her lifespan had already reached its limit when Ves had been drafted by the Mech Corps. A botched life-prolonging treatment operation supposedly led to her deteriorating health and mental state.

Though she lived longer and made far more accomplishments than ordinary Brighters, Ves found her fate to be very tragic. She even lost one of her Journeymen who was supposed to continue her research after her passing.

Ves learned a lot of lessons from her. He not only learned to value his time, but also cherish his opportunities. When he grew older, he did not want to regret the mistakes he made when he was young!

The small group crossed the hangar bay headed to the adjacent mech stables where dozens of mechs were safely secured. They stopped in front of the machines that Ves wanted to visit in person.

Technically, the Akkara was a heavy cannoneer mech. This became evident due to the myriad of rapid-fire laser and heavier ballistic cannons mounted to its quadruped frame.

The formidable mech featured no flight system to speak of, but its appearance lent itself well for both landbound operations and use in space as a bunker mech.

Not everyone understood the difference between an artillery mech and a cannoneer mech. To be honest, the differences were rather nuanced, mostly because the pioneers of mech design applied their own labels to similar concepts.

In short, a typical artillery mech excelled at outputting damage at medium but especially long range. Their armament could range from anything, but their firepower was always very strong.

Landbound artillery mechs were typically capable of attacking targets outside of line of sight, mostly by lobbing shells over tall structures and other obstacles.

They were very vulnerable at closer ranges and possessed virtually no defense against melee mechs. They possessed slow to average mobility but their inadequate armor despite their heavy frames were not designed to resist sustained attacks.

A cannoneer mech played a different role on the battlefield. They were capable machines in both long and medium ranges and mostly wielded large-caliber weapons that were attacked by line-of-sight.

This mech type was more suited to heated battles as they possessed slightly more armor and mobility, allowing them to perform at least some viable maneuvers on the battlefield.

That did not mean it was a good idea to allow them to soak up enemy fire. Cannoneer mechs were also poor in melee combat as their strong but unwieldy limbs simply couldn't move fast enough.

In any case, whether the Akkara model of the Flagrant Vandals fell under the definition of artillery mech or cannoner mech was not important to Ves. What truly mattered was that the Cat's Paw fulfilled the same role as the Akkara. Mostly.

"What a big mech." Zanthar exclaimed as he looked straight up at the large and imposing mech.

"That's the point."

The mass of the Akkara was around four times greater than a typical medium mech. Its expanded height and girth significantly expanded the big mech's capacity, allowing it to mount over dozen different weapons.

Ves briefly immersed himself in his memories. He had seen Akkaras mechs in action during plenty of battles between the Flagrant Vandals and whatever enemy stood in their way. Vesians and pirates all suffered dearly against these heavy cannoner mechs.

Thick plates of armor protected the mech against retaliation. Since the budget of the Akkara was very generous, Professor Velten was able to make her Akkaras withstand quite a lot of damage against its typical foes. This was no glass cannon that fell apart after suffering a few hits!

When Ves looked at the dormant Akkara, he tried his best not to focus too much on the details. Instead, he viewed the impressive machine from a holistic perspective and tried to see if he could perceive what Master Willix hinted at during their previous consultation session.

He developed various thoughts, some of which he felt were useless. Only a few stray thoughts merited more attention from him, but the problem was that these idle ideas usually led to dead ends.

Even though Ves was in the process of designing his first heavy mech in the form of the Cat's Paw, he felt as if he came no closer to understanding the essence of heavy mechs.

Maybe other people could point him in the right direction.

"What do you think about this Akkara, Zanthar?"

"It's big."

"You already told me that. This is the most obvious aspect about this mech. Now what else is there?"

"It has four legs."

"Yes, it's a quadruped mech. Thank you for that, Captain Obvious."

Commander Orfan stifled a laugh. She wasn't very good at it. "Hahahaha! He's just a squirt, kid. What does he know about heavy mechs?"

"Hey! I'm a future mech designer, lady!"

Ves swatted Zanthar's face. "Watch your tone! She might not sound very formal, but she is the respected commander of the Flagrant Vandals."

"I don't care." Orfan.

"I'm trying to raise him into a proper and respectable mech designer, commander. I don't expect you to help, but at least don't make it worse."

"What's so bad about this squirt? He looks kind of cute!"

Ves loudly coughed. "Let's get back to the Akkara mech, please. Zanthar, your thoughts?"

"Well.." The adolescent trailed for a moment. "I've seen a lot of medium mechs and plenty of light mechs. All of those mechs are at least somewhat maneuverable. I think one of the reasons why mercenary corps like to use mobile mechs a lot is because they never want to fight to the death. Once a battle goes against their way, they want to run away as quickly as possible, and lugging around a heavy mech is just a big mistake in those situations! Oh, smaller mechs are cheaper as well, so that's also a big advantage!"

Ves and Commander Orfan shared a bemused glance with each other.

They found the remark amusing not because it sounded ridiculous, but because Zanthar's argument was both right and ridiculous!

The Vandal Commander actually looked thoughtful this time. "I think the greater point of this fellow is right. I fought in many battles where moving quickly and being in the right place at the right time was crucial. Battles between mechs is one big maneuvering game where you try to position your mechs to the greatest advantage while the enemy is doing the same. It's a mistake to think you can simply win every battle by investing loads of money into fielding a force that consists entirely of heavy mechs."

Heavy mechs possessed their own distinctive weaknesses. At the very least, their slow mobility made them vulnerable to either massed bombardment or committed melee assaults.

"How did you and your fellow Vandal officers work with the limitations of the Akkaras?" Ves asked.

"The Akkaras are strong, but they aren't the right solution in every situation. We try to use them as the core of our defensive posture. When an enemy attacks us, we try to lure their mechs into the killzone of our prepared Akkaras. When we do the attacking, we don't overtake our Akkaras but instead match their pace when there is no need for haste."

"Time." Ves suddenly felt he grasped something. "The situations you mentioned are times where the Vandals didn't need to hurry. They traded time for greater opportunities, and they did so in order to leverage the strengths of the Akkara mechs!"

Heavy mechs were so slow and cumbersome that they rarely took part in any offensive maneuvers. That limited their usefulness as the enemy wasn't obliged to run in front of their guns to get blasted!

What the Flagrant Vandals attempted was to invest time and effort into putting the Akkaras into situations when they were useful.

From luring enemies into the range of the Akkara mechs to slowly pushing them forward so they could bombard enemy formations and defenses, all of these scenarios demanded patience and planning.

Heavy mechs possessed awesome power, but their critical flaw limited their applicability. Those who owned them and fielded them in battle had to learn how to work around their known weaknesses in order to fully express their great advantages.

He formed his first important insight. "Heavy mechs are sort of extreme versions to their medium counterparts. They are specialized to a much greater degree than regular mechs, which means that they impose much higher requirements on the command ability of the people in charge. This is also why they are largely limited to the military or large-scale organizations, as only they are able to hire or nurture competent commanding officers."

"It's kind of like they are fixed in place somewhat. You can't easily move them around." Zanthar remarked.

"The squirt is right. That's how we Vandals usually treat our Akkara mechs. We don't try to move them if it's not urgently required. We treat them similar to stationary defenses that are just easier to install and remove than actual turrets and defense platforms. You could say that they are a hybrid between medium mechs and stationary defenses."

Ves widened his eyes when he heard that. Commander Orfan's words caused him to view heavy mechs from yet another perspective!

Viewing them as fixed defenses that just happened to move a bit from time to time caused him to develop a different standard towards them. The mobility of most heavy

mechs were weak because they truly didn't need more. Heavy mech designers consciously sacrificed mobility in order to reach greater extremes in offense or defense!

When mech designers pursued this principle far enough, the products they make eventually acquire many of the traits that define fixed defenses.

Was this a good or bad development? No one could say for sure, but so far, heavy mechs designed according to this principle were viable, otherwise so many mech militaries wouldn't have fielded them in battle!

When Ves looked up again at the Akkara with this new lens, his impression of it had changed. He no longer focused purely on its firepower or its individual might. Instead, he saw the mech as a single piece of a greater puzzle.

This was a result of his third insight!

Heavy mechs normally weren't suited to be deployed by themselves. They needed to work together with medium mechs and light mechs in order to leverage their strengths!

Chapter 2269: Unified Doctrine

Ves gained much from his short visit to the Princely Jackal. Observing the Akkara heavy cannoner mechs of the Flagrant Vandals not only granted him a better feel for huge machines, but also sparked a fruitful discussion with two different people.

He found it rather surprising that both Zanthar and Commander Orfan helped expand his views on heavy mechs. The two weren't known for their wisdom and wealth of knowledge. Yet their different perspectives and life experiences caused them to illuminate new angles that Ves previously overlooked.

On the shuttle ride back to the Scarlet Rose, Ves briefly activated his comm in order to call for a meeting with Major Verle. He had a lot to talk about and wanted to get started right away once he returned.

"Meow."

Meanwhile, Lucky squinted his glowing green eyes as Zanthar eagerly tickled his pale bronze exterior. Even if the surface felt like a mix of solid bone and metal, the mechanical cat appeared to be quite sensitive!

"Can I have a cat like Lucky too?" Zanthar smiled as he enjoyed this moment.

"Lucky is unique. You can't afford a cat like him. Perhaps it will be different when our Larkinson Clan becomes a first-class power, but don't get your hopes up. If you want a pet, then you are better off looking for something organic."

Ves had received this question many times ever since he obtained the gem cat. There was no way that he would tell anyone the truth. He would simply tell people that Lucky was a Rubarthan product or something. That quickly ended the questioning.

"Awww..."

The teenager looked disappointed, but many people simply couldn't have nice stuff. The galaxy was filled with space peasants who looked at Terrans, Rubarthans, other first-raters, the true spaceborn, mecheers and fleeters with envy.

Ves knew it was pointless to feel jealous at those who were born at a much higher station than himself. Rather than engage in unproductive behavior, he might as well invest in himself in order to improve his ability and qualifications. Slowly but steadily, he would catch up and even surpass those privileged people.

Once the shuttle arrived at his personal ship, Ves exited the vehicle and quickly returned to his stateroom. With Lucky wandering off and Nitaa taking up an unobtrusive guard position, Ves readied his thoughts until Major Verle arrived.

"Please take a seat, major."

The middle-aged man in uniform did so. "What's this about, sir? You sounded quite eager over the comms."

"I developed some doubts in the process of designing our upcoming heavy artillery mech. I decided to seek some consultation and received some advice..."

Ves quickly explained what he had been up to. He also enumerated the most important insights he gleaned from studying the Akkara mechs.

"Several aspects of heavy mechs stand out to me. First, heavy mechs are incredibly specialized. By sacrificing mobility, they also sacrifice flexibility. Using them effectively in battle becomes more challenging, and many options simply aren't available due to their limitations."

Major Verle nodded as if he had long understood this point. "It is very easy to squander heavy mechs. Commanders need to pass special courses in order to gain the qualification to command them. They are so valuable that their loss can easily cripple a unit."

"This leads me to the second point. To make effective use of their pronounced strengths, we need to put more effort into manipulating the circumstances of the battle in our favor. Heavy mechs are assets that require time and patience to employ. Once we have set up the perfect circumstances, their extreme firepower or other strengths can be played to the fullest!"

"That's why heavy mechs exist, sir. A smaller formation consisting of heavy mechs can actually achieve far greater results than a larger formation of medium mechs. This is because you can concentrate much more firepower or defenses in a much smaller area."

"Thirdly, heavy mechs aren't very good by themselves." Ves pressed on. "They lack mobility and flexibility, hence they can't take the initiative. Heavy mechs perform at their best when they are part of a larger unit that boasts faster mechs. Combining different mech types and different mech classes is the key to achieving victory against many different opponents. In order to do that, our clan needs to develop a coherent strategy and configuration to make sure all of the pieces of the puzzle fits together."

Major Verle looked quite pleased when he heard that. "This is something that I have been working on in the past few months. Ever since you gave me permission to establish the Military Bureau, I haven't spent all of my time on unifying our personnel management and establishing rudimentary cooperation and coordination between our mech forces. With the help of some of the commanders and senior officers in the clan, I have been drafting a unified mech combat doctrine for the Larkinson Clan. The battles we have fought recently have allowed me to test, verify and refine its principles."

A unified mech combat doctrine!

Ves sat up a little straighter from his chair when he heard that. So far, the mech forces of the Larkinson Clan each fought in their own distinctive way. While the various battles against the Nyxian pirates allowed the Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels and the others to become accustomed to working together, there was still a lot to go before they reached the same standard as the military.

"Tell me what you have come up with, major."

The major breathed deeply. "This is a very big proposal, sir. In our opinion, the Larkinson Clan's mech combat doctrine rests on three legs. They are as follows: psychological warfare, elite development and maneuver warfare."

Even before the major explained the three legs, Ves already understood the gist of them. He had personally witnessed each and every battle against the pirates and could recognize elements from all of the three strategies.

Major Verle raised a finger. "Let's begin with the first one. Psychological warfare is something that I happen to specialize in. To put it simply, it is an attempt to defeat the opponent by forming a disparity between the morale of our own side and the morale of our enemies. It doesn't matter if our enemies outnumber us, fields better mechs or employs better trained mech pilots. As long as our fighting forces are more confident than the enemy, we can still win!"

This was something that Ves had always been impressed with and one of the reasons why he was so eager to hire the former mech officer and Flashlight operative. Major Verle possessed an excellent grasp in manipulating the morale of his subordinates.

Ves smiled. "I take it that the existence of glows makes it much easier to wage psychological warfare."

"Exactly so!" Verle grinned back. "While it is dangerous to become too dependent on glows, that is no reason to discount their use. Right now, our use of glows is more a result of using what is available. We still lack a more unified and strategic approach towards leveraging glows. It's not enough to come up and implement some plans. This cooperation needs to start from the beginning of the design process of your mechs."

"Ah! I see! I shouldn't have designed a new mech without obtaining sufficient input from my target audience."

This was something he overlooked. As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, Ves was accustomed to getting his way. Whenever he wanted to design a mech for the Larkinson Clan, he just developed an idea and designed it right away without sufficiently paying attention to the demands of the Larkinsons or whether it fit their needs.

Whenever he designed a mech for the market or a specific client, Ves paid much more attention to the needs of his customers. Skipping this essential step when he designed a mech for his own clan was an unforgivable mistake.

Fortunately, Ves only designed a single mech for the Larkinson Clan so far. As a modular mech platform, the Bright Warrior possessed a lot of versatility, which meant it was always useful in a battle.

The same could not be said for heavy mechs. Their extreme specialization meant that Ves had to pay much more attention to how they would be used in the battles waged by the Larkinson Clan.

The major explained the need to focus on psychological warfare.

"Compared to many other powers, our Larkinson Clan possess a great advantage in this aspect. Since you are the originator of glows, you can design any mech that manipulates the morale of both friendlies and enemies to our liking. Don't take the fact that we can affect the morale of multiple sides lightly. For example, if we say that a benign glow provides us with a 10 percent boost in performance, our battle results won't differ that much. However, if we pair that with a malignant glow that suppresses the enemy's performance by 10 percent, then the difference widens to 20 percent."

The ultimate impact of such a wide disparity was not that simple! If the disparity became too wide, then that meant that the superior side would easily be able to snowball their

advantages throughout the battle. A close battle with even losses on both sides could easily turn into a lopsided massacre with such a difference in morale!

The Battle of Marrakath System also highlighted the drastic difference that glows could make through this effect!

While it sounded great to achieve an easy victory through waging psychological warfare, Ves did not immediately embrace the notion.

"What if the enemy fields some sort of counter to our glows? The Friday Coalition's Masters and many other mech designers are already starting to research methods on how to counter my specialty."

"That's okay. I don't believe your glows can be negated so easily. At the very least, it is likely that those counters require very special solutions that only work against LMC mechs. The enemy will have to invest considerably in those counters in order to fight us on even ground. That is time and resources that they could have spent on something deadlier. Besides, I doubt most of our opponents will have sufficient counters ready. From our understanding of glow interactions, quantity is also a factor. Proportionally, no one fields more LMC mechs than our clan!"

That was true. Even if Master Olson and her fellow colleagues developed an effective counter to glows in the form of a mech, then one copy likely wouldn't be enough. An enemy would have to field hundreds, if not thousands of copies in order to effectively mitigate the Larkinson Clan's most notable advantage!

Against ordinary opponents such as pirate outfits, Ves doubted that any of them bothered to field any counter mechs. The only reason why they would do so was when LMC mechs became very popular in their region. Even if that was the case, that just meant the Larkinson Clan had become even wealthier, allowing it to field even stronger mechs!

Major Verle raised an important caveat. "We should be careful not to over rely on the advantages given by your mechs. Do you remember our first battle in the Nyxian Gap? We dispatched some Sentinel rookie mech pilots against some pirates in the company of some Bright Warriors from the Avatars. In the final moment, we ordered the Bright Warriors to withdraw, causing the rookies to become unbalanced by the sudden absence of glows."

"I remember." Ves grimaced a bit.

"As a result of that, Commander Magdalena and every other commander has made sure to prevent our mech pilots from getting too complacent. They need to fight well regardless of the presence of glows. This does not mean that our emphasis on psychological warfare has reached a dead end. Humans and aliens have waged

psychological warfare before the emergence of your glows. There are many other levers that we can manipulate in order to obtain advantages on this front."

Propaganda, training and many other measures could all achieve some of the effects of glows. The main difference was that glows were much more directly applicable during battle while those other options had to take place beforehand.

On top of that, the Larkinson Clan also possessed another advantage that Major Verle wasn't entirely aware of. The Larkinson Network that bonded every clansman to the Golden Cat and with each other could also play an important role!

All of these measures had the potential to overlap, resulting in a qualitative disparity that was difficult to surmount. Ves readily agreed with Major Verle that the Larkinson Clan should pursue this advantage to the fullest!

Chapter 2270: Hand Motions

Up until now, the Larkinson Clan's approach to glows was just to make use of them whenever convenient. There was hardly any greater thought behind their use because they were just there already.

The Avatars of Myth, which was arguably the greatest user of glows in the Larkinson Clan, just took whatever mech that Ves shoved at them. It was up to them to figure out how to make effective use of the new glows.

This was a rather faulty approach. What actually needed to happen was for Commander Melkor to approach Ves and request the addition of a mech that fulfilled a certain role or requirements. The needs of the Avatars had to fit its chosen doctrines and approaches.

"This is something that we can work out in the future." Major Verle remarked. "Right now, it's more important to formulate and verify each mech force's respective development trajectories. Once we exit the Nyxian Gap, we can review all of the battles we have waged and use the conclusions to confirm our plans."

"You're the expert in this matter. I will defer to your judgement." Ves waved his hand.

He needed to remind himself that he was primarily a mech designer, not a military strategist. There was no need for him to provide his input on every single issue.

That said, his work as a mech designer was influenced heavily by what kind of mechs the Larkinson Clan needed to win its battles.

Verle brought up the next leg that propped up his unified doctrine.

"Let's move on to elite development. As you can probably surmise, elite development is all about training and developing our various elite mech troops. In our case, that is every

mech pilot aside from the ones belonging to the Living Sentinels. Our clan is quite unusual compared to other nomadic, spacefaring powers. Usually, a nomadic clan of our scale only employs a single mech force that is exclusively used to defend its fleet. Nothing more, mostly because there is no need."

Originally, Ves only started off with the Avatars of Myth. He later decided to narrow their scope as elites and founded the Living Sentinels to fill up the void. After that, various other forces such as the Battle Criers, Swordmaidens and Flagrant Vandals merged with the Larkinson Clan while still retaining their unique identities.

A mech force with a strong, decades-long martial tradition was more than the sum of their mechs, mech pilots and other assets. They formed a cohesive, synergistic whole that employed time-tested strategies, distinctive training and strong specialization to achieve far greater results than a band of random mechs and mech pilots could ever accomplish!

Ves disliked waste and did not wish to throw all of those advantages away. While that had led to the fracturing of the Larkinson Clan's fighting forces, the growing diversity was not universally bad.

"As long as the Larkinson Clan can manage and combine the specialized mech troops effectively, then the disadvantages of fracturing our fighting forces and splitting up our attention are tolerable. We just need to invest sufficiently in not only their individual development, but also how to combine them together. That is the third leg of our doctrine which we will discuss later."

"Hmm." Ves tapped his fingers against his desk. "So you are saying that our clan should decisively focus on quality rather than quantity."

"Correct, sir. This fits best with our circumstances. Compared to other organizations, our Larkinson Clan has an abundance of capital. This affords us the luxury to spend enormous sums of money on better mechs and mech pilots."

"We could spend that money on expanding the Living Sentinels as well. Right now, the LMC is doing fantastic in terms of selling mechs and collecting a lot of licensing fees. There is no reason why we can't invest all of that money into acquiring more mechs, ships and manpower."

Major Verle grinned and crossed his arms. "We have already undergone a major expansion. One of the reasons why we are picking fights with Nyxian pirates is to merge the old and new clansmen together. I doubt you want to repeat this cycle too much. Also, a large fleet protected by average-quality mechs and mech pilots is much harder to manage and defend than a smaller fleet which is protected by a smaller core of elites."

That was true.

"Are you happy with our current lineup of mech troops?"

"Not entirely, sir. If we want to invest fully in elite development, then we need to expand our roster with at least two other units. One needs to specialize in long-ranged artillery and wide-area bombardment. The other one should focus on special operations and stealth operations."

"Neither of the two sounds easy to set up." Ves looked a little pained.

"It's possible but very difficult to set them up from scratch." Verle admitted. "The best option is to acquire existing mech troops that already specialize in these areas."

"Is that difficult?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. Usually, artillery mech troops are mainly in the hands of states and ruling powers. Stealth mech troops are largely exclusive to state intelligence agencies. Do you think you can just knock on the doors of a state and offer to buyout either of them? I think not. Our best bet is to travel to a collapsing state and be on the lookout for rats that are trying to flee a sinking ship."

The Flagrant Vandals used to be one of those fleeing rats. Unlike their fellow critters, the Vandals just happened to flee in a specific direction.

"If I had known that, then I would have directed my clan to consider the option of poaching other Brighter units." Ves grimaced.

In hindsight, that was a missed opportunity!

"You don't need to fret over these matters. Wars always take place in the galaxy. While certain conflicts such as the Komodo War are too dangerous for us to approach, there are always smaller conflicts where our clan can safely swoop in and recruit some of the elites nurtured by the losing side of a war. Otherwise, we need to nurture these elite mech units from scratch, and that is a long process as it takes decades to formulate and mature their martial traditions."

"I'll keep that in mind once we cross into other star sectors. It would be best to acquire these new additions before we enter the Red Ocean. What about the Living Sentinels, by the way?"

"As our only non-elite mech force, the Sentinels serve as a counterweight of our elites. We can't defend the Larkinson Clan by relying entirely on the latter, after all. They Sentinels will primarily orient their development towards static or defensive warfare. This poses significantly less requirements in terms of capital and manpower, but the Sentinels will have to rely more on quantity to compensate."

"That is acceptable." Ves mused. "Our clan isn't backed by a state. Our clan's population will never surpass that of a settled planet. Limited manpower will always be one of our biggest bottlenecks. That said, with a successful mech designer like me in the clan, money won't be a major issue. Even if the mech pilots of the Sentinels are of a lower standard, we can still make up for that by issuing higher-quality mechs to them. Of course, our elite mech forces will also enjoy this benefit."

"That's also the largest vulnerability of developing our elites. They never come cheap, sir. Much of what our clan is trying to do rests on the premise that there is an abundant supply of money. From my understanding, business is booming at the LMC. How long will that last? What if our mech company enters into a slump again? The upkeep of elite mech troop is multiple times higher than a regular mech troop, and that is assuming that waste and embezzlement is minimal."

"While you have raised a good point, I think we can manage the risks. If our clan's income ever dries up, we don't immediately have to sell off our most valuable mechs and ships. Running them is expensive, but as long as we accumulate enough savings, we can still hang on for a couple of years while we attempt to restore our income. If that doesn't work, we'll just downsize."

Even though Ves spoke lightly about this problem, he still understood that this might become a very real threat some day, especially when the scale of the Larkinson Clan had ballooned.

Major Verle moved on to his last point. "The two strategies I've mentioned previously complement our third strategy. Maneuver warfare fits well with our strengths and weaknesses. Take for example the opposite, which is attrition warfare."

He stretched out his palms and pressed them together.

"The most basic mech battles is quite simply a brawl that directly pits one group of mechs against another group of mechs."

The major began to rub his palms back and forward. The resulting friction generated some rubbing noises.

"Such a battle is waged by grinding each other mechs against each other until one side gets tired, loses confidence or runs out of mechs."

Ves looked at Verle rubbing his palms as if his fingers were cold and needed to warm up. "The way you put it sounds as if anyone who fights their battles in this manner is stupid."

"It's not stupid. It's just not suitable to everyone, especially smaller powers such as our clan. Our pool of mech pilots is only in the thousands. How can we compare against the likes of states that can call up millions of mech pilots? Much of the Komodo War has

descended into attrition warfare because both sides are simply too strong, numerous and prepared. Neither the Friday Coalition or Hexadric Hegemony exhibit any holes in their defenses which can easily be exploited. The only way for either state to win the war is by pitting their strengths against the other state's own respective strengths."

"This is something that we should avoid as much as possible." Ves remarked. "The modest losses we have sustained so far has hurt our clan quite badly. We'll be set back a lot if we lose just a thousand mech pilots."

"I agree, sir. This is why our Larkinson Clan should try its best by leveraging our high-quality mechs, our ability to generate disparities in morale and our investment in elite mech forces. There is no better way to do that by specializing in maneuver warfare."

"What does that actually mean?"

"Well, that's a bit of a lengthy story, sir. You should have already seen it in action plenty of times in our previous battles against the Nyxian pirates. In short, it's attempting to win a battle by employing our strengths against the enemy's weaknesses."

The senior mech officer stopped rubbing his hands. Instead, he kept one palm stretched while extending just a single finger with his other hand.

Instead of pressing the finger into the palm, Verle exagerattingly circled the finger around until it poked sharply into the back of his stationary palm!

"We aren't cavemen anymore, Ves. We humans have developed many more refined tactics and strategies. A battle doesn't have to be won simply by destroying more mechs than the enemy. We can instead make clever use of our strong elite mechs to attack critical enemy assets. Think of targeting their officers, commanders, carriers, ranged mechs and so on. If nothing else, we can always employ our elites as cavalry and attack the flanks of an enemy formation. The Swordmaidens happen to excel in this tactic."

Ves nodded. He could still remember how the Swordmaidens easily caused the strong and troublesome Allidus Archons to collapse by nipping at their flanks.

The Avatars of Myths on the other hand were locked in a frontal engagement against the pirate elites, which was the more stupid way to fight.

Even so, the Swordmaidens could have never pulled off their brilliant feat without the Avatars pinning the enemy mechs down.

"We still need at least some of our mechs to fight the enemy head-on, right?"

"That is so. The typical hammer and anvil tactic can't work without them. This is why combining different mechs and different mech troops is so important. We cannot neglect

the role of slower and defense-oriented mechs even as we rely mainly on maneuverable mechs to achieve our victories."