

Mech 2381

Chapter 2381: Unending Regalia

He first started with making Ketis' new gear. In order to make sure her new combat armor was to her liking, he called her over in order to assist in the project.

Once she arrived from the Jaded Sword, she inspected the design that Ves came up with and proposed extensive changes to fit her preferences.

Perhaps the most unexpected change was lowering the amount of Unending alloy used to make the powered armor."

She explained her rationale to Ves as she adjusted the schematic. "If you're right about this Unending alloy, then it's pretty much impossible to break it without employing a ludicrous amount of power. I don't see the need for so much protection when all of this dense material just weighs me down."

In other words, just like the swordsman mechs that the Swordmaidens preferred, Ketis wanted to wear a leaner suit of combat armor. By lowering its mass, she could move around considerably faster, especially if all of the servos and other motors remained the same.

Ves understood her desires, though he didn't feel very comfortable about it. Her previous ordeal inside Ulimo Citadel showed that her Breyer alloy combat armor clearly wasn't up to the task. His worries caused him to overcompensate a bit, though he didn't think that was wrong.

"Are you sure you want to make your new combat armor so lean?"

"Passively taking a beating is not my style. I want to be able to move fast while still enjoying a reasonable amount of protection. Also, increasing the mass of my combat armor also hinders my ability to swing my sword."

"Speaking about your sword, I think we can augment it with a little Unending alloy..."

Her CFA greatsword was made out of alloys that were just as strong as Unending alloy if not more. Even so, one of the downsides of the impressive weapon was that it did not contain any spiritual properties.

While it wasn't possible to replace the blade with one made out of Unending alloy or anything, it was possible to make some other additions. Replacing the hilt, crossguard, pommel with rougher versions made of out Unending alloy somewhat ruined the clean, high-tech aesthetics of the greatsword, but Ves and Ketis employed great care in maintaining its balance.

As soon as they completed the modifications, Ketis became much more pleased with her weapon.

"I feel it's easier to get in tune with my weapon. Sharpie is happy as well!" She happily chirped.

To test out the real efficacy of her new blade, Ketis attempted to perform her little superpower with the help of her sword intent.

With great concentration, she managed to cover the entire length of the blade with a deadly glow!

When she quickly hacked the sword down onto a spare plate of Unending alloy, her sword painfully clanked as the attack failed to leave a single mark!

"Damn, I thought it would work this time!"

Ves already expected this outcome. While he was impressed with her ability to cut through very tough objects, it did not change the fact that its effectiveness was largely based on how much energy she expended.

As an Apprentice Mech Designer, Ketis was still at the stage where her spiritual potential had not yet consolidated into something stronger.

Despite the disappointing outcome, Ketis eventually perked up. "This time, I managed to cover the blade of my entire weapon! That's progress at least!"

Already, Ves could sense that a trace of her spiritual energy remained locked inside the Unending alloy. While the quantity was miniscule, over time it might build up to something bigger.

Ves regretted that none of the Larkinsons had any time to build up any accumulation. Even he was a little different. After the previous battle, he had lost much of his reserve of excess energy.

While he made sure to rebuild it, just a couple of week's worth of spiritual energy wouldn't be enough for him to form another protective barrier around his ship if something strange took place.

Fortunately, Venerable Jannzi should be capable of protecting the fleet in his stead.

Ves and Ketis rapidly crafted the remainder of their gear in quick tempo. His student even helped him out in assembling and finishing his own protective combat armor.

Unlike her combat armor which she straightforwardly called the Unending Dragon, his own protective suit was not designed with close combat in mind.

His so-called Unending Regalia was leaner and smaller than the Unending Dragon because he did not envision himself diving into enemy ranks like a barbarian.

His Unending Regalia was more of a protective suit rather than powered armor. The latter was more protective, but it massed more and relied too much on active moving parts to properly function.

Ves was a bit paranoid about depending too much on components like these. While the chances were small, there were always ways to sabotage them or compromise them. For this reason, his Unending Regalia had to be light enough for his artificially-strengthened body to move around without investing any power.

One benefit to building such a modestly-sized suit of combat armor was that Ves could make it foldable. If there was no need for him to wear so much protection, he could command it to fold up into a thick and heavy suitcase-like object that could be mounted on Nitaa's heavy combat armor.

"Hmmm, that reminds me, I should make a new suit of armor for her as well."

There wasn't much time left for him to do so, and the benefits weren't as great. The primary purpose of the Unending Regalia was to strengthen him against spiritual opponents!

There were very few people in the task force that could handle the cultists of the Nyxian Gap. His expert candidates and expert pilots may be strong in this regard, but they did not possess his knowledge, control, perception and understanding of spirituality.

This meant that if the pirates ever dropped an artificial anomaly on the fleet, Ves should be able to fight back with the help of his spirituality-oriented combat armor!

Ves did not explain these considerations to Ketis, but she wasn't stupid. She could tell that Ves had something different in mind when he presented her with such a peculiar design.

"If not for the strong defensive properties of Unending alloy, I would describe this work as a survival suit rather than combat armor. It's great if you end up stuck in some untamed planet away from civilization. The fact that you can still move it without any active components is a great advantage in certain situations, Though I don't really see you ever needing it as long as you remain in the clan."

He shrugged. "I've experienced a lot of strange and unusual events. Take the anomalies for example. Whenever they sweep you up, normal solutions might not work anymore. I don't want to rely too much on technology only for it to fail for some inane reason."

"That's rich coming from a mech designer." Ketis chuckled. "Don't you make big, huge complex machines for a living? A lot could go wrong with them and the logistics to keep them running isn't light. Despite these disadvantages, our clan still relies heavily on mechs. Oh, don't forget about the ships either. It's impossible for us to sail through the stars with our naked bodies!"

She had a good point, but his Unending Regalia was only meant to fight against one specific class of opponents. Against more mundane enemies, Ves did not expect he would be forced to take action in person.

Unlike in the past where Ves was still growing his organization, now he was surrounded by tens of thousands of competent and loyal Larkinsons. Any of them could handle most enemies far more efficiently than he ever could!

If it turned out that he was wrong, well, he always had the Amastendira in his intangible back pocket.

"Let's move on to assembling the remainder of the internal modules."

Despite the relatively compact dimensions of his Unending Regalia, he made sure to pack its limited capacity with as many useful gizmos and gadgets as possible.

He used some of the finest and rarer exotics his fleet had plundered from Ulimo Citadel and other pirates to make these modules. By using these high-quality materials, Ves could pack a lot of power in a very small package without making any other sacrifices.

Some of the more important functions he added to his Unending Regalia included a strong communications module, sensor modules, several antigrav modules, an automated targeting system, ECM and jamming systems, limited water and air filtration and storage systems and so on. Each of these modules and systems worked far better than anything that Ves had previously used.

If there was one regret, it was that Ves wasn't able to add a minifab to his Unending Regalia. He probably didn't need it in the Nyxian Gap, but it would have been nice to regain this capability.

For this reason, he made sure to add a modular slot to the back of his Unending Regalia. Later on, Ves could place any optional backpack module such as an oxygen tank, a flight system, a power communications antenna or his long-awaited minifab system.

Ketis looked amused at Ves. "You're constantly harping on about the minifab system. Why do you want it so much? This system is only useful for field or combat engineers."

"I just want to be able to bring a miniature fabricating machine wherever I go. It's not just useful in combat. With this little machine, I can craft anything small on the fly. Trust me, it is far more useful to me than you think."

One of the ways he exercised his abilities was by making totems that possessed a spiritual foundation and were able to channel a design spirit. Ves wanted to gain the capability to craft sophisticated trinkets in case he needed to hoodwink someone important.

They soon finalized the Unending Regalia. Just like Ketis' Unending Dragon, he covered the rough and uneven Unending alloy sections with smooth and precisely-machined Breyer alloy plates. After that, he coated his new suit in the standard Larkinson pattern of red and white.

When it came to the finishing touches, he added a large emblem of the Golden Cat on the chest of his new work. With this addition, there was no doubt that the wearer of the Unending Regalia was part of the Larkinson Clan!

He didn't forget about his signature look. He often used the third eye as a motif in his recent creations, and this was no different. He added a special third eye on the forehead of the helmet. The reason why it was special was because Ves partially synthesized it with some ground P-stone. This allowed him to perform various parlor tricks with it if he ever needed to impress some yokels or something.

While his Unending Regalia did not look that impressive due to its small stature and standard coating, Ves had prepared a red cape that instantly doubled the wow factor of his new armor!

Ves couldn't wait any longer. As soon as he finished the Unending Regalia, he wore it right away. As soon as the protective suit molded to his form and its systems came online, he experimentally moved around while his cape swished along with his motions.

Meanwhile, Ketis had changed into her Unending Dragon suit. As a more combat-oriented suit, her new gear caused her to gain quite a bit of height and mass. When she stepped in front of him, she towered over him by almost a head!

Ves felt a bit inadequate when he was forced to look upwards in order to meet her eyes.

"Damn, you look good."

"Same to you." She grinned as she clenched an armed fist. "I can feel the power of my new gear! It's not perfect, but it's better than anything that I have ever worn!"

"That's the point. As long as we take good care of them and keep their systems up to date, they'll last a lifetime!"

Chapter 2382: Supporting Data

The completion of the Unending Regalia and the Unending Dragon almost marked the end of his personal crafting spree.

While Ketis happily departed the Scarlet Rose with her Unending Dragon in tow, Ves stayed in the mech workshop long enough to fabricate a new Misfortune Harness for Lucky.

After all, his cat helped him out quite a bit in processing so much Unending alloy. Ves figured that his cat deserved an extra reward.

The Mark II version of the Misfortune Harness did not differ very much from the first version. Ves did away with most of the Breyer alloy, only using it to keep the structure together.

Just like before, the inner layer consisted of a thin layer of B-stone. While Ves wasn't sure whether this protection helped his cat in any way in the previous battle, that was mainly because the Misfortune Harness Mark I sustained too much damage against conventional attacks.

In the end, the thin layer of Breyer alloy couldn't withstand so much firepower. Getting caught in the middle of a trap where explosions triggered all around Lucky resulted in numerous breaches that exposed the fragile B-stone layer.

Such an outcome shouldn't happen again. The Unending alloy exterior was capable of withstanding explosions that were at least ten times more powerful. In fact, the true defensive capabilities of the Misfortune Harness Mark II was likely higher than that, but Ves did not want to overhype his work too much.

In order to retain Lucky's phasing ability, both layers of materials had to be thin. The B-stone layer protected Lucky against some spiritual attacks, but not if they exceed a certain level of strength.

The same went for the Unending alloy layer. Not only was it very thin, its coverage was also a bit inconsistent. Ves tried to overlap the plates as much as possible in order to avoid exposing any gaps in coverage, but the irregular shapes still introduced several vulnerabilities.

"Well, it's as good as I can make it with the tools I have on hand." Ves sighed.

He fitted it onto Lucky to make sure that his cat enjoyed adequate protection while wearing it. Due to the naturally obsidian look of Unending alloy, Ves didn't need to coat it. In fact, the irregular exterior panels caused Lucky to gain a very savage look!

"C'mon, buddy. Roar for me. Roar like a panther!"

"Meow."

Though his cat looked somewhat curious about his new gear, he was still a bit lethargic from having to digest the B-stone in his stomach.

Ves reached out to rub Lucky's covered head, only for a thick paw to smack his hand away.

"Oh, don't be so sullen. You've done our entire clan a huge favor. With all of the products I've made with the Unending alloy that you've processed, our chances of surviving and winning the upcoming battle is substantially greater!"

His cat did not look appreciative of his praise. Despite his dashing appearance with his new Misfortune Harness, Lucky looked like he was more willing to sleep through the upcoming battle!

"Meow.."

"Okay, okay, I'll take it off for you. Don't think you can take a break, though. As soon as the Allidus Alliance comes within sight, I'm putting it on you whether you're sick or not. Understood?"

Lucky flipped his tail at Ves.

With that done with, Ves exited the mech workshop and took a long break.

The next day, he intended to spend the remainder of his time supervising the final preparations before battle commenced.

He first summoned both Major Verle and Calabast to his stateroom for a private meeting. The former Brighter and Hexer both arrived promptly and began to fill Ves in on the battle readiness of their fleet.

"Task Force Predator is as strong as it can be at this time, sir." Major Verle reported first. "Certainly, there is still much we can build, but we have used up much of our available resources and supplies. What's left is relatively low-valuable bulk materials and unusable exotics that can't be converted into anything useful. As for our mech pilots, they can always use more training, but the increase in battle power from this point is marginal. The only exception is if any of them randomly advance to expert candidate, but the odds of that happening is painfully small, especially when we aren't fighting any major battles."

That last point may not be as unlikely as Major Verle thought. Ves had made at least some progress in his research towards accelerating the breakthroughs of expert candidates. At the very least, he possessed a lot of confidence that his spiritually-

enhanced custom mechs should definitely be able to trigger the breakthroughs of all of his current expert candidates at the right time.

Of course, much of that was possible due to the prior accumulation of the Larkinson Clan's best mech pilots. Aside from Joshua, each of them became expert candidates several years ago. During that time, they fought through several major conflicts such as the Bright-Vesia War, the Sand War and now the Nyxian Gap Campaign.

It was not a mistake to claim that all of his expert candidates had been forged through the fires of war! The amount of times they put their lives on the line in battle was enough to put all of them, including Joshua, at the threshold of expert pilot!

What applied to his expert candidates also applied to the regular mech pilots in his fleet. Many of their compatriots had died, but those who survived up until now had evolved into the bloodied, battle-hardened elites that Ves always yearned.

If only he could bring them out of the Gap unscathed! None of his brave mech pilots needed any further trials to prove their courage, valor and competence in battle.

In truth, the pressure heaped on the shoulders of those with spiritual potential was so great that Ves hoped that some of them would have advanced to expert candidate by now. It was too bad that talented mech pilots such as Imon and Casella Ingvar didn't find their turning points.

He briefly thought back on his enlightening conversation with James. His spiritual advisor told him that he shouldn't be focusing solely on the spirituality of his mech pilots.

Willpower also mattered.

Was that why his regular mech pilots failed to advance?

If he had more time, Ves would have gladly investigated this angle further, but the pirates were too close to pursue another initiative.

That reminded him of his spiritual enhancement project. Almost a month had gone by since he enhanced the spiritual foundations of almost every LMC mech in the fleet. Their saturation levels ranged from 25 to 100 percent, though the latter was only reserved for those with spiritual potential.

"Has there been any notable increases in performance of this group of mech pilots?" Ves asked during the meeting.

Major Verle nodded. "There have. It ramped up over a couple of weeks but leveled off as more time went by, sir. We can conclude that whatever you did to improve the mech caused their mech pilots to obtain both a short-term and long-term boost."

"Do you have the data?"

"Here you go."

Ves received the files sent by Verle and quickly went over the data. He quickly discovered that the saturation level of the enhanced mechs made a small but substantial difference in the rate of improvement.

Both the immediate boost and the sustained boost in performance went up as the saturation levels went up. Even when Ves controlled for age, piloting skill, experience, mech type and so on, the broad pattern was undeniable.

He smiled. The data provided conclusive proof that higher saturation levels led to greater improvement.

Still, he couldn't use this new technique unscrupulously. The spiritual energy needed to empower the mechs in this fashion did not come for free. Also, the mech pilots themselves needed to be mentally and spiritually strong enough to withstand the burden of piloting a mech with a stronger spiritual consciousness.

Cockpits tended to get messy if this was not the case.

"How is the fleet?"

"Oh, all of our ships look quite good, though that doesn't change the fact that most of our vessels are tin cans, sir. The asteroids floating around us will likely help prevent us from getting pounded too much by the pirate warships, but I'm not hopeful for our light carriers. A couple of well-placed hits can easily cripple the Redfeather. Win or lose, I don't expect most of our ships to survive the engagement."

"They don't need to." Calabast interjected after a long time of remaining quiet. She crossed her sinuous legs as she shifted her position on the couch. "The reinforcements from the Wodin Warriors have made good speed trying to reach us. If not for the pirate armada in our way, we could have linked up with them and safely left the Nyxian Gap. As it is, we don't have to fend for ourselves for long if we ever manage to survive the upcoming battle."

Major Verle reluctantly nodded. "She's right. We can lose ninety percent of our mechs and ships and still succeed in our goal of making it out. We just have to have enough ships left to accommodate all of the Larkinsons who are still alive and retain enough mechs to deter any scavengers and other scum looking to pick up an easy bargain."

"A battle involving this much hardware always attracts vultures and scavengers." Calabast warned. "The Allidus Alliance has done its best to press as many local pirates as possible, but plenty of them are still on the sidelines. If we win but lose our entire battle strength, we can't defend ourselves against the pirates that come after. You can

bet for sure they will come in great numbers. The value of the salvage of all of our second-class mechs and ships as well as those from the enemy warships will likely exceed anything the pirates have earned in their entire lives."

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "That sounds great."

"We just need to hold on for two weeks or less. It's not that bad."

"First, we need to win the battle, though, and that is already an enormous challenge in itself." Major Verle said. He waved a hand, activating a projection that depicted every ship in the fleet. "We have one overriding objective. Survive. To accomplish this, we need to preserve both our ships and mechs. While we are unavoidably forced to use them up, the key is to maximize the yield and make the enemy pay dearly for every loss we suffer."

"That's the calculus used in battles of attrition." Ves frowned.

The major nodded. "I know you don't like them, but the strength disparity along with our circumstances leave us with no other choice. If I was in the shoes of Lord Hivex, I could think of several ways to leverage the pirate warships and thousands of mechs to crush us without suffering a great loss. That isn't possible for us. We are unquestionably weaker and we can't run away, so that means we have to adopt a mindset of sacrificing our strength in the hopes our enemies lose even more."

"Is there no way we can lessen this disparity somehow?"

Calabast spoke up. "We've tried. We have contacted many pirate factions through various channels. While they openly rejected our entreaties, a number of them are actually quite supportive of us. As long as we defeat the Allidus Alliance, its rivals will surely take advantage. It's just..."

"None of them are willing to help us in the upcoming battle, right?"

"Correct." She sighed. "The most they are willing to do is to raid the territory of the Allidus Alliance when the battle commences. Since the Gravada Knarlax is confirmed to be in the periphery, the Allidus Alliance's rivals will feel assured that she won't come back to brutalize the raiders. If we succeed in destroying the pirate flagship, then those raids can easily turn into a full-blown invasion."

While it sounded nice that the Nyxian pirates were willing to cannibalize one of their own, none of the news helped him in any way. The rivals of the Allidus Alliance were just taking advantage of the Larkinson Clan!

"Isn't there anyone who is genuinely willing and able to help us? Anyone?" Ves asked with a hint of despair in his voice.

"Well, there is one..."

Chapter 2383: No Key

"Do you remember the pair of Xona Crystals we've obtained from Ulimo Citadel?" Calabast asked.

"Yes. I heard that they are huge and unwieldy. They demand a lot of energy and they can only be used for 2 minutes and 34 seconds at a time. After that, they have to cool down for as much as 86 hours, 29 minutes and 11 seconds."

Ves stored those numbers in his implant so he was able to recall them at any time.

"Before you ask, we haven't managed to improve the usability of the crystals. We don't have any alien tech researchers or crystallographers on our staff. Our existing techs, engineers and researchers have all puzzled over the two crystals for a time, but we really can't make any progress in improving their usability without starting to study them from scratch."

"That's fine. A window of 2 minutes and 34 seconds is enough to convey a lot of important messages that absolutely need to remain confidential. For regular communications, we can make due with regular quantum communication nodes."

Everyone knew that the galactic net that the quantum communication nodes connected to was as leaky as a sieve. While there were many cryptographic methods to convey messages to one another without someone else listening in, most organizations would rather take the trouble to resort to the low-tech solution of using physical couriers to convey matters of great importance.

In that sense, the Xona Crystals allowed the Larkinson Clan to skip that tedious process, so Ves was not annoyed at its many limitations.

Calabast raised three fingers. "Well, did you remember that the Xona Stalkers used to operate five of these crystals? The Stalkers placed three of them in other, far-flung pirate bases in order to maintain a covert communications network. Since they're placed so far away, we gave up on trying to collect them. Have you ever wondered what happened to them now that the Xona Stalkers placed in those outposts are left to fend for themselves?"

"You told me these groups of Xona Stalkers belong to the loyalist faction. They're mostly made up of native Nyxian as opposed to exiles from Majestic Teal."

"Correct. I've been keeping tabs on them. Just as expected, now that these Xona Stalkers lost the support of their mother organization, they've defected to the local pirate factions. I predicted that would be the end of that, but it turns out that a very special Nyxian group has attempted to make contact with us through one of the three crystals."

Ves leaned closer over his desk. "Who?"

She looked straight into his eyes. "The Oblivion Hand."

"Truly?!"

Ves almost shot up from his chair! The Oblivion Hand! That was the dark mercenary organization that his parents had taken over. Last he heard, the Oblivion Hand had been razing pirate base after pirate base before venturing deeper into the core regions of the Nyxian Gap. The spatial warping there was so bad that most forms of communications no longer worked.

While he had idly instructed Calabast to make contact with the Oblivion Hand since a long time ago, he didn't really get his hopes up that his parents would be able to bail him out of this predicament.

They were too far away.

It would take at least several months for the Oblivion Hand to travel all the way to this location. The breakdown of communication in the core regions also meant that his parents would likely learn of the news late as well.

His worst fear was that the Oblivion Hand was so isolated from the pirate community that they didn't learn of the news at all! Perhaps they were still merrily beating up pirates in the more inaccessible parts of the Nyxian Gap!

"Don't get too excited, Ves. Just because the Hand made contact doesn't mean they are in a position to help."

"What does the Hand want?" Major Verle asked. "As far as I am aware of, the dark mercenaries are hostile to most pirates, but that doesn't necessarily make us allies."

Of everyone in the fleet, only Calabast and a handful of others knew the truth. Everyone else did not know that his parents helmed the Oblivion Hand.

While Ves considered revealing this to Major Verle, he quickly rejected the option. With secrets like these, it was best to keep it on a need-to-know basis. There was no compelling reason why the major needed to know such an important matter when it wouldn't affect anything.

"They might have an unbearable grudge against the Allidus Alliance." Ves shrugged. "We have already made contact with some other pirate factions who think Lord Hivex and his warships are disrupting the order of the Nyxian Gap."

While the Larkinson Clan hadn't managed to make any substantial deals with the pirate factions that secretly reached out, the contact nonetheless made it clear that the Nyxian Gap was anything but united.

The most annoying part about all of this was that these pirate factions were just waiting for the fight to happen. As long as the Larkinsons took out the Gravada Knarlax, the territories of the Allidus Alliance would soon get very busy!

While this might help get the remainder of the Allidus Alliance off the Larkinson Clan's back, it did not help at all in the crucial upcoming battle!

This was why both Ves and Major Verle didn't have much hope for the latest offer for help.

Calabast must surely know that, but she maintained a confident expression. "I know what you're thinking, but the Oblivion Hand has offered us a potential solution to.. bridge the gap."

"Haha."

"I'm not joking, Ves. Just look at this before you dismiss what I am saying."

She withdrew a secure data chip from her tight black uniform pocket and threw it over.

When Ves grabbed the data chip and inserted it into a slot in his desk terminal, a series of coded lines popped up. Rows and rows of encrypted entries kept scrolling through the projected screen.

"What the hell is this?" Ves frowned.

"The contact person from the Oblivion Hand did not elaborate. The amount of encrypted data is quite large. In fact, it took four separate intervals of 2 minutes and 34 seconds to transmit all of this encrypted data."

"That's two weeks!" Ves gasped. "What has made them spend so much effort to transmit this data over a Xona Crystal?"

He looked at the gibberish with much greater attention than before. What was the secret behind these seemingly-random patterns of letters, numbers and alien symbols?

Calabast sighed. "You'd have to ask them 64 hours later, because that is when the Xona Crystal on the spokesperson's end will be ready to transmit a message again. Before you ask, no one from the Oblivion Hand can be reached via a quantum communication node. Apparently, they don't want to conduct any business over the Comm Consortium's network. I suspect the spokesperson may be in contact with the

Dark Cleaver through another alien device that is similar to the Xona Crystal. In my opinion, the spokesperson is solely responsible for passing on the encrypted data."

This made sense to Ves. His parents were not only hunted by the Five Scrolls Compact, but would also get in a lot of trouble with the Big Two if their identities were exposed. Since Ryncol and Cynthia Larkinson couldn't obtain shelter from any powerful galactic organization, they had no choice but to follow the same route of pirates who ran afoul of the galactic order.

Ves and Major Verle both asked a few more questions about the nature of the transmitted data, but Calabast had no answers.

As a high-ranking intelligence officer of the Larkinson Clan, she had access to all of the codes, passwords and keys of the original Larkinson Family. None of them enabled her to decrypt the code.

She even attempted to decipher the encrypted data through brute-force attacks, but with the computation power the Larkinson Clan had at its disposal, it would probably take years.

Inwardly, Ves cursed his parents. What was up with this? Neither his mother nor his father handed him any private decryption keys before they skedaddled out of his life!

The only keepsake his father left to Ves before he disappeared was... the System.

His eyes widened a bit before he reined in his emotions. He coughed. "I think I have an idea on what to do with this data."

This elicited a reaction from Calabast. "Are you sure?"

"It's the only answer. The Oblivion Hand wouldn't send us a message if we can't even read it. I'll check it out in private after this meeting. If there is anything in the message that you should know, I will pass it on right away."

Though Calabast obviously wanted to be present as he decrypted the data, she knew better than to ask. He valued his privacy very highly, especially when it came to certain sensitive matters.

The briefing resumed, but no one brought up anything unusual. The fleet had made extensive preparations, but the cloud hanging over their heads looked as stormy as ever.

Once the meeting ended, Major Verle left his stateroom first. Calabast lingered long enough to pet Lucky's head.

"So. Do you think your parents can help you?" She suddenly asked.

Now that they were able to speak a little more freely, Calabast no longer held back as much.

"I don't know. They're quite capable, especially my mother, but this is the Nyxian Gap we're talking about. I don't think there's a way for their fleet to reach us quickly."

"We have seen all manner of strangeness taking place during this campaign. Who knows. Maybe your parents have found a way."

"Even if they can bring their entire fleet to us in an instant, that doesn't change the fact that we are still outnumbered and outgunned. No matter how many pirates they have defeated and integrated into their ranks, their cohesion is probably poor to average at best. The only one who can possibly rise above the role of cannon fodder is my father, but even if he's known as an expert pilot, what can he do against an entire warship?"

There were many instances throughout the Age of Mechs where the Big Two had been forced to put down rebellious or unhinged expert pilots for whatever reason.

The most direct way to wipe these rogue expert pilots out was to bombard them with massed firepower from a very huge distance!

This was a simple, direct display of overwhelming power that successfully intimidated every expert pilot throughout human space.

With so many brutal examples, hardly any expert pilots were willing to turn against the existing order!

While the Gravada Knarlax wasn't as powerful as a typical CFA or MTA battleship, its main guns were still huge threats!

Calabast frowned and crossed her arms. "From what I can tell, your parents are quite amazing. How else were they able to accomplish great feats such as raising a well-behaved son as you and achieving success in one of the most depraved dens of iniquity in the local region."

"Your sarcasm is not appreciated. Now get out. I'm dying to hear what my parents are trying to tell me and I don't want you breathing down my neck."

"Are you sure about that? Most boys would love that, actually."

"GET OUT!"

After metaphorically kicking the spymaster out of his stateroom, he activated various security measures before he summoned the System comm from his Inventory.

It had been months since he last called it out. While he wanted to make use of it, he didn't have enough DP to make a difference.

Ever since the System stopped rewarding him DP for every mech he sold, he was only able to earn Design Points through completing mech designs.

Even though he was involved in six concurrent design projects, none of them were finished at this time!

This put Ves in the unfortunate situation where he could only lust at the expensive solutions offered by the System.

In fact, when Ves last inspected the expansive Skill Tree, he even spotted an entire branch devoted to designing expert mechs!

Chapter 2384: Prerequisites

The System offered many Skills related to mech design, but probably not everything. Even if it did allow him to learn some highly-exclusive knowledge, it was often locked behind insane price tags or onerous mission requirements.

Take for example the foundational Skill that was simply called Expert Mechs. Ves needed to obtain this Skill first before he could access the huge variety of Sub-Skills that were each tailored to enhance specific aspects of these powerful machines.

Most of them related to manipulating resonating materials and getting them to cooperate with the resonance abilities of specific expert pilots. From what little Ves could see when he activated the System and browsed the Skill Tree, these Sub-Skills formed the actual specialization of mech designers who engaged in designing expert mechs.

"This is probably why multiple Seniors or Masters usually collaborate on expert mech designs." Ves muttered.

Certainly, a mech designer specialized in defense was probably the most suitable person to design an expert mech for Venerable Jannzi, but other specialists were needed to round the mech out and ensure they weren't too one-dimensional.

It took far too much time and effort for any single mech designer to learn all of the branches in his lifetime. Doing so would only cause them to gain a basic proficiency in each area. This was much less efficient than just specializing in one branch and going as deep as possible. If they ever needed to add something else to an expert mech, they could just reach out to a colleague for a collaboration.

Expert mechs were very impressive. Their performance was high and their budgets were even higher. This meant that many mech designers who were constrained by the

limited budgets of commercial mech designs could finally let themselves go and implement the solutions they had always dreamed about!

With budgets ranging from 100 to 10,000 times more than a typical design, a lot of mech designers could employ extravagant solutions in an expert mech design. Not only would they gain a lot of experience and insight from implementing their high-powered solutions, they were also able to gain a lot of data from seeing them at work.

It was not unusual for mech designers to try out cutting edge innovation in expert mechs first. With all of the data they gain from the implementation, they were sometimes able to derive a lesser but much more economic version of their inventions.

"And this is just one of the reasons why mech designers are so eager to participate in an expert mech design project!"

Few opportunities existed for mech designers to take part in an extremely high-spec design project. It was unrealistic to go through all of that effort for a mech design targeted to mundane mech pilots. Only high-ranking mech pilots were worthy of this level of pampering! Only in their hands would the most powerful mechs be able to justify their existence!

This was why Senior and even Masters who possessed the qualifications to design expert mechs were very eager to take part in such projects. As long as Ves or Gloriana were willing to bankroll the enormous expenditure of developing an expert mech, they could easily attract the interest of many Seniors and higher.

Of course, that was just one of the aspects he needed to take into account. Up until now, Gloriana still hadn't been able to accomplish a deal that satisfied everyone's demands.

"It's better if we can just design an expert mech ourselves."

This was not possible for Journeymen. The mech community generally presumed that only Seniors were capable of designing them. Ves wasn't sure why, but when he read up on the topic, he learned a very telling piece of news.

Any mech designer who advanced to Senior had to visit one of the MTA's sector headquarters and stay there for a time as a guest. They not only had to register and prove their qualifications as a Senior, but also gained numerous other benefits during their stay, including the ability to design expert mechs!

Even if a mech designer couldn't care less about the Big Two, this last reason alone was enough for them to bow their heads to the MTA!

Ves was a bit suspicious of what these newly-advanced Seniors experienced when they went on another pilgrimage to the MTA. Different from Journeymen, Seniors always

enjoyed positions of considerable power and authority. They also become professors at educational institutions without exception.

It was as if the MTA put a gun to their heads and threatened to pull the trigger unless the new Seniors immediately promised to teach a class of mech design students!

"Well, I'll probably have to go through the same ordeal in the future." He grimaced.

That would take a couple of decades at the very least. While Ves had made some progress in advancing his design philosophy, he had barely stepped away from the starting line. He still had much to go before his tree grew wide and bushy enough to advance to Senior.

Most mech designers who couldn't wait to design an expert mech therefore did their best to advance to Senior as quickly as possible!

Ves thought he would have to follow this trajectory as well, but the System actually offered him an alternative.

[Expert Mechs - Senior] - 1,000,000 DP

Prerequisites: Senior Mech Designer OR fulfill 1 S-Rank Mission

The Skill started at Senior rank straight away, which made sense since Journeymen and lower were only able to participate in expert mech design projects as assistants.

Just the amount of DP he had to pay was extremely high. While he was sure that the price tag was somewhat justified by how much complete and extensive knowledge the Skill imparted to him, it was still a huge burden to fork over so many Design Points!

Aside from that, he also had to meet one of the two requirements imposed by the System.

Advancing to Senior Mech Designer was the default requirement, but also made the offer redundant. Once he advanced, would he fork over 1,000,000 valuable points to the greedy System, or would he visit the nearest MTA sector headquarters and obtain the knowledge for free?

"Only fools will pass over something given for free!"

Of course, the MTA didn't actually pass on this exclusive knowledge without a price. Nonetheless, Ves hadn't heard anything bad about these pilgrimages.

"Still, I can't wait that long. Our clan already has an expert pilot, and we'll probably gain more if we manage to survive the upcoming battle."

With so many expert pilots in the clan, Ves did not want to rely too much on external mech designers to solve the need for expert mechs.

This was why he was a bit grateful that the System offered him another way to gain the necessary Skill.

Ves was only happy for a small moment. In order for him to skip the need to become a Senior, he just had to complete a S-Rank Mission. Simple, right?

"You damn scammer!"

He resisted the urge to whack his System comm against his desk. This requirement infuriated him! Were S-Rank Missions easy to complete? Heck no! Ves had five outstanding S-Rank Missions, but had made little to no progress in fulfilling any of them. The Supply Missions asked too much!

Perhaps the only mission that Ves could complete in the near future was the one that demanded an extraordinarily valuable exotic known as Timpala Steel, but that entails years of travel.

"You stupid System! Can't you offer me a way to design expert mechs that won't take years or decades to complete? How can you be so obstinate?"

Of course, the System did not deign to reply to him. Ves hoped that it would be generous for once and offer him some alternative missions such as 'Destroy the Gravada Knarlax' or 'Escape the Nyxian Gap Alive', but it wasn't that generous.

"Come on, help a poor fellow out, will you? My fleet is surrounded by pirates. Won't you lose your investment in me if I die?"

[The Mech Designer System becomes unbound when its current user is no longer able to design mechs. Other mech designers will then be able to gain user rights to the Mech Designer System.]

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

"You goddamn piece of crap!"

His attempts to cajole the System into helping him failed. Even if his mother possessed some sort of influence over it, the System largely followed its own rules.

From a transactional perspective, the System demanded a lot of energy and resources. Ves provided what it needed by designing mechs and obtaining special, high-value exotics.

Nothing about this transaction implied that only Ves could fulfill the System's needs. Others such as Gloriana and one of the countless other mech designers in the galaxy could satisfy its needs as well!

It was pointless for Ves to get angry over this fact. The System possessed unknown motives and wasn't necessarily dependent on him. It could afford to sit back and relax while Ves went through all kinds of crises.

If he died, the System would simply hop over to another mech designer, simple as that.

Ves sullenly smirked. At least he made sure not to become dependent on the System either. Certainly, he was still willing to take advantage of its services, but he was still capable of getting what he wanted the old-fashioned way.

He shook his head. There was no point lusting after the Expert Mechs Skill when he only had a little over 100,000 DP in his System account. Even if he met one of the prerequisites, Ves still had to complete a lot of mech designs to pay for the price of redeeming this potent Skill.

"Let's get back to business."

Ves transferred the encrypted data transmitted through the Xona Crystals to his System comm.

The little device beeped upon receipt of the data. Ves waited for something to happen.

"Uhm... are you doing anything with the data?"

The System remained silent for a time until the System menu suddenly made way for an entirely new projection.

Ves immediately took in the large projection. It turned out to be a schematic! A design schematic!

While Ves was happy his hunch turned out to be true, Ves quickly frowned as he studied the design in greater detail.

"This... is not a mech design. Nor a design of some other device."

If he interpreted the complicated schematic correctly, the design actually represented a spiritual construct!

"What?! Mom! Do you think I can put something as complicated as this together?!"

The design almost blinded him by how dizzyingly complicated it appeared. While it wasn't as ridiculously advanced as the Grand Dynamo, its complexity far exceeded that of his simple spiritual constructs!

Ves had to be a much better spiritual engineer in order to put something as multifaceted and multilayered as this together. There was a reason why it took four separate communication attempts to transfer over the complete design!

What was worse about the design file was that it came with very little explanation and context. Ves didn't even know what it was supposed to accomplish if he put this elaborate spiritual construct together!

The final difficult aspect about this outrageous design was that Ves had to use up a lot of spiritual energy, far more than he possessed himself!

As his shock began to fade, Ves tried to figure out what the spiritual product was supposed to do. He didn't recognize anything, but his intuition gave him some hints.

"If I'm interpreting this correctly, it's.. messing with something in the Nyxian Gap. Is it.. a beacon? Maybe a portal?"

If this elaborate spiritual construct allowed his parents and the rest of the Oblivion Hand to arrive in an instant, then it was still worth the effort to create it no matter how many hurdles were in the way!

There was no way his mother would leave him out to dry. If this was the solution they prepared for him, then it was definitely worthwhile to try it out. After all, his mother loved him, right?

Chapter 2385: Unconventional Method

Ves continued to study the spiritual design his mother presumably sent over. He became very troubled by the harsh demands it imposed to make it. So far, he had a hunch that its complexity equaled that of a mech.

Did that mean that Ves was capable of making it? Hell no! Just because he was capable of designing and building mechs didn't mean he was good at other occupations!

His spiritual engineering fell far behind his mech engineering abilities. While he relied on the former to gain an advantage in the latter, that did not mean he was actually good at spiritual sorcery. It was just that most of the competition in the mech industry didn't have a clue about spirituality at all, which meant that Ves gained a monopoly by default.

Another way to describe his situation was to describe him as a slightly less stupid person among idiots.

Compared to a giant like his mother, Ves was merely a marginally taller dwarf!

"What does my mother think I am? Her heir?"

She hardly taught anything to him! For some unknown reasons, she seemed unwilling to teach him the basics of spiritual engineering and spiritual manipulation. The issue continued to haunt him at times. He had thought very long and hard about the possible reasons behind her unwillingness to share what she knew and came up with a lot of theories, many of which sounded absurd.

Maybe she thought her knowledge would corrupt his innocence. She shouldn't have bothered.

Maybe she lacked a prop or resource that was necessary for him to inherit her abilities. Perhaps her heritage was difficult to pass on without this requirement.

Maybe she was under some kind of limitation that prevented her from teaching what she knew. Was there some kind of lock in her spirit?

Perhaps the most optimistic reason was because she wanted to do what was best for him. By allowing him to find his own way, he was able to go off the beaten track and develop his spiritual abilities in a way that completely fit his needs.

Whatever the case, Ves had learned to stop hoping that his mother would enlighten him in the ways of spiritual sorcery. He was already doing rather decently on his own. Perhaps in a century, he might even be able to surpass her in this aspect!

Yet that would take time, which he didn't have. With days to go before Calabast expected the pirate armada to intercept their task force, Ves really did not have the time to spend on putting together such an elaborate spiritual construct.

It was like telling Maikel Larkinson to fabricate a complete mech on the spot!

No matter how smart he was and how much he learned under Ves, the kid still had years to go before he was ready to put together his first mech!

"The problem is that I'm in this situation as well. It's funny if someone else is in this predicament, but it's not so funny if I'm the one who is suffering!"

The spiritual construct design put Ves in a difficult position. Battle loomed closer and he could be spending his remaining time on many other productive activities that boosted his chances of winning the upcoming battle.

Should he put those activities aside and try to create the complicated spiritual construct?

Ves really didn't have the confidence to be able to do that within the limited time span available!

If he had enough time, let's say a few months or a few years, he could probably finagle something together. Even if he didn't have the knowledge, he could still resort to trial and error to kludge the construct together.

If he was half as knowledgeable as his mother on spiritual sorcery, then he didn't need the time. He just had to get enough spiritual energy from somewhere and spend a day or so to perform all of the fine work necessary to complete the construct.

No matter how much he tried to dissect the design, the individual sections were already far beyond his capacity to put together. He had to create spiritual components that concentrated lots of energy, enabled very advanced reactions or possessed other demanding properties.

It was as if he was a caveman who just received an order to build a musket.

"Musket? Why does this club look so strange? What is this big hole for?" Ves imagined his caveman self scratching his head in confusion.

After more than an hour of trying to wrap his head around the design, Ves eventually threw up his hands and gave up! His mother expected too much from him! How could she ever think he was good enough to make something so complex?

"Is she setting me up to fail or something?!"

Maybe the point of sending over this design wasn't to make it straight away. It could be that she expected him to survive the upcoming battle. Perhaps years or decades later, Ves would eventually be able to reach a high enough proficiency in spiritual engineering to make this spiritual construct.

Ves shook his head. "This doesn't make much sense. Why pass it over now instead of sooner. She could have given me this several times back when she met me in person."

Another theory was that he wasn't meant to create the entire spiritual construct. Instead, he was supposed to make just one or a couple the simpler spiritual constructs. This was a more reasonable explanation, but one that still seemed unlikely to Ves. Couldn't his mother just told him what he was supposed to build and what he was supposed to ignore? In fact, why didn't his mother just transmit the most relevant data?

After a bit of thought, Ves came up with a third theory. This one sounded a lot more plausible than his previous guesses.

"Maybe... I'm not meant to create this spiritual construct. Maybe some other powerful spiritual entity is supposed to do that in my stead!"

Was it James?

Ves attempted to call him over, but his spiritual adviser refused.

"I am a prophet, not a craftsman." He simply stated before cutting the connection.

"Tch. Bastard."

Maybe his design spirits could do something with it. He presented portions of his mother's designs to the Golden Cat and so on. None of them were able to make heads or tails out of the elaborate design.

Not even Qilanxo, who developed a lot of abilities, was capable of reproducing his mother's design!

As an exobeast who grew up on a planet where technology constantly declined, she spent far more effort on mastering her own inborn talents. She was very good at spiritual manipulation but spiritual engineering was something else entirely.

None of his other design spirits could help him out either. While he skipped over his hostile design spirits, he didn't think any of them were willing or able to help him. They were probably hoping for him to get smashed to pieces!

There was one more spirit that Ves that stood out from this group. Of all the design spirits he knew, only the Superior Mother might actually be able to do something with what his mother sent over.

The Superior Mother had remained dormant for so long that Ves forgot about her entirely. Perhaps it was better to keep her asleep, as a design spirit that was not only his mother but a very bossy mother was not fun to have around!

That said, if he could even the odds by waking her, he would gladly do so. It was unfortunate that Ves had no clue how to do that safely.

Would waking her even help him make this complicated construct? Ves vaguely guessed that this should be the case. The logic behind this possibility sounded very compelling. It made too much sense.

"Why does my mother need to send something to me instead of passing it to herself directly?"

Was his mother not connected to her own incarnation? Were Cynthia Larkinson and the Superior Mother two separate entities who only shared a marginal relation with each other?

Ves felt really confused, but this was what his logic dictated.

Now, Ves had to make a difficult decision. He could either continue to figure out how to make this complicated construct by himself, or he could shift his focus on waking up the Superior Mother and make her do something with the complicated spiritual design.

Logically, he should do the latter. Trying to figure out how to pull the Superior Mother from her slumber sounded much easier than the other option.

In addition, the Superior Mother was powerful and probably knowledgeable as well if she inherited some of Cynthia's spiritual sorcery. Just having her at his disposal like Qilanxo would help a lot.

However, his intuition hinted to him this was not a simple choice. Waking the Superior Mother before she was done with whatever she was doing might cause her to interrupt her evolution or something. The repercussions of this were severe, and Ves would rather avoid hindering the Superior Mother's growth.

He eyed the design schematic with greater resentment. Did his mother automatically assume that Ves was not capable of realizing it? Did she really think so little of him due to his ignorance?

"I'm not as incompetent as you think I am! I'm a mech designer! I'm good at creating my own stuff!"

Why should he follow her arrangements like an obedient little boy? No one said that he wasn't allowed to make this spiritual construct himself!

As a mech designer, Ves was a problem solver by nature. When faced with this challenge, Ves had the urge to surpass it. Perhaps he wasn't qualified to produce such a complicated spiritual construct if he tried to do so conventionally, but he possessed other abilities that might be of use in this instance!

"What if.. I don't make this construct, but rather grow it? As long as I build a powerful enough spiritual seed, it can grow and bloom into this design by itself!"

His eyes lit up as he came up with this radical and innovative idea!

He came up with it after recalling the way that the mech designers of the Life Research Association produced their distinctive biomechs.

Instead of fabricating the individual parts before assembling them together to produce a fully-functional mech, the biomech designers instead design their products in a way that allowed specially-cultured organisms to 'grow' into them! The process sounded rather disgusting to Ves, but it was evidently quite an effective method of producing mechs without relying on mech technicians or industrial machinery!

A producer just had to prepare some growing pools. These large, advanced bioengineering creations enabled any biomech culture to grow autonomously as long as someone dumped the required raw materials in the pools.

While the growth period was rather slow, there were several advantages to this process. The key was that as long as someone clever set the process up, the growing pools would basically run themselves!

It was this advantage that Ves sought to transplant in this situation. So what if he didn't possess the expertise required to realize his mother's design?

He would simply leverage his own expertise to build some sort of spiritual seed that was loaded with the design! While Ves couldn't guarantee that the budding seed would bloom in accordance with the design, if it was at least somewhat similar, then that was already fine!

Ves became enormously enchanted by this new and unconventional method of producing spiritual constructs. Compared to his old method, it was a lot less demanding as long as he figured out how to get it to work.

"I can probably accomplish this in a day! Maybe even less!"

The caveat was that Ves could only gain this convenience by giving up control. By giving up the opportunity to make his mother's construct piece by piece, he had to let the seed grow while only being able to exert a limited amount of influence.

"It's worth a try. If I can't get it to work, then I'll just wake the Superior Mother!"

Chapter 2386: Growing Products

The idea of 'creating' complicated spiritual constructs and products via growth rather than fabrication and assembly was perhaps the most radical and innovative idea he came up with! Its potential was enormous as it allowed him to sidestep the more traditional development path of spiritual engineering!

Certainly, what Ves imagined as 'traditional' spiritual engineering was incredibly powerful and versatile. Though the requirements were very difficult to meet, once someone became a master at spiritual engineering, they could produce any spiritual product imaginable with complete understanding how it worked because they understood and controlled every single detail.

This was what Ves yearned to achieve himself. As a mech designer, he always pursued this aspiration, and with the help of the Skills bought from the System, he had become very proficient in the finer details of mech design.

He hoped to approach spiritual engineering with the same degree of precision, control and understanding. Unfortunately, his lack of heritage, tutoring and learning resources left him as blind as a bat. Unless he was willing to invest thousands of years to reinvent several million different wheels, he would never be able to attain the level required to reproduce the Grand Dynamo he obtained from the System!

"Mech designers don't pop up out of nowhere. They are trained and educated by well-run educational institutions. They are mentored and tutored by the Seniors and Masters of their profession. If nothing else, then someone can always become a mech designer through self-study and e-learning if they have a few books and learning apps at their disposal."

The tragedy of Ves was that he lacked even the latter. His deadbeat mother didn't even give him a single booklet!

For this reason, when faced with a sophisticated spiritual design, Ves could either pass it over to someone who knew what to do with it, or use his own ingenuity to solve the problem in a creative fashion.

The proper course of action was to leave it to an expert. Yet if Ves forcefully woke up the Superior Mother, he feared he might interrupt some sort of delicate growth phase.

The damage might not be serious, but Ves did not want to risk kneecapping the ancestral spirit's fantastic potential. She had the potential of attracting the worship of trillions of Hexers. With the Superior Mother's connection to Cynthia, this might be a way for his mother to stop leeching his spiritual energy and sustain herself on a more independent basis.

"The construct itself also requires a lot of energy to shape into being. Does my mother have to pay for that?"

There were certain special components in the spiritual construct design that looked very special. Even by themselves, Ves was unable to create something so high in quality, precision and complexity. Just like fabricating high-performance physical parts, anyone who attempted to make these special spiritual components would have to pay a hefty price.

Therefore, unless it was truly necessary, Ves did not want to upset this vital arrangement!

This led him to his second solution. Though he hadn't tested it at all, Ves was very confident in his theories and projections. According to his existing understanding of spirituality, implementing a growth-based production method should be viable.

Even if Ves was very fuzzy on the mechanics, his earlier experiments in spiritual engineering taught him that this was not a crippling downside.

As long as he was willing to surrender control to the whims of nature, fortune and other external factors, he would roughly be able to get what he wanted.

Of course, that didn't mean he didn't have to expend any effort at all. Just like the peculiar biomech designers, he needed to develop a different methodology of production.

"That's okay."

Different from traditional spiritual engineering, Ves possessed a significantly greater talent and foundation in the production of 'living' entities. His life domain not only enhanced his intuition in this area, but also smoothed over a lot of difficult procedures.

Someone without a life domain would make a lot more mistakes because their spiritual energy did not offer any assistance in the growth process.

In short, this production method suited him perfectly!

He immediately began to outline the method needed to accomplish this ambitious goal. He pooled all of his knowledge that was relevant and applied his judgement, logic and intuition to put together a blueprint of his new spiritual production method.

He needed to take two broad requirements into account.

First was what he called the 'initial seed'. Like a real plant seed, this was the starting state of a complete spiritual product. The seed not only contained the design of its end state, but also contained all of the essential spiritual ingredients that were necessary to kickstart the growth process.

"Every seed needs access to good soil or other favorable conditions to grow into a healthy and vigorous plant."

This was the second requirement. The incubation conditions encompassed every positive and negative variable that could influence the growth of the initial seed. These external circumstances not only provided the necessary spiritual nutrients, but also directed the growth process!

Ves paid a lot of attention to the latter because that was his only safeguard to get the product he wanted. While it was impossible to guarantee exact precision, as long as the end product did not exceed the boundaries he set, he would be happy with what he obtained.

As Ves slowly built an elaborate plan, he found out that as long as it worked according to his design, he could indeed skip a lot of difficult steps.

"Just let the growth process take care of everything."

Even so, a couple of thorny aspects still remained.

First, he wasn't sure he was able to obtain all of the specific spiritual attributes needed to make some of the special spiritual components.

Ves could only throw up his hands at this difficult request. "Well, the growth process will just have to work with what's available. If it can't obtain the required spiritual attribute, then it can always substitute it with another attribute."

Certainly, a steel sword was a lot more effective at cutting bodies than a wooden sword. However, they were both swords and they were both capable of harming people, and that ought to be enough.

"Ketis might disagree, but she's not here!"

This was not the time for perfection. With just a couple of days to go before the Larkinsons confronted the Allidus Alliance, Ves had to set this process up quickly, forgoing the usual need for rigor.

Still, Ves remained confident.

To make sure this production method was not a figment of his imagination, he tested it out on a smaller scale. He designed a slightly obtuse and difficult spiritual construct and began to fulfill the two requirements.

He formed the initial seed with some of his spare spiritual energy and blended in a spiritual image that contained the design and visualization of his desired end product.

He then prepared the incubation conditions. He used a P-stone as the incubating chamber and began to insert some loose spiritual energy from himself, Goldie and some other sources.

Ves then threw in the initial seed and took a step back.

He observed what happened carefully.

"It's starting. The initial seed is following its programming."

When the initial seed recognized its favorable conditions, it immediately began to absorb the nutrients and grow out of its shell.

Ves smiled wider and wider when he recognized that the seed largely followed his programming. The growing spiritual construct began to grow taller and develop some branches.

He chose a spiritual tree as his first product with this new method because it offered him an easy way to judge how its formation differed from the design he specified.

"Hmm, there's indeed some variability."

He observed a lot of variance in how its branches and leaves matured. When the spiritual tree he had grown reached its programmed end state, the final result ultimately deviated from his design by as much as fifteen percent!

Ves smiled. "To be honest, that is a lot better than I anticipated."

If the deviation reached as far as fifty percent, then it was impossible to ensure the end product would be able to fulfill the same role as the original.

He pulled the just-matured spiritual tree from the P-stone and stuffed it into the so-called Prosperity Tree that was drooping so bad that it looked as if it was on the verge of death!

The shape of the spiritual tree roughly corresponded with the structure of the physical Prosperity Tree. This was because he used the latter as the basis of the design of the former!

"C'mon, revitalize already!"

The tree only looked a bit more revitalized than before, but Ves did not feel disappointed. He knew that trees were slow to change. The reason why he was happy was because the physical Prosperity Tree seamlessly accepted the artificial spiritual product he had grown from a seed.

If the tree was truly doomed, it wouldn't have done this! The fact that the spiritual tree settled in nicely signified that his scheme to revitalize the physical tree might actually work!

Ves laughed. "Hahahaha! Take that, you stupid tree! You want to die? Not on my watch! I'll pump you up with life no matter how much doom you want to portend!"

While he disdained superstition, he couldn't help but remained bothered by his Prosperity Tree's malaise. His grandfather claimed that its state directly reflected his fortune, but Ves couldn't believe in this nonsense.

Even so, he still felt disturbed when his tree was doing awful.

Instead of letting the tree increase his doubts, Ves preferred to take matters in his own hands!

The success of this little experiment provided the critical proof he needed to bet all of his chips in his plan to produce his mother's work through this new method.

Even if the scale and complexity weren't comparable at all, Ves still had faith that it had the potential to work!

He spent the rest of the day setting his plan in motion. He requested, begged or coerced his various design spirits to pass over their spiritual fragments and formed a large and complex initial seed by combining them together.

The initial seed was already a living spiritual product in itself, but Ves deliberately kept it in a preliminary state.

During the creation of the seed, Ves made sure to imprint his mother's design as much as possible. He also sacrificed a few drops of life-prolonging treatment serum to pack the seed with a lot of necessary nutrients.

Still, the seed could only accommodate so much nutrients and still retain its nature as a growing entity rather than a mature entity. Perhaps Ves might be able to raise this limit as he became more proficient with this method, but for now he could only do so much.

He turned his attention to setting up the incubation conditions. He stuffed the seed into a P-stone and began to gather some additional spiritual energy to provide the seed with fertile 'soil'.

Ves soon encountered a very significant problem.

"I don't have enough nutrients!"

His mother's design not only depicted a complex spiritual machine, but a very strong and demanding one as well!

He couldn't keep milking himself and his design spirits for spiritual energy. Ves needed a lot more.

He grabbed the vial of precious high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum from his pocket and studied its contents. He already used up quite a number of drops to fuel some of his potent endeavors. While he still possessed plenty of drops, he was very reluctant to use up so much serum for a single purpose.

Due to their universal compatibility and high energy density, it was best to use a single drop or a few drops at a time.

Did he have access to another abundant energy that could provide the initial seed with all of the spiritual energy required to fuel its entire growth?

A few ideas came to mind...

Chapter 2388: The Final Hour

The final hours counted down.

The distant energy signatures, particularly the huge one belonging to the Gravada Knarlax, hadn't stopped their approach. In fact, they even accelerated a bit as if the pirates crewing the ships were eager to crush the brazen Larkinson Clan!

Ves thought about what he wanted to say in his upcoming speech. He knew from Major Verle that words had a very powerful effect on the morale of his troops. If he said all of the right words, his mech pilots might be able to perform twenty percent better.

In contrast, if he spoke words of doom and defeat, then the effective performance of his mech pilots might drop by as much as fifty percent!

In a battle with such high stakes, these were enormous swings! Anything that could help their side fight a little harder and prevent more deaths was worth pursuing.

In fact, Ves came up with an idea to go a step further. What if he took advantage of the Larkinson Network while he held his speech? What he tried to integrate spiritual manipulation in his words on a deeper level?

"What if I can speak to their souls rather than their ears?"

It was an interesting idea, and one that Ves thought had a lot of potential. While a part of him felt a bit exasperated at himself for trying to employ spiritual techniques in situations where they weren't needed, he was fascinated by them as well.

As Ves returned to his stateroom and sat next to Lucky, his attention shifted from the projection of the local area.

Ever since the Larkinson Clan received word that Lord Hivex dispatched a formidable punitive fleet, Ves had left much of his mech design work aside and instead focused most of his creative energies on developing spiritual solutions.

Oh, he spent plenty of his time on mechs. Upgrading and customizing the mechs for his expert candidates took up most of his month.

"It's more of a chore, though."

Ves didn't invent anything new while he performed all of that work. Even the most powerful upgrade that came in the form of Unending mech weapons actually didn't require any intensive effort at all. This was because the Unending alloy he used was already strong enough to do all of the work!

Instead, he had become quite passionate and obsessed about advancing his spiritual engineering and spiritual manipulation abilities. He correctly surmised that the best way he could strengthen his forces was to explore the spiritual angle further.

There were thousands of Larkinsons in the task force who were already able to upgrade the physical performance of every mech and ship at their disposal. Ves could leave the job of servicing them and upgrading them to the mech designers, mech technicians, chief engineers and other knowledgeable clansmen.

He could not turn to anyone else when he needed to accomplish something spiritual in nature.

Certainly, James and perhaps Ketis might help, but neither were even close to matching his spiritual capabilities.

Admittedly, his capabilities were very shallow compared to his mother, but he still stood head and shoulders above those who still believed that the extraordinary didn't exist!

As Ves reflected back on what he had accomplished in the last month, he realized that he had become a lot more passionate about spiritual engineering than mech design.

Of course, part of that was because he had stalled his involvement in the LMC's ongoing mech design projects. Yet that did not excuse his excessive preoccupation with spiritual engineering.

"Am I a mech designer or am I a spiritual engineer?" He asked himself.

Lucky tiredly looked up at his face. "Meow."

"Heh. That's easy for you to say. Your gem production pretty much runs on autopilot. Are you even capable of exerting any control over this process?"

"Meow!" His cat turned away while flipping up his metallic tail.

It was not as if Ves was much better. When faced with an impossible project, he decided to take a crooked road and invented an entirely new spiritual production method.

Ves felt this method had a lot of potential. Its applications were endless, but Ves felt a bit disturbed in the direction he was going. Was he trying to pursue spiritual engineering regardless whether his actions were related to mech design?

"What am I turning into? Can I still just call myself a mech designer?"

He imagined that this question must be plaguing many other mech designers who dabbled in other fields. It was not unusual for mech designers to be dissatisfied with

relying on third-party mech parts to design their mechs. This was why Master Olson learned how to develop her own mech engines and how other mech designers learned how to design their own key parts.

Yet no matter how far they ventured into these side paths, they were still able to cling on to their primary identities as mech designer.

Ves found it increasingly more difficult to do the same. The temptation to pay less attention to mech design in order to reserve more time for spiritual engineering kept plaguing him. There were almost an endless amount of mech designers in human space, many of which could design fantastic mechs that rivaled his own in value or functionality.

There weren't as many spiritual engineers or spiritual sorcerers, though.

While it was rather precarious to engage in spiritual engineering in full view of the Big Two, as long as he maintained his identity as mech designer and continued to work with mechs in his daily life, he could probably get away with a lot!

Still, Ves felt a bit reluctant to become more like his mother. Even if he did not follow the same path as hers with regards to spirituality, he believed he definitely possessed the potential to match and surpass her strength one day!

Right now, his domain encompassed both life and mechs in equal proportion. This duality reflected his split obsessions towards life and mechs.

"I'm a mech designer. I'm a spiritual engineer. I'm both."

No matter what, if he ever managed to leave the Nyxian Gap, he would return with enormous gains related to the latter. This would surely encourage him to go down this path even further.

"Why am I even questioning myself about this when there's pirates about to barrel down on my forces?"

He shook his head. This was not the time to get swept up by irrelevant concerns.

His eyes sharpened as he reminded himself of his actual priorities.

"I have a clan to lead into battle."

Time passed by as the Larkinsons all ate the best meals they had in awhile. Ves even ate another Ulimo nutrient pack to pamper his taste buds and fill his stomach with a pleasant rolling warmth that would keep him satiated and energetic for hours.

It was a fitting meal to prepare him for what was to come.

As the reality of the situation dawned on the Larkinsons, they slowly firmed up as they mustered up their courage.

They already prepared for this battle. Each of them had worked hard to pass the most difficult tests of their lives.

Hardly any mech force achieved victory against a force of actual warships! The last example of this happening in the local region was when the sandmen overwhelmed the understrength MTA warships dispatched to defend the Bentheim System.

As confident as Ves was in all of his preparations, he did not feel his forces were as strong as the sandmen back then. He appreciated the parallels, though. Much like the aliens, his Larkinson Clan had upgraded its strength quite a bit since their last battle.

Hopefully, the Allidus Alliance would be caught off-guard much like the hapless MTA warships at the pivotal Battle of Bentheim!

When the countdown had almost reached the end, Ves began to suit up. He slowly donned his Unending Regalia and checked each and every piece of individual equipment. He also helped Lucky equip the Misfortune Harness Mark II.

Though the chances were small that he would ever end up in a fight where he needed to fight man-to-man, it didn't hurt to be prepared.

"Are you ready for a show, Lucky?"

"Meow."

Lucky did not look eager to go out. His stomach was still busy trying to digest the B-stone that Ves had employed as a laxative for his cat.

"Well, tough luck, you're going out anyway. I'm not leaving you here to sit out the entire battle."

Ves picked up his suited-up cat and held him against his shoulder as he stepped out of his stateroom.

With Nitaa's large and looming form following from behind his back, his armored suit clanked across the metal deck as he strode towards the bridge.

Once he entered, he sat in the central chair, various projections already popping up around him to give him a solid overview of his assets and the surrounding space.

Major Verle had already moved to the Redfeather to command the battle. The Scarlet Rose was many things, but she was not a good command ship.

"Status report. What is the condition of our forces?"

"The Avatars of Myth are fully deployed and ready for action."

"The Living Sentinels are just about to deploy their final mechs."

"The Battle Criers are surrounding our ships."

"The Flagrant Vandals are covering our flanks and rear."

"The Swordmaidens are keeping all of their mechs in reserve."

"The Penitent Sisters are already in the process of evacuating their converted combat carriers."

As Ves listened to the various reports, the hatch to the bridge slid open. Calabast, having eschewed her tight black uniform for a high-tech Hexer infiltrator suit, strode up to his seat.

She bent down a bit to caress Lucky's head.

"Meow~" The cat squinted in pleasure.

"Why are you here, Calabast? Do you want to take Lucky on a risky jaunt or something?"

"No. Not yet. It's too dangerous to attempt an infiltration under the current circumstances. Maybe there will be an opportunity later in the battle, but for now it's too dangerous."

"Then why have you come?"

"I want you to remind you of our backup option. The engines are already warmed and ready to engage."

"Pass."

"I'm just looking out for you, kid."

They chatted for a bit, but Calabast didn't have anything else to say. She just wanted to see how confident he was and whether he was still committed to fighting the pirate armada.

Once she left, Ves closed his eyes. He ran through the plan one more time. This was the time to see whether the stratagems he devised would grant his side enough advantages to resist the pirate onslaught.

"Open a channel to every ship and mech." Ves spoke as he gathered his thoughts. "I'm ready to address the entire clan."

His armored form creaked on the chair as he raised himself to his feet. His helmetless face looked suitably heroic, and upon a silent command, a billowing red cape extended from the rear shoulders of his Unending Regalia.

Every Larkinson waiting for the final hour to count down all directed their attention to the lifelike projection of Ves appearing in front of their faces.

The entire fleet momentarily fell silent. Aside from the mech pilots who were stationed in the perimeter of the fleet, everyone directed their attention at their leader.

Ves stared at the wide projection that popped up in front of him. A random panorama of faces greeted him. Avatars, Sentinels, Swordmaidens and more each looked at him via his projections. Seeing their faces in real time allowed him to gain a more personal connection with those he addressed. He could also adjust his speech if he noticed his clansmen weren't taking his words very well.

Before he spoke, he took a deep breath. At the same time, he stretched out his hand.

Nitaa placed the Larkinson Mandate in his armored grasp.

Ves needed the prop for what he was about to do. He concentrated his mind a bit and began to connect to Goldie and the Larkinson Network.

Then, he proceeded to do something he had never done before. He attempted to push his presence through the network!

Chapter 2389: Rousing Speech

The Larkinson Clan was about to face its biggest test in Maynard Fields.

Tens of thousands of Larkinsons paid attention to his address. While each of them had been psychologically preparing themselves for the fight of their lives, it was difficult to ensure that each of them would endure in the coming struggle.

The odds were too great. The looming pirate threat had come close enough to confirm the initial long-ranged scanning data. The Allidus Alliance hadn't been bluffing, and a formidable heavy cruiser definitely led their mighty fleet!

In the past, humans used to believe that warships played a key role in expanding and securing their civilization's dominion. The might of battleships had long attracted the worship and admirations of an uncountable amount of humans.

It was different now. The specter of warships cast a heavy shadow over humans born in the Age of Mechs. From their youth, they had been taught to fear these enormous engines of destruction. Even if nobody personally experienced the terror that warships wrought, all of the ominous education they received as they grew up in school had left a very strong mark in their minds.

Perhaps the prospect of facing a pirate-built warship might not sound so intimidating when the battle was still a distant prospect. The Larkinsons accepted the news with stoic solemnity.

Yet as the days went by, the fears that their teachers implanted into their minds had slowly started to creep up. Ves was no different as he possessed a greater technical understanding how a warship like the Gravada Knarlax could easily demolish his task force.

The power of a weapon platform depending on many factors. In mech combat, size usually wasn't a big factor because the mech industry spent four centuries to find the optimal balance between size, cost, functionality and efficiency.

Hardly anyone fielded super-sized mechs or juggernauts in battle because they were too inefficient. Certainly, anyone who had plenty of money and resources to spare might choose to field them, but their unwieldiness and their very obvious flaws left them open to exploitation.

Still, at some point, when something got big enough, they became incredibly formidable. Size increased leverage. Size provided capacity. Size added durability.

The jump in specs from light mechs to heavy mechs was already quite extreme. The two possessed completely different fighting styles, but it was not entirely clear that the larger and heavier mech could defeat the lighter mech in a dueling scenario.

However, the real battlefield was very different from a fair mech duel. In an actual battle, an expensive heavy mech could easily yield much greater results if employed correctly.

The same went for warships, but at a much more exaggerated scale. The Gravada Knarlax didn't need to have any brilliant captains and officers in command. As long as they knew just enough to keep the ship running, the Allidus Alliance could merely rely on her potent gun batteries and very resilient hull plating to carry every battle!

In comparison, a force of smaller elements such as Task Force Predator had to exert an unreasonably high amount of effort to achieve similar results.

In other words, the pirates would be able to win a battle in their sleep while the Larkinsons had to exert at least 150 percent of their effort in order to gain a fighting chance!

It sounded unfair. It sounded insurmountable. No matter how overconfident the pirates felt, there was no way the large and powerful Allidus Alliance was completely made up of incompetents.

The Larkinsons had already built up a formidable reputation of their own, so anyone who dared to confront the conquerors of Ulimo Citadel should certainly come prepared.

Ves confidently smirked as his projection graced every clansmen in the fleet. If exerting 150 percent wasn't enough, then he would make sure that everyone would output 200 percent instead!

Ves was confident he already made a lot of progress with the extraordinary measures he prepared. However, improving the tech and providing his forces with spiritual advantages was only part of the equation.

He had always believed that the key to winning most battles was to maintain better morale than the enemies.

As long as the Larkinsons were confident, then they would fight at their very best! Anything less was not acceptable!

This was why he ignored all of his doubts and tried to meld his mind with the Larkinson Network!

Though Ves did his best to look confident and at ease, inwardly his mind came under significant strain!

This was because his forceful insertion into the Larkinson Network caused him to bear some of the burden of its operation. Goldie watched Ves on with considerable concern!

Nyaaaaa!

Humans weren't suited to withstand so much input. Ves recalled the many times his experiments caused his test subject's head to explode because they received too much spiritual input!

Now, Ves chose to put himself in their place, thereby risking the same fate!

He didn't feel concerned. Unlike his clueless and hapless test subjects, he not only understood what took place, but also prepared a countermeasure!

He concentrated a bit further and pulled a spiritual augment template from his implant. He rapidly built up a spiritual construct with the help of the template. As soon as it came into existence, a large proportion of incoming spiritual signals suddenly stopped bombarding his Spirituality!

The new spiritual construct acted as a filter. Its role was very simple. It rejected the passage of any spiritual input except for the ones he specifically approved.

Since Ves merely wanted to communicate with the clansmen connected to the Larkinson Network, he did not need all of the irrelevant spiritual input.

It was working, if only just. While the spiritual input of most of the clansmen wasn't very strong, it was different when it came to the more spiritually active Larkinsons. Venerable Jannzi especially radiated a strong presence, so much so that she was already exerting her influence to a greater degree in the Larkinson Network!

Fortunately, Venerable Jannzi did not regard Ves with hostility. Her potent spirit and will was willing to make way when Ves stood in their way.

After cutting down the excessive input, Ves found it much more bearable to place himself closer to the center of the Larkinson Network. By partially taking over Goldie's role as the nexus, he gained a close, direct connection to every Larkinson.

This did not just apply to Larkinsons in the fleet, but also the clansmen back at Cinach VI!

Still, Ves only intended to address the members of the task force this time. When his eyes focused on the small faces on the projected panorama, Ves was somehow able to match their appearances to a specific connection in the network.

The unprecedented degree of closeness he established with his fellow Larkinsons felt surreal. Was this what Goldie felt all the time?

For a moment, he felt like a god looking down on his faithful subjects.

Similarly, each of the clansmen who paid attention to him felt as if their awe, respect, worship and other feelings towards him had increased.

It was a very magical moment for both sides. Even if Ves hadn't spoken for more than a minute, everyone felt as if they perceived his affection for them. A small portion of his love, his hopes, his aspirations and his confidence propagated through the network, causing the clansmen who were about to confront the pirates to feel as if they were all in it together!

Ves finally spoke his first words.

"Larkinsons. Our time of proving has come."

Those words audibly spread through the audio speakers. They also rippled through the Larkinson Network, thereby conveying greater meaning to the clansmen than they realized!

This dual nature caused the clansmen listening to him to become mesmerized.

"When we founded the clan, we knew it wasn't going to be easy. Many existing interests in the galaxy had already carved out their own turfs. Nobody likes to welcome newcomers."

Ves dramatically raised his fist. Now that he wore his Unending Regalia complete with a matching red cloak, he resembled a warlord rather than a mech designer!

"So what? Nothing comes for free! If we want something, we have to work for it, and in a galaxy as violent and dangerous as ours, that means we have to fight for our future! In the short existence of our clan, we have overcome numerous enemies who wanted to stop our rise. From the Friday Coalition to the Dry Snakes, each of these enemies thought we didn't deserve to grow and prosper. Each of them thought that they were stronger than us and that they could squash us like a bug. Have they succeeded?"

Ves grinned, through the Larkinson Network, he could feel some of the raw emotions from his clansmen. His fist opened up as if to symbolize an explosion!

"No! Each time our enemies stood in our way, we flung them aside! Each time our enemies thought they could annihilate us, we resisted their blows and stood our ground! Each time our enemies plotted against us, we foiled their plots and outwitted them! We survived every successive challenge that sought to end our clan, and this time will be no different!"

A huge wave of confidence spread through the Larkinson Network. Ves found it almost infectious as the network took in the rising mood and began to feed it back to every Larkinson!

He clenched his fist and pressed it against his chest. "In my heart, I believe we are special. To be a Larkinson is to be a soldier. Not just any soldier, but an honorable soldier. With the long and distinguished heritage of the old Larkinson Family as our foundation, we have proven ourselves greater and more superior than any band of roving mercenaries! Different from those who fight for fortune, we fight for family. Our comrades and our loved ones are depending on us. Knowing this, let me ask you a question. Are you willing to fight against one of the most powerful pirate factions of the Nyxian Gap?"

The answer of his clansmen came instantly!

"YES!"

"Are you willing to brave the guns of the pirate warships?"

"YES!" His clansmen roared!

"ARE YOU WILLING TO FIGHT FOR YOURSELVES, YOUR CLAN, AND ETERNAL GLORY?!"

His Larkinsons roared! They roared out their whole lungs! They roared until their hearts almost stopped!

Despite serving under the banner of the Golden Cat, each of them roared like lions today!

The collective jubilation not only spread to everyone's ears. Due to the role of the Larkinson Network, they spread their elevated moods to Ves and each other!

Though Ves had massaged the truth and distorted some facts in his speech, no one paid attention to the inconsistencies. It didn't really matter. He succeeded in boosting everyone's fighting spirit!

"Now, ready yourselves, because our latest challengers will not let us pass for free. Be prepared to teach them the same lesson we taught the Coalition Reserve Corps! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!" His Larkinsons echoed!

With that, Ves ended the broadcast. He slowly began to pull back from the Larkinson Network. Even if he managed to endure the strain, it wasn't viable for him to maintain this condition for an extended amount of time.

Ves still sensed plenty of hope and confidence from the clansmen manning the stations in the bridge. Each of them performed their duties with a sense of confidence and superiority.

Whether that would last, Ves wasn't sure. He had done his best to secure every possible advantage he could give his fellow Larkinsons. Now was the time to see if all of his hard work and preparation would see him and his clan through this pivotal battle.

An alarm suddenly rang through the bridge.

"Sir, some of the distant energy signatures are spiking! The enemy warships are firing their main batteries!"

"INCOMING!"

A trio of powerful rounds thundered towards the task force! Numerous asteroids exploded into pieces or were violently knocked aside as the Gravada Knarlax's opening attack made a powerful impression!

Shortly afterwards, distant laser beams attempted to strike the ships of the Larkinson Clan, only for them to fail to thread through all of the asteroids in the way.

Even so, Ves and everyone else knew that this was just the start!

Chapter 2390: Initial Advance

In the final days before the battle, Task Force Predator deliberately navigated to a region in Maynard Fields that was particularly dense with asteroids.

Not only that, the surrounding asteroids were denser and contained higher metallic content than usual. Some of them even contained trace amounts of higher quality exotics, though not to the extent that some enterprising pirate group decided to settle in the area in order to mine this bounty.

Regardless, the task force deliberately moved in the middle of this area and dared the Allidus Alliance fleet to enter into battle in this environment.

To Ves' astonishment, the pirate armada accepted the invitation. With these harder and more durable asteroids blocking the path between the two sides, the Larkinsons hoped to gain some vital cover that would allow them to approach the pirates without coming under as much fire.

Now, it seemed that this hope was slightly naive. Dense asteroids or not, the distant warships were firing their main batteries towards the coordinates of the Larkinsons without hesitation!

No matter what asteroids blocked the Gravada Knarlax's line of sight, the incredible kinetic energy that propelled the main battery rounds forward domineeringly smashed or knocked many asteroids aside!

"Sir, if this goes on for ten to fifteen minutes, the pirates will have succeeded in opening up a corridor between us and them! The asteroids providing us with cover won't last long under a sustained bombardment!"

Ves resisted the urge to vomit. How many times could the pirate fire their main batteries? If it was several hundred times, then that was enough to temporarily free up an entire lane!

Faced with the sight of numerous asteroids exploding or being cast aside like billiard balls, Major Verle quickly issued a set of orders from the Redfeather's command center.

"Advance!"

The Larkinson fleet surged forward, with specific ships flying in front of other ships.

Most strikingly, the Penitent Sister combat carriers took the lead. Their significantly-reinforced bow armor pointed straight in the direction of the pirate armada and blasted forward as if they already knew they were heading to their doom.

Their enormously-bolstered boosters and other additional propulsion systems did not engage just yet. This was not the time for these sacrificial ships to perform their suicidal charges.

The more vulnerable carriers and support ships of the task force directly trailed behind the far more durable Penitent Sister vessels.

Though their combat carriers weren't as modern and durable as the combat carriers fielded by the Hex Army, they were still proper second-class vessels with considerable defensive capabilities.

The only unfortunate aspect about their defenses was that their hull plating were optimized to resist mech-grade weapons fire and attacks. The smaller the caliber, the more easily the armored Hexer vessels shrugged off the attacks.

It was the opposite against more powerful attacks. Ves had studied the armor systems of the Penitent Sister combat carriers in passing and understood their weakness against warship-grade attacks.

The developers of this armor system and the shipwrights that designed the combat carriers did not care about this weakness!

In the modern galaxy, only aliens and the Big Two fielded armed warships.

If any of their customers bumped into the former, then they had entered an area where they shouldn't have appeared.

If the combat carriers somehow entered into a conflict against the Big Two's warships, then it was hopeless to defend against the firepower that humanity's overlords had at their disposal!

None of the Hexers involved in constructing the combat carriers could have ever imagined that their commercial-grade ships would ever do battle against pirate-owned and pirate-developed warships!

Ves frowned a bit. He knew that this oversight would come to bite the Larkinsons and the Penitent Sisters in the butt. Though the latter had done their best to patch over this inherent weakness by piling up a lot of armor at the bows of their vessels, the firepower the pirates were slinging around made him doubt whether it would help that much.

As the Larkinson fleet advanced with the most durable warships in the vanguard, the pirates showed no signs of stopping their wasteful opening moves. Powerful kinetic or

explosive rounds impacted asteroid after asteroid, causing the surrounding space to become a bit murkier due to all of the shards and fine dust spreading.

Aside from blocking the optical sensors a bit, they didn't throw up too much interference. This was a shame, since the pirates possessed an unquestionable advantage in long-ranged firefights.

"Sir, our forward scouts have succeeded in coming into visual range of the enemy fleet!"

"Send me the visuals!"

A new projection appeared on the side. Ves let out a shocked breath as he finally saw what he and his clan faced with his eyes.

It was easy to diminish or detract the formidable nature of his enemies when they were still detected by their energy signatures. Mere symbols on a chart did not convey the power and ferocity of the pirate fleet as much as a simple projected image!

The heavy cruiser in the center of the fleet was most definitely the pride and joy of the mighty Allidus Alliance. Among the dazzling amount of secondary gun batteries installed over her entire length, a large portion of her side proudly stamped the grand name of the vessel.

The scout mech, an Inheritor mech, had ventured very far forward. The Vandal mech pilot was literally risking his life to transmit this vital footage back to the main fleet!

More details quickly became apparent. Two of the three powerful main turrets with three monstrous gun barrels each were firing in a slow but constant staccato.

All the while, the heavy cruiser slowly crept forward. Her huge thrusters and propulsion systems weren't firing at full blast. They merely pushed the enormous warship along as if it was merely a matter of time before her guns broke the Larkinson Clan!

The escort warships couldn't be ignored either. Though far smaller and less assuming than the pirate flagship, their large and numerous energy weapon turrets all boasted Judgement Lasers or similar weapons.

While they weren't very effective at blasting apart asteroids, their accuracy was incredibly high, so much so that the most forward Penitent Sister combat carriers already began to sustain some of the distant laser beam attacks!

"The Penitent Sister ships are holding, but the enemy escort warships are beginning to concentrate their fire!"

Though much of the distant laser fire wasted their firepower by striking the asteroids that covered up the line of sight to the Larkinson fleet, whenever the strikingly thick and

energetic beams managed to thread the needle, the Penitent Sister combat carriers always suffered serious damage, far more than what a volley from an entire mech company could output!

"Move forward! Don't let these attacks scare you. We have enough metal between us and the enemy to get into closer range. Once our mechs get close enough, we can finally start hitting back!"

The sentiment sounded great, but as their ships came closer, the terror exerted by the powerful warship attacks continued to batter at the confidence of the Larkinsons. Some of the courage that Ves had bestowed onto his clansmen began to recede as the full import of their actions became evident.

No one wanted to be struck by the Gravada Knarlax's main cannons! No one wanted to be vaporized from existence after getting struck by a Judgement Laser!

Suddenly, one of the Gravada Knarlax's kinetic rounds had succeeded in threading through all of the asteroids and struck straight at the pointed nose of the Delica Pride!

The Penitent Sister combat carrier immediately jerked as her entire hull moved as if a giant had punched her back!

The ship fell into a brief uncontrolled spin! The thick layers of armor that reinforced her bow bore a deep and ugly rent that ruined a significant portion of her forward armor!

"What is the state of the Delica Pride?!"

"She's still operational! She has lost a considerable amount of hull integrity, and some of her forward compartments have been breached. There are no casualties and her core systems are still undamaged."

"Good!"

Much of the original crew of the Delicate Pride and other Hexer warships had already evacuated their vessels beforehand. Only skeleton crews remained, and most of them consisted of essential engineers and ship ratings that made sure their ships kept propelling in the direction of the enemy.

The bow compartments of the combat carriers were completely deserted. Only bots entered these compartments if something crucial needed to be done.

While this measure ensured that the loss of life was minimal, Ves still winced at the desecration of such a valuable ship.

A few years ago, obtaining a second-class combat carrier had been an extravagant dream! Now, he could easily afford to obtain them, but that did not mean he was willing to accept their loss.

Unfortunately, he had no choice! As Major Verle and every other military commander had made it clear to Ves, their task force was weaker than the pirate fleet.

The only way to find an opportunity for victory was to buy the time to grasp them. In order to do so, the Larkinsons had to be willing to sacrifice their ships to secure this crucial time!

So far, it was working, though the price became considerably more unbearable. As the range closed in, huge but silent weapon impacts began to scar the Penitent Sister carriers.

The enemy pirates apparently noticed how well the combat carriers endured the attacks. Both the Gravada Knarlax and the escort warships began to concentrate their fire.

The most heavily-damaged ship, the Delica Pride, degraded even faster as a combination of heavy kinetic rounds alongside a constant refrain of powerful laser beams continually hammered or melted the bow and armor.

Soon enough, the enemy warships succeeded in chewing through the forward armor! The weapons fire that followed after this point dealt considerable damage to the interior of the Delica Pride. The internal compartments were less protected than the hull, thereby allowing the destructive warships to wreak havoc inside and destroy many essential systems!"

"Evacuate the Delicate Pride! She has done her job and absorbed enough firepower to keep the Gravada Knarlax occupied for a time!"

A small amount of escape pods launched from the dying combat carrier as successive long-ranged weapon attacks finally dug deep enough to hit something critical!

"Careful! She's breaking apart!"

As a final strike, one of the Gravada Knarlax's turrets fired all of its three huge guns in quick succession!

The three enormous rounds rapidly punched the heavily-damaged combat carrier until she could no longer hold her structure together.

The last volley managed to cleave the ship into several pieces!

This pattern continued with the other Penitent Sister combat carriers. The pirates easily hit the large and obvious targets. Though the carriers employed at least some form of evasion, they were so large and cumbersome that these simple moves hardly offered any advantage.

As the range between the two fleets started growing smaller, the accuracy of the warship batteries increased. Less asteroids were in the way, and the Gravad Knarlax's reckless volleys had already destroyed many of the rocks in the way.

First one of the Penitent Sister combat carriers fell. Then another one. Then another. With each fallen ship, the wall between the formidable pirate guns and the Larkinson fighting assets gradually decreased.

Yet all of it was worth it as the Larkinsons finally came close enough for their ranged mechs to start playing a meaningful role!

"Target the enemy mechs! If that is not possible, then shoot at the enemy destroyers and frigates!"

A lot of laser beams and a smaller amount of physical rounds began to sail from one end to the other end.

A lot of pirate mechs were startled as some of their own ranks instantly succumbed after they were sniped by accurate fire from the Penitent Sister mechs!

The pirates suddenly grew angry. Like a buzzing swarm of bees, over 8,000 loosely-organized pirate mechs began to stir!