

## Mech 2271

### *Chapter 2271: Fitting the Cat's Paw*

Now that Major Verle explained the three legs that supported his proposed mech combat doctrine, it was time to tie them all together.

Ves looked thoughtful as he processed what he learned.

"The three strategies each support and complement each other." Major Verle repeated. "On their own, they are fairly strong, but if we employ all three of them at the same time, we can achieve greater results. This is not a guess. This is an outcome that we have already proven in our previous battles. Combining glows, elite mechs and clever maneuvering can allow us to achieve quick, decisive victories while suffering minimal losses. Of course, this doesn't apply to enemies that are too strong or numerous. Quantity alone can overcome everything as long as the differences are large enough."

"As long as we don't pick fights against states or powerful organizations, we should be fine. Our Larkinson Clan isn't weak in the slightest. At the very least, most private sector outfits should steer clear of us. I doubt anyone wants to tussle against thousands of second-class mechs."

With an abundance of money and more and more mech pilots reaching second-class standards, Ves just had to design all of the second-class mechs needed to elevate the Avatars, Sentinels and other units to a new height.

The Penitent Sisters, while rather annoying and restrictive, were still very strong.

As for the newly-named Glory Seekers, the Wodin Dynasty invested heavily in bringing them up to full strength, which meant the Larkinson Clan would soon be traveling in the company of a complete second-class mech regiment!

Such strength already far surpassed most second-class outfits! Only larger organizations based in states such as the Garlen Empire or the Heavensword Association could rival such a formidable lineup!

"We still have the Friday Coalition on our backs, sir."

"...You have a point."

They talked some more about Major Verle's thoughts on his mech doctrine. This discussion directly affected the future of the Larkinson Clan's military development, so Ves tried his best to weigh the matter seriously.

He was just a mech designer, though. The logic that Major Verle employed to support his arguments all sounded impeccable, but who knew whether he was really right.

"How much have you discussed these ideas with other military specialists in our clan?"

"Extensively, sir. Many of the Larkinson military veterans who I've spoken with agree with my ideas. The trueblood Larkinsons are very familiar with some of my concepts as they are also widely-used in the Mech Corps back when we served. The input of those who come from other states and possess different backgrounds such as Calabast and Commander Chancy has allowed us to refine our plans and close some of the loopholes. This is a project that has involved many brilliant minds."

"I see."

The mech doctrine already looked mature enough to be implemented right away. In fact, the different mech forces of the Larkinson Clan already followed many aspects of it to a large extent. What the Larkinsons mainly needed to do was to unify their individual and disparate efforts in order to follow a single, cohesive development trajectory. The clansmen also needed to start additional initiatives in order to bolster the three legs.

To Ves, the most pertinent issue right now was to establish a more systematic cooperation between his Design Department and the clan's respective mech troops.

Verle gestured at Ves. "Right now, the model with regards to mech acquisition is partially a simple top-down process. You, the clan patriarch, simply chooses what mechs the Larkinson Clan needs based on your own personal judgement, mood, feelings and other random factors. Right now, that happens to be a heavy artillery mech. While I do not disagree with this addition, it's better if the selection process involves more sources of input."

In other words, Ves should stop deciding what mechs to design for the clan by himself. That was something that he was already willing to adopt.

"I will take that into account next time, major. For now, the Cat's Paw Project is already at an advanced stage. It's too much of a waste to halt the project and throw all of that design work away."

Ves briefly brought Major Verle up to speed on the Cat's Paw. The heavy artillery mech design that partially adhered to Hexer design principles possessed many of the same traits as other designs in the same price category.

It's remarkable glow was the primary reason for its existence.

"Remember my Deliverer design? I want to design a much more formidable second-class mech that possesses much more firepower with similar predictive targeting abilities. There are a number of limitations, though. The most critical one is that only devout Ylvainan mech pilots are comparative with such glows."

"So your Cat's Paw is essentially an Ylvainan mech design."

Ves reluctantly nodded.

"That.. is an issue, but not a big one." Major Verle responded after a brief pause. "There are hundreds of Ylvainan mech pilots in our clan. As far as I'm aware of, their numbers are slowly expanding as they have begun to convert some receptive clansmen to their.. faith."

Both of them grimaced at that. As Brighters, they possessed a dim view on religion. Even so, both of them knew that the Ylvainans and their faith were here to stay.

"Whatever they believe in makes them useful. The Deliverer's extraordinary targeting assistance is not something that I can replicate without involving the Ylvainan Faith. I believe strongly that the Cat's Paw will be able to save much more lives and defeat enemies considerably faster if it possesses the same capability."

"On the surface, I can see the logic."

Major Verle thought back on his memories of seeing the Deliverer in action. The Vandals fought alongside them several times during the Sand War. Each time, the Ylvainan marksman mechs managed to snipe the sandman admirals hidden in the middle of a swarm with unerring judgement!

While a heavy artillery mech on land or locked inside a bunker wouldn't be asked to find a needle in a haystack, the predictive targeting assistance could still play a huge role in a battle.

The main problem with long-ranged combat was that the hit rates were abysmal, especially in space.

With hundreds or thousands of kilometers separating both sides, even a 0.01 degree deviation in aim resulted in solid misses. If this pattern was repeated on a larger scale, then that effectively meant that most of the ranged mechs of the Larkinsons quite frankly wasted at least 90 percent of their energy and ammunition!

Lightspeed weapons such as laser rifles boasted the best accuracy at longer ranges, while physical weapons such as ballistic rifles fared much worse.

Even so, factors such as imperfect sensors, enemy ECM, environmental interference, mech-based limitations all reduced the hit rate of laser weapons as well.

This was where Ylvaine's spiritual fragment could play a great role. As long as this precognitive bastard fed its predictions on the enemy's evasion patterns to the mech pilots of the Cat's Paws, the latter could easily nail their hard-to-hit targets before they came close enough to pose a threat!

While Major Verle easily understood Ves' intentions for this mech design, from his perspective the design came with a few problems.

"I don't know enough about tech to comment about the way you put the mech together." Verle said. "What I can do is provide you with my feedback on how this mech is supposed to integrate in the clan's mech roster. First, you have already established that the Cat's Paw is piloted exclusively by Ylvainans. Now, which of our mech troops do they fit in? The Avatars? The Sentinels?"

Ves blinked. "Uhhh.. I guess I haven't thought about that. Since heavy artillery mechs are static or slow-moving machines, the Cat's Paw should fit well with the Living Sentinels."

"That's a decent option, but not a flawless one. The Living Sentinels have adopted rules and regulations that makes their mech pilots significantly less diligent and trained than their counterparts in the Avatars and other mech forces. That is not entirely bad because there is a larger number of eligible mech pilots who meet the standard of the Sentinels. What I am asking is whether you want the mech pilots of these important mechs to treat their responsibilities as a job."

"If you put it that way, then the Living Sentinels is not a good choice. Their culture is not as strict or demanding towards their mech pilots. Considering the key role that the Cat's Paw can play in many battles, I want their mech pilots to hold themselves to a much higher standard. Perhaps they fit better with the Avatars of Myth."

Verle shook his head. "The Avatars of Myth are slowly developing in the direction of an assault force. While such a specialization doesn't preclude them from adopting a heavy artillery mech, it is not needed. If we want to pursue our new doctrine to the fullest, then it is best to set up many specialized elite mech troops instead of a handful of broader ones."

"If the Cat's Paw doesn't fit with the Avatars of Myth, then where else can they go? Certainly not the Flagrant Vandals."

"We performed a difference back when we were still a part of the Mech Corps, sir. The Larkinson Clan has very different needs and traits, hence our decision to specialize in reconnaissance and mobility. The Akkara mechs that we currently possess are largely holdovers from our prior service. Their importance has been reduced to using them as bunker mechs. Since it's a lastgen mech, the Vandals would really like to replace it with something better and more modern."

Ves thought about what the major said. The Larkinson Clan was set to acquire a lot of ships with bunkers placed on their hulls. All of those bunkers needed to be filled with heavy mechs.

No matter if the ship belonged to the Avatars, Sentinels, Swordmaidens or whatnot, it was best if each of their bunkers were put to good use! Otherwise, wouldn't they be throwing away this powerful defensive tool?

Yet assigning them to a specific force was not the ideal solution. He suddenly recalled one of Major Verle's recommendations.

"In order to ensure that the Cat's Paw model is used to its fullest, you need to put them in a unit that specializes in such." Ves concluded. "The best solution therefore is to put them in a dedicated artillery-focused mech force!"

He was not entirely unfamiliar with them. He recalled that Jannzi Larkinson used to serve in the Apocalypse Heralds of the Mech Corps. The mech regiment was famed for their love of heavy mechs and artillery warfare.

Sadly, the Larkinson Clan wasn't close to any collapsing state that lost their grip on artillery mech regiments. There was no feasible way for him to acquire them in the short term.

A sudden idea came to mind. "What if we start our own artillery-focused mech force regardless of the cost?"

"We will have to invest years in building up its mech roster, pilot roster, culture, customs, tactics and martial traditions." Major Verle immediately replied. "This is not that easy. How long has it been since you founded the Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels? While their current performance is rather satisfactory, they are still developing their fighting styles to this day. Their foundations are still too shallow, and now you want to add a third mech force to the mix."

Though Ves agreed with his points, he didn't think it was as cumbersome as the major thought.

"Our Larkinson Clan is large enough to accommodate an extra developing elite mech force. I'm thinking.. whether it's a good idea to set up a dedicated Ylvainan mech force that is solely designed to maximize their unique targeting advantage. Not just artillery mechs, but other powerful long-ranged mechs can be included in its mech roster!"

Though Ves ordinarily loathed anything related to Ylvaine, he found it quite intriguing. How strong would this new mech force be if it completely dedicated itself towards a single design spirit?

*Chapter 2272: Ulimo Special*

The mood at Ulimo Citadel had changed. The expansive marketplace that normally offered its local residents a semblance of normal life grew calmer.

Not as many Nyxian locals and visitors strolled through the streets. Several shops had shuttered their doors and hardly any vendor set up a stall on the streets.

Those who walked through the streets were either locals with a purpose in mind or armed thugs that kept the peace.

A small group of armored Mirror Raiders steadily strode through what used to be one of the widest avenues in Ulimo's public area.

The exoplants the Dry Snakes had planted along the avenue still looked vibrant, as half-corroded bots dutifully followed their programming and trimmed their strange black leaves.

A portion of the plants looked shriveled. Evidently, the supply of water or other sustenance in that area had broken down. None of the managers had sent anyone to fix this obvious error.

Nobody in Ulimo cared about making the pirate stronghold prettier. Many technicians and engineers that usually maintained the pirate base had all been reassigned.

The group of Mirror Raiders that passed through the avenue did not spare a glance towards the decaying plants. As they strode forward, the few locals and smaller thugs nervously made way.

They did not do so out of the well-made armor or the menacing-looking rifles of the Mirror Raiders. The long-time residents of Ulimo did not spare a glance towards the reapplied black-and-white coating or the random collection of trophies hanging from the powered armor suits.

The sole reason why they made way was due to the green armbands attached to the Mirror Raiders. The logo of the Dry Snakes served as a powerful deterrent to anyone, because those who wore it had the right to kill anyone not directly connected to the local pirate authorities!

Of course, the wearers of the armbands couldn't really kill people at will. Those who wore the armbands answered to the supervisors who passed them on. The Dry Snakes quickly squashed those who abused their newfound authorities.

The group of Mirror Raiders eventually reached one of the few stalls that was still in business. An old, ragged man looked at the approaching group with anticipation rather than fear.

Once the Mirror Raiders reached the stall, the helmets of two of them retracted.

"Give us the usual." Dietrich requested.

"Right away, Mr. Bo!"

The old man eagerly withdrew a dozen nutrient packs from a heated oven and began to tear them open. He withdrew some deformed and stained alloy bowls from the storage compartment of his stall and began to fill them all with the contents of the opened packs.

The stall vendor then proceeded to pick up a warm water pitcher and mixed the dry nutrient matter with some much-needed moisture. After hydrating the food, the old man picked up some dried herbs and some other unknown ingredient and carelessly tossed them into the bowls. He completed his food preparations by seasoning the food with a pinch of salt.

"Here you go, the Ulimo Special, specially prepared for you and your boys. Please enjoy your meals!"

"Thanks." Dietrich said as his armored gauntlet dropped a handful of K-bits onto the stall before grabbing onto an alloy bowl.

Though each of the bowls looked dented and deformed, they were still tough enough to withstand the abuse of armored pirates who didn't bother to control their strength.

Before they began to dig in, Ketis held out a small multiscanner and quickly verified that the food didn't contain any poison or other harmful ingredients.

The precaution was not for nothing, as other pirates had fallen victim to tampered food before!

While the reputation of the old food vendor was pretty good, who knew what might happen during these tense days.

Once she declared the food to be safe, everyone grabbed the thick spoons and began to dig in. The warm taste of spiced and seasoned nutrients seemingly melted into their mouths. The normally dry and crumbly nutrient matter turned into a smooth mash-like mixture that was just hot enough to remind the Mirror Raiders of real food.

As Dietrich and Ketis sat together on a bench and emptied their bowls, they casually chatted with each other.

"I really don't know whether we should stay here." Dietrich said, choosing his words carefully since he knew that he was in the scope of the base's monitoring system. "Our plan was to stick around for a couple of weeks and leave as soon as our ships and mechs are repaired."



Ketis swallowed her mouthful of warm nutrients before speaking. "It's dangerous to go out alone at this time. The Larkinson Clan has been going after pirates like us without mercy. Any pirate who stumbles upon them is never heard from again."

Naturally, she felt quite glad about that, but in order to maintain her cover story, she had no choice but to treat the clan as an enemy.

Every Mirror Raider carefully controlled their words and actions since they had entered Ulimo Citadel a week ago. No one who took part in this mission was careless. Whatever sloppiness they exhibited was almost certainly a facade meant to fool the current overlords of Ulimo Citadel.

While Dietrich shoveled another spoonful of food into his mouth, his eyes wandered over to the green metal armbands attached to his arm and the arms of his subordinates.

He really didn't like this part of the new plan. Originally, the Mirror Raiders had been tasked with gathering intelligence on the defenses of Ulimo Citadel. By entering its public marketplace and mixing in with the locals, the disguised Larkinsons could unobtrusively gather a wealth of information from the locals.

All of that changed shortly after the Mirror Raiders defeated the Roid Rats!

A few days after that abrupt event, the Dry Snakes announced that they would be recruiting any local pirate outfit who possessed at least some mechs!

Any viable group of pirates would earn an elevated status in Ulimo. In exchange for their services, the newly-hired pirates had to defend Ulimo Citadel against any potential attackers!

The reason for this drastic measure was no secret. The Dry Snakes openly announced that they had received word that the fleet of the Larkinson Clan was lurking in the vicinity of Ulimo Citadel!

Though the pirates failed to pin the fleet of pirate hunters down, everyone in Ulimo feared that they would become the Larkinson Clan's next victims!

Ever since the announcement and the rumors that accompanied them became public, the pirates and residents each reacted in different ways.

Many visiting pirate gangs hopped back into their shabby ships and departed from Ulimo as fast as possible. There was no way they wanted to be in the middle of a massive battle between two giants!

The Dry Snakes, who normally valued the commerce that visitors brought, was happy to see them go. This was not the time to focus on earning K-coins. With the potential



survival of their powerbase at stake, the Dry Snakes couldn't afford to watch over so many unknown elements.

As for the small number of pirate outfits who decided to stay, they each accepted the offer to become a part of the alliance centered around the Dry Snakes. Though the strength of many of these little pirate gangs were limited, the newly-formed Ulimo Militia quickly swelled to the point of numbering almost 800 mechs!

The Mirror Raiders contributed significantly to the Ulimo Militia by offering 80 mechs to defend the pirate stronghold, so the Dry Snakes treated them quite generously. While the members of the Militia didn't receive access to any of the restricted areas, their new bosses entrusted them with at least some responsibilities.

The entire situation seemed absurd to Dietrich. The Mirror Raiders, who were pretty much Larkinsons in disguise, now formed a part of Ulimo Citadel's defense force!

From what he heard, Lieutenant Sendra of the Swordmaidens played a very big role in making the pirate overseers accept the Mirror Raiders. The Dry Snakes weren't stupid and they did not accept the loyalty of any random band of pirates.

For some reason, the fact that the Mirror Raiders destroyed the Roid Rats and took over the former gang's territory was a very big mark in their favor! It showed that the Mirror Raiders were serious about settling down in Ulimo.

Dietrich really didn't know what else Lieutenant-Commander Abis and Lieutenant Sendra pulled off to gain the trust of the Dry Snakes. It seemed that there were very good reasons for putting them in charge of the mission.

All he and Ketis had to do now was to wait and stick to his cover. Other Mirror Raiders were stationed elsewhere, and Dietrich even heard that a couple of his comrades had managed to enter one of the core sections of the stronghold!

That was a massive breakthrough in their mission! The public area of Ulimo was nothing more than a cash cow to the Dry Snakes. Most of their people and important defenses were located in the restricted sections which ordinary repelled every outsider.

Though Dietrich was glad for the sudden progress, he was worried as well.

The Mirror Raiders were unable to leave! Once Task Force Predator attacked Ulimo Citadel, Dietrich and his fellow Mirror Raiders had to fight on behalf of the pirates!

The messy situation constantly burdened him. His stomach roiled uncomfortably as he was no longer in the mood to enjoy the local cuisine.

Once the Mirror Raiders finished their lunch, they left their bowls and spoons on the bench and slowly walked away.

The old food vendor stepped away from his stall to pick up the bowls and pour with his shaky hands.

"Thank you for your patronage. Please come again! Remember, there is no better meal than the Ulimo Special. Our ingredients are 100 percent organic and locally sourced!"

The group of Mirror Raiders eventually ended their patrol and returned to their new base, which previously belonged to the Roid Rats.

A thorough cleaning and new furniture made the interior of the base look at least somewhat respectable.

While the rest of the Mirror Raiders went off to relax, Dietrich and Ketis marched to a secure room that was already under a jamming field.

"Ah, I see the two of you have arrived. Good." Lieutenant Rodan greeted.

The Black Cat officer had turned into a strong supporter of Lieutenant Sendra's initiative. The Swordmaidens may have acted recklessly, but they succeeded in earning some trust from their targets!

The rewards for all of the risks they took became evident from the printed sheets lying on the table.

At this point, it was extremely dangerous to store any incriminating material in a digital storage medium. The Mirror Raiders didn't carry suspicious data chips or stored anything dangerous in their low-quality comms.

Instead, Lieutenant Rodan and the few Mirror Raiders who had entered the restricted section of Ulimo Citadel relied on their memories to note down anything important.

Once they returned from their shifts, they used primitive means such as using pen and paper to record their observations.

Ketis walked up to the tables and carefully studied the handwritten documents and sketches.

The autopen insured that every Mirror Raider wrote in neat and legible handwriting. However, it couldn't do much to make their sketches clearer.

Only the precisely-drawn sketches of Lieutenant Rodan conveyed the best impression of Ulimo Citadel's restricted sections.

"What have you learned?" Lieutenant Rodan asked after a while.

"There are a lot of powerful energy channels in the base. I can vaguely estimate how many energy weapons they are and how much power they use. If I have more sketches from different angles, I can even point out some critical components that you can tamper with in order to cut the power flows."

"Good. I will prepare the additional sketches as fast as possible. Have you detected any more concerning elements?"

Ketis frowned. "No. So far, I believe we have only scratched the surface of Ulimo's defenses."

"We know. Our investigation takes time. By the time we are ready to report back, I hope to provide the clan with something material."

Just as Ketis was about to reply, a hidden entrance suddenly opened. A pair of Swordmaidens dragged an injured man into the room!

"What is the meaning of this?!" Rodan exclaimed as he backed off a bit.

Lieutenant Sendra passed through the hidden entrance a second later. She grinned at everyone and gestured at the capture.

"This is a Xona Stalker!"

Everyone looked astonished. The Xona Stalkers were one of their greatest threats in Ulimo Citadel. Now that the Mirror Raiders captured one of their men, they could finally learn something material about the stealth and anti-stealth measures of this mysterious pirate group!

#### *Chapter 2273: Turbulence*

The intelligence gathered by the Mirror Raiders eventually made their way to Task Force Predator through some obscure means.

Even if the Mirror Raiders were no longer allowed to leave Ulimo Citadel, they still possessed several sophisticated ways to transmit data.

Before, Abis and Rodan were very reluctant about using any of those means. Once exposed, they would fail their mission and doom the lives of every Mirror Raider!

They only took the risk after capturing and interrogating several important pirates, most notably the technicians and officers of the Dry Snakes and Xona Stalkers.

It was very difficult to capture them without leaving behind a trail. In order to frustrate any investigations, some of the Mirror Raiders deliberately stirred up trouble.

From sabotaging important systems to inducing hostility between different pirate gangs, Ulimo Citadel became a little bit more chaotic. The Mirror Raiders even managed to lay some false trails that hinted that the Hapid Qlinters were the ones responsible for kidnapping some of the pirates!

Sendra and Rodan had noticed that the Hapid Qlinters regularly quarreled with the other pirate groups. Most of the Hapid Qlinters consisted of unruly, bloodthirsty raiders who felt repressed after not being allowed to leave in order to plunder some new victims.

None of the Mirror Raiders knew why the Dry Snakes put the Hapid Qlinters under their heel. That didn't stop the disguised Larkinsons from taking advantage of the rabid and undisciplined pirates!

With parts of Ulimo Citadel becoming increasingly more chaotic, it was no surprise that the Mirror Raiders managed to transmit some vital intelligence.

Once this crucial information fell into the hands of Task Force Predator, the Black Cats in conjunction with the Military Bureau went to work in order to increase their understanding of Ulimo Citadel.

Calabast eventually visited Ves while he was working in the design lab in order to report her findings.

"Let's speak somewhere private. You need to know this." She said.

When they entered an office which Calabast proceeded to secure, Ves sat down at a desk while holding Lucky.

"Meow."

"I know you can't wait, but be patient. You'll get your banquet of exotics soon enough."

Once Calabast approached the desk and parked her rear end against the edge, she explained what she learned.

"Ulimo Citadel is a bigger target than we thought." She began and handed over a data pad containing a summary of the intelligence. "The formation of Ulimo Citadel shows that the Dry Snakes are very serious about resisting any potential attacks from our direction. They are more prepared than ever against our moves, and that is rather disconcerting."

"Have we infiltrated their defenses? Do we know what hardware they use to depend on their stronghold?" Ves asked as he rapidly skimmed through the documents and sketches in the data pad.

"The Dry Snakes has long maintained some good relations with some of the bigger pirate alliances. Lately, they have partnered exclusively with the Allidus Alliance. As a result, they have been supplied with additional superweapons, some of which they have installed throughout their fortification. The rest usually go on auction, thereby supplying many other pirate outfits with illegal, destructive weapons."

Usually, someone from civilized space would react with horror to such news. Incidents such as the infamous Friedmont Massacre reminded everyone living close to the Nyxian Gap of the devastation that weapons of mass destruction could unleash!

Yet the pirates at Ulimo Citadel paid even less attention to the Big Two's taboos than before. They cared nothing about the lessons of the Age of Conquest or maintaining the stability of human civilization.

They just wanted to survive!

Therefore, even if the Friedmont Massacre made it even more dangerous to own taboo weapons, most pirates feared closer threats such as the Larkinson Clan more than distant ones such as the MTA and CFA!

Even if the latter organizations were much more powerful, the threat from rival pirate organizations, Peacekeeper outfits and the Larkinson Clan was much more acute!

"In effect, our aggressive moves have only encouraged the Nyxian pirates to increase their arsenal of prohibited superweapons." Calabast looked amused. "The Allidus Alliance is profiting a lot from this trade and Ulimo Citadel is one of the few places where independent pirate outfits can procure the dangerous products."

"How much?" Ves asked.

"According to our current estimates.. compared to Xiphard Base, there are at least ten to twenty times more superweapons at Ulimo Citadel!"

Ves almost shot up from his chair. "That much?! How the hell hasn't Ulimo blown up from all of that powerful hardware?!"

"Most of these weapons are stored in remote vaults hidden and secured at a healthy distance from the main fortification. Even if some of the bombs inside the vaults were improperly secured and blew up for some reason, Ulimo would only lose a couple of dozen superweapons at most."

The data pad held by Ves contained some estimates and inferences of what kind of weapons were stored in the vault.

The list included goods such as nuclear bombs, exotic bombs, warship-grade laser cannons, warship-grade torpedoes and even biological weapons!

Any of the vaults contained enough weapons to scour at least ten percent of the people living on a major planet such as Cinach VI!

The superweapons were more than enough to destroy Task Force Predator if they were activated all at once!

The worst aspect of all of this news was that this list only contained the superweapons that were locked in storage. Either they were owned by visitors such as the Mirror Raiders, reserved for sale in future auctions, or were left behind when their original owners could no longer take them back.

Regardless, compared to these castoffs, the pirates in control of Ulimo Citadel most definitely made use of considerably more powerful superweapons!

Even though Ves felt incredibly threatened by the sheer amount of firepower, he was also very pleased.

All of this evidence indicated that Ulimo Citadel was a hotbed of illegal superweapons. This meant that Ves stood to earn a lot of merits once he destroyed the entire arsenal and submitted proof to the MTA!

He could already see the merits falling into his hands even now. While he wasn't sure how the MTA calculated the merit rewards for disposing taboo weapons, Ves believed the MTA wouldn't be stingy. With the Association doubling every reward related to this contribution, it might be possible for him to earn up to 10 million MTA merits at once!

"Ten million merits!" Ves drooled as he became lost in his fantasies.

Calabast frowned as she observed her partner. She quickly snapped her fingers.

"Hey! Don't take Ulimo for granted! The defenses of Ulimo are several times stronger than Xiphard, and worst of all the pirates are paying close attention to their critical infrastructure."

Ves snapped out of his fascination. She was right. A pirate base that was collectively worth up to 10 million MTA merits would never succumb easily to an attack. Compared the Crona Lords, the Dry Snakes seemed to have learned something from the chain of attacks that recently took place in Maynard Fields.

Prepared enemies were so much harder to attack than those who were oblivious to danger!

"These long-lived pirates are too cautious for their own good." He cursed. "Can Lucky infiltrate the base and sabotage their defenses?"

"We're working on that, kid. Right now, my agents are trying to learn more about the tech mastered by the Xona Stalkers. We have managed to obtain some of the technical specifications of their gear, but it's not enough to ensure complete dominance. There are also other plans in the works that might allow us to gain some advantages."

She cast a mysterious smile at that, causing Ves to believe that she was up to something again.

He paid more attention to the incomplete technical specifications stored in the data pad. Every stealth tech possessed vulnerabilities and loopholes. Once the Black Cats obtained enough information, they could modify their stealth shuttle and tweak its settings to minimize the chance of tripping any sensors that were on the lookout for invisible intruders.

"Well, tell me when we have made some substantial progress." Ves said as he handed back the data pad. "What is your overall impression on the Dry Snakes. Why is this pirate organization engaging in trading superweapons at such a large scale? Surely they can't believe the Big Two will ignore their rampant behavior forever."

"That is what is puzzling my analysts as well. The flagrant conduct of the Dry Snakes does not conform with the relatively cautious and forward-thinking that is prevalent among the larger pirate groups. Each of them have survived for many decades or even centuries while the majority of their other rivals have long ceased to exist. Much of that is because the more conservative pirates actually know how to restrain themselves. While they still have the heart of a pirate, their actual conduct is more in line with respectable rulers."

That was what Ves had observed for some time as well. This far into the Nyxian Gap, only the smaller pirate outfits earned their living by plundering others. Many of them didn't own any FTL-capable ships, so they could only attack their fellow pirates.

The pirates who did own ships that could travel faster than light lived even shorter lives because of the danger of raiding trade convoys and settlements in civilized space.

In contrast, the larger pirate groups such as the Crona Lords and the Dry Snakes had it easier. They only needed to claim and defend a patch of asteroids in order to mine the mineral wealth locked within.

Before Ves said something, the air in the office suddenly changed. A strange chill settled on their bodies as strange grey shadows flickered across his vision.

"ENEMY ATTACK!" Nitaa, who had spent most of her time around Ves in complete silence, had suddenly moved into action! "GET DOWN, SIR!"

Though she transmitted her words through the speakers of her combat armor, Ves didn't hear her words.



Time seemed to freeze as people moved, yet remained in place.

People spoke, but no one heard any voices.

Frost started to crust over various objects in the office, but Ves still only felt a subtle chill through his bones.

"MEOW!"

Lucky jumped up into the air and tried to fly close to Ves for safety! Yet his body seemingly remained still on the desk.

Ves blinked, trying to make the grey smudges in his vision clearer. He failed. A strange echo rang throughout his ears, but his actual ears did not hear any sound.

"What is going on?"

He felt utterly confused, but his instincts were warning him of an imminent threat.

A pressure built up in his mind. The strange sensation seemingly reminded him of something.

He tried his best to ignore the strange impulses and concentrated his mind. He first engaged his spiritual senses, only to find nothing out of place. Lucky and Nitaa both registered normally to him, and Calabast was nearly invisible as usual due to her lack of spiritual potential.

He decided to look deeper.

Ves breathed deeply as he increased his concentration. Meanwhile, the Scarlet Rose rang a ship-wide alarm. Many other alarms began to ring throughout the ships of the task force.

No one in the office heard the alarms. It was completely silent inside, which helped Ves enter the correct state.

He proceeded to extend some of senses into the imaginary realm.

A raging storm greeted his spiritual projection! The huge vortex that caused the imaginary realm inside the Nyxian Gap to become so unsettling had generated some sort of turbulence in this area.

The faint grey shadows that Ves faintly saw in the office had become much more clearer in the imaginary realm!

It turned out that the imaginary realm was inhabited by monsters!

Strange alien phantasms attempted to climb out of the clumps of corrosive energy, yet failed to drag their intangible bodies out of their cells. As the vortex blew them onwards, many of the phantasms noticed Ves' spiritual projection. Each of them clawed forward, only to come up short!

"AH!"

Ves became frightened and immediately pulled his presence back from the imaginary realm!

*Chapter 2274: Casting A Net*

Several minutes passed as the Scarlet Rose fell under the grip of a strange condition.

In fact, no time had passed at all. When Ves glanced at the clock displayed by the desk projector, not a single millisecond had passed.

"This is getting rather weird."

Ves felt as if he was perceiving two realities at once. One of them was completely frozen in time, while the other seemed to pass normally.

The only problem was that the latter reality was also filled with strange phenomena, ranging from the random buildup of frost to the appearance of vague grey shadows that actually corresponded to captured spirits in the imaginary realm!

It didn't take much time for Ves to ascertain what had happened.

"We have become engulfed by an anomaly!"

He instantly recalled that the inner periphery of the Nyxian Gap occasionally produced anomalous hazards in random pockets of space. Their effects and appearances were random and unpredictable.

The closer to the center of the Nyxian Gap, the greater the chance of stumbling upon anomalous hazards. This was what made the core regions very dangerous!

The moment Ves figured out that an anomalous hazard had engulfed his ship and possibly the rest of his fleet, his blood froze even further.

Many times, those who entered anomalous pockets of space never appeared again! Such hazards were so dangerous and mysterious that the Big Two even ended up losing entire fleets in some cases!

Reminded of these deadly risks, Ves immediately tried to figure out whether he was in a deadly hazard. He observed his surroundings, took note of the strange phenomena and even peeked into the imaginary realm yet again.

He did not dare to stay too long. He only spent enough time to ascertain the scope of the turbulence.

Ves and his fleet only occupied a tiny position in the huge vortex that spun throughout the imaginary realm like a miniature galaxy. He didn't believe that the disturbances in the imaginary realm affected the entire Nyxian Gap.

As Ves looked into the imaginary realm several times, he calmed his heart a bit when he noticed that the corrosive winds calmed down a bit further away.

This meant that this strange anomaly would likely pass after half an hour or so. As for whether those trapped inside would sustain any damage, Ves felt that this outcome was unlikely.

Despite sensing danger through his intuition, Ves guessed that most of it came from the strange grey phantoms. Their hazy shapes constantly reached out to him whenever they came close to his spiritual projection in the imaginary realm.

However, in the material realm, Ves noticed that nothing happened even if those phantoms passed through his body. They seemingly existed out of phase, which meant that Ves shouldn't have to worry too much about their threat.

He slowly calmed himself down and adopted an inquisitive, scientific mindset.

He hadn't let down his guard, nor did he assume that the strange phenomena were completely harmless. He just felt that this anomaly was impossible to get rid of. It encompassed a huge amount of space. If it was a product of nature, Ves doubted that he could match up against the huge forces that produced this anomaly.

Ves attempted to cross to the other side of the office.

On the one hand, he felt as if he was stepping away from his original position.

On the other hand, his body remained completely stationary.

"Damnit. How am I supposed to get anywhere with this weird perception thing?

Even though a portion of his senses told him that he had moved away, he actually didn't move at all! The logic behind this was strange and twisted.

He could still breathe air, yet it seemed to be completely stationary.

When Ves walked over to the exit and attempted to leave, the hatch failed to respond to his instructions.

The environment was frozen in time, but not really.

"I'm trapped." Ves glowered.

He turned back and observed the other occupants of the office. Lucky kept attempting to fly to him, but his body never moved from the desk.

Calabast pushed herself off the desk and attempted to pull out a weapon, but remained in place.

Nitaa wanted to step forward in order to cover him, but her combat suit stood completely still.

"What is this nonsense?!"

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to go out anytime soon, Ves began to perform some tests.

He grabbed the data pad that Calabast had put away and let go of it. The pad seemingly floated motionlessly in the air, but at the same time it was still in its original place.

He then approached Calabast and poked her in the stomach with his finger.

The woman grew angry and yelled at him, but she had actually noticed nothing amiss in her frozen state.

He grabbed Lucky and tossed the gem cat into the air. The same story happened.

"Is there a way to negate this weird effect?" He asked himself.

This anomalous hazard appeared to be a temporal phenomena on the surface, but Ves vaguely suspected that it was actually spiritual in nature.

This would have been a great time to have a B-stone in his hands!

Sadly, they were all stored in the Scarlet Rose's vault, which also held Lucky's Misfortune Harness.

"I need to build a suit of armor integrated with B-stone as soon as possible!"

This incident taught him that there were much more potent spiritual threats in the Nyxian Gap than he expected. Forget about strange sorcerers and cultists. The huge disturbance in the imaginary realm was the biggest threat of this nature in this region!

Ves decided that it was better for him to spend his time on developing a solution.

He began to concentrate his mind and tinker with spiritual energy in order to escape this time-freezing effect. Even if he couldn't pull others out, at least he might be able to pull himself out of this unknown anomalous field.

He began to express his Spirituality in several ways, only to fail. No matter what kind of spiritual projection he formed, they weren't very different. None of them escaped the ubiquitous time-freezing effect.

He attempted to reach out to other spiritual entities such as Qilanxo or Ylvaine, only to bump into the spiritual equivalent of signal noise.

Since that didn't work, Ves proceeded to do something he had sworn off since he accidentally warped his mind.

He began to create spiritual constructs in his own mind. Knowing that he was altering his personality as he was doing so, he did not dare to create anything big.

He formed various spiritual constructs.

One of them was supposed to form a spiritual shield around his body. When he activated it, the shield was incredibly weak and didn't do a thing to stop his weird state.

Another spiritual construct was meant to track the passage of time. The spiritual clock failed to register the passing of a single second.

Since his modest creations failed to accomplish anything, Ves cautiously took more risks. His subsequent spiritual constructs became larger as he attempted to find anything that could change his abnormal state.

He continued to create various spiritual constructs and empowered them with specific spiritual attributes. In the span of fifteen minutes, he created what he thought to be a rudimentary spiritual jammer, a different spiritual shield and a spiritual helmet.

Nothing worked. None of his constructs helped him defend against this unknown field.

As he became increasingly more hopeless, his mind wandered off a bit. He felt increasingly annoyed at the grey shadows that passed through the bulkheads. The way they obscured his vision and caused him to feel disturbed throughout the duration of this anomalous hazard caused him to develop a strange impulse.

He began to build a spiritual net of some sorts. He invested a bit more of his spiritual energy into its formation because he wanted to make sure it wouldn't break apart.

Once he formed the net, he concentrated his mind to the utmost and cast his senses back to the turbulent imaginary realm.

Ves did his best to ignore the fluctuating corrosive winds while at the same time preventing any of the desperate phantoms to collide against his presence.

"I have to be quick!"

Knowing that it was difficult to avoid every grey phantom, Ves hastily targeted one of the passing grey shadows that was locked in a clump of spiritual energy and cast his net!

His throw hit the mark!

Once the net fell upon the grey ghost in question, the being convulsed and released a tortured pulse!

Ves immediately felt a pressure on his mind as his spiritual net seemed to sustain some damage. He tried his best to ignore the pain and attempted to close the net and secure his target.

"Come on! You're mine now!"

Even though the pressure on his mind increased, Ves did not give up on tightening the bonds around the phantom!

Since the grey ghost was partially fused with a clump of strange spiritual energy that was different from the corrosive winds, the net also encompassed it as well.

Though the phantom constantly tried to break the net, Ves was glad that it didn't possess the strength to do so. If the grey ghosts were any stronger, he wouldn't have dared to cast his senses back into the imaginary realm for the duration of this anomalous hazard!

"Now, let's see if I can get you back."

After taking a deep mental breather, Ves attempted to drag his presence and his mysterious catch back into the material realm!

The process was a lot more difficult than before! Ves felt as if he was squeezing his body and his captive through an opening that was too small to accommodate his entire body.

He had to push himself back by expending more of this spiritual energy!

Fortunately, his strength was barely sufficient for him and his catch to return.

The moment Ves successfully brought the grey ghost back, one of the vague grey smudges had grown clearer. It no longer looked vague and out of phase, but appeared close to what his spiritual senses had observed from the phantom!

The ghostly entity, upon reaching the material realm, began to convulse and panic. It was as if it had entered a completely unknown environment and didn't know what kind of threats it faced!

Ves found to his dismay that he needed to expend even more effort to keep his captive under control.

"You're in my grasp, now! Don't think of getting away!"

He continued to wrangle his ghostly captive, ignoring the reactions or non-reactions of the others in the room. Ves didn't really care whether Calabast saw him struggling to keep some kind of weird opaque ghost under control.

As time began to pass yet continue to freeze, Ves kept a constant eye towards what was taking place in the imaginary realm.

Roughly half a minute after it started, the turbulence finally faded! The imaginary realm returned to calm and the material realm in this specific area no longer came under the influence of any weird phenomena.

The grey smudges disappeared. The occasional frost went away as if they never froze anything.

Unfortunately, even though nothing seemed to have happened, everyone who was locked in the same strange state for roughly half an hour were still somewhat aware of the horror that they had just experienced.

"MEOW!"

Lucky finally succeeded in jumping to the air! He immediately flew to Ves and readied his claws for anything that needed to be mauled!

Nitaa thundered forward in her heavy combat armor and armed her rifle, causing it to whine dangerously as it began to accumulate a large amount of energy.

Once she reached Ves, she bodily pushed him back into the corner, ignoring the fact that he was still busy with trying to keep his captive in check!

"Hey, stop! Ahh! Damnit!"



Calabast immediately pushed herself off the desk and sprinted behind the desk while pulling out a slim but sophisticated pistol.

Both Lucky, Nitaa and Calabast each bore their respective weapons towards the strange grey phantom that hovered in the middle of the office. Even though it was caught in a net, the strange spiritual pulses caused all three of them to feel incredibly threatened by the mysterious entity!

"Don't shoot!"

*Chapter 2275: Nova Krakow*

It took a bit of persuading to convince Lucky, Nitaa and Calabast that the grey phantom that he caught was not a threat.

"I have it under control! Don't do anything stupid! You probably won't be able to harm it anyway!"

"What the hell is it and how in the galaxy did you manage to corral it?" Calabast asked as she kept her back pressed against the corner.

"Meow meow meow!"

"I know the thing looks dangerous, but it's perfectly under control!" Ves approached Lucky and held his aggressive cat back. "Calm down already and put your weapons down!"

Seeing that the grey phantom that reminded them so much of the inexplicable event that ended just a moment ago, Nitaa and Calabast reluctantly lowered their weapons.

They still remained vigilant, though. Neither of the two trusted his claims completely. What had just taken place had shook their minds so much that they began to question everything.

"Are you truly Ves?" Calabast asked with evident suspicion in your eyes. "Please verify your identity immediately."

Ves looked unamused. "Really? Do you actually think I've been replaced by a doppelganger or something?"

"...VERIFY YOUR IDENTITY!"

"Alright alright! Sheesh!" Ves turned to his cat. "You know me the best, Lucky. Am I my mother's son?"

"Meow!"

That was not enough for Calabast. "What if Lucky is compromised as well?"

Ves laughed. "Then I guess you're screwed! That's unlikely, though. Lucky is a completely different life form. Besides, I can verify my identity more thoroughly. Nitaa, hand over the Larkinson Mandate."

As soon as Ves received the heavy tome, a sense of intimacy and completion emanated around Ves. Even a spiritually-barren individual such as Calabast could sense the strong aura from him with the help of the Larkinson Network!

"Okay. It's you, alright." Calabast eventually conceded.

As for Nitaa, she required much less proof to determine his identity. She only remained on guard against the strange grey phantom.

"Now that we have left this nonsense behind us, let's step out and check on the state of our fleet. I am certain that this strange anomaly affected at least several ships! If they experienced the same weirdness than us, then they're probably in disarray!"

He temporarily left the grey phantom in the office and headed to the exit. As soon as they stepped out into the design lab, they immediately stumbled upon a shameful sight.

The Braves who had been quietly working on the design projects a half hour ago now turned into shaken and confused people.

"Ahhhh! I don't want to stay in the Nyxian Gap anymore!" Maikel cried as he huddled underneath a desk with his hands over his head.

"Me too!" Zanthar shivered as he huddled next to his cousin. "I hate it here! It's too dangerous!"

Only a handful of assistant mech designers managed to retain their wits.

"Calm down, you pansies!" Rina Orion shouted. Her vocal implants allowed her to shout loud enough to ring the ears of everyone in the design lab. "Are you Braves or are you cowards?! Panicking and losing your minds will do nothing to help our situation!"

Moltar Ringer kicked a Brave from his design team who had collapsed on the ground. "Get up! I can't believe that Mr. Larkinson recruited you. This is the Nyxian Gap! You should have been prepared to face situations like this. If you can't handle it, then quit right away before you lose your wits again!"

With the help of several exemplary Braves, the assistant mech designers soon calmed down. Ves personally stormed over to his two students and pulled them from their hiding spot.

"Ouch! Ouch!"

"You are trueblood Larkinsons!" Ves pressed his face close. "Get yourselves together! When have Larkinsons like us ever cowered against potential threats? Rendering yourself useless by huddling underneath a desk is the last thing you should do! What if attackers barge into this compartment? What if the Scarlet Rose has incurred catastrophic damage and is close to blowing up? Giving in to your fears like this is the least productive choice you make!"

"I-I-I'm sorry!" Zanthar blubbered.

"W-W-We will do better!" Maikel echoed.

Ves slapped the two in the face to shock them a bit. "Get yourselves together and don't become a hindrance! The two of you need to learn to keep your wits instead of losing them in times of danger. As long as you keep doing the latter, you won't live long during times of trouble. I know it is difficult to go against your instincts, but they are tuned to times where we still lived in caves and hunted mammoths for a living. Use your logic instead!"

The threats that humans faced in the Age of Mechs fell far beyond the scope of humanity's current degree of evolution. Baseline humans were actually woefully incapable of adapting to the demands of modern society.

For example, eating excessively during humanity's early days used to be a way to build up the body's energy reserves. When food came in short supply, those reserves of fat could easily turn into lifesavers.

Unfortunately, in the current age, starvation was a concept of the past to most people in the galaxy. Even if fresh food couldn't be cultivated, industrial food such as nutrient packs were so cheap and abundant that no one truly needed to build up their fat reserves anymore!

This was why becoming fat was a detriment rather than an advantage. It was too bad that the evolution of the baseline human genome had practically stalled due to the ubiquity of humans in the galaxy and the extensive use of modern technology to compensate for genetic faults.

If not for the development of fat-restraining drugs and easy fat-removing treatments, there would have been a lot more overweight humans in the galaxy!

Though Ves adopted a harsh tone against his students, his words managed to stiffened them up and consider what was best for them. While they were still in the grip of their fear, his two students at least managed to muster up some courage.

"What do we need to do, teacher?"

"You don't have a position in the Larkinson Clan right now, so the only way you can help is to get out of everyone's way and listen to instructions. I need to check up on the rest of the fleet, so I have no time to babysit you two. Return to your cabins and remain there until the crisis has passed."

Before Ves headed anywhere else, he first needed to secure the grey phantom. Since he was unwilling to show it around to everyone in the Scarlet Rose, he remained in the design lab while dispatching Lucky and Nitaa to retrieve some objects from the vault.

The cat and bodyguard raced off and returned a few minutes later with a P-stone and the B-stone lockbox.

"Good!"

Ves grabbed the P-stone and shoved the grey phantom inside while ignoring its tortured cries. He then threw the P-stone into the B-stone lockbox and closed it. He waited for a moment in order to confirm the phantom remained inside.

"Good. Nitaa, hold this lockbox and keep it safe."

"Yes, sir."

With that taken care of, Ves quickly brought Lucky and Nitaa out of the design lab and headed all the way to the bridge.

Upon arrival, he saw that the bridge officers had their hands full in trying to manage the confusion and panic that had ensued once the anomaly had passed.

The communication officer tried to pass on Major Verle's orders to the different commanders of the fleet.

The sensor officer urgently tapped into the sensor arrays of multiple ships in order to scan for any anomalies or threats in the vicinity.

Other officers commanded the carriers to deploy their mechs or form elaborate patrol routes in order to make sure that nothing threatening had snuck up on the fleet.

"Sir!" Major Verle noticed Ves entering the bridge. "A third of the fleet has been affected by the unknown temporal anomaly! We are still in the process of verifying the condition of every ship and crew affected by the incident. The clansmen on the ships unaffected by the anomaly have become incredibly confused by our behavior. In their perspective, no time has passed and no anomaly has taken place."

That sounded strange!

Ves asked a few more questions, though Major Verle didn't have all the answers. All of the communication channels were filled with confusions and requests for instructions.

It took a fair amount of time to impose order onto the ships affected by the anomaly. Fortunately, none of the crew had gone crazy. The clansmen who took part in this excursion had all received extensive training. Their discipline was fairly good and the officers who exercised leadership knew better than to run around like headless chickens.

As the task force, which still remained on high alert, gradually regained its composure, some horrifying news passed on to the Scarlet Rose.

"Sir! One of our carriers is missing!" The communications officer immediately reported to Major Verle. "The Nova Krakow is nowhere to be found! None of our sensors nor our communication requests has reached the Avatar light carrier. Even her quantum communication node has lost connection to the galactic net!"

"WHAT?!" Ves shouted.

While Major Verle did not blow up, his tense posture signified that he felt just as alarmed!

"Dispatch our search parties! Search the surrounding asteroids for any sign of the Nova Krakow! Deploy more mech patrols to guard our perimeter. Disperse our fleet formation. We can't afford another anomaly engulfing so many of our ships at once."

"Aye, sir!"

As the entire task force went on high alert, the Larkinsons quickly confirmed that the Nova Krakow was truly gone from the fleet lineup!

Word of the inexplicable disappearance of an entire light carrier, causing every Larkinson to feel much more insecure about their continued stay in the Nyxian Gap.

The clansmen had finally learned why the MTA and CFA avoided this cursed region like the plague! Against anomalous hazards that could come and go without warning and devour entire ships without any resistance, no amount of firepower or tech could defend against the danger they brought.

This was because the anomalies were the equivalent of natural disasters! The huge vortex in the imaginary realm was so stupendously powerful that ordinary black holes paled in comparison against the might that Ves had witnessed!

In a way, Task Force Predator actually suffered a minimal loss. If the anomaly that engulfed a third of the fleet had taken away all of the ships affected by the temporal anomaly, then the Larkinson Clan would have suffered a fatal blow!

Ves quickly inspected the details on the Nova Krakow and winced. The Avatars of Myth had lost forty mechs, forty mech pilots, hundreds of highly-trained crew members as well as valuable supplies and cargo.

Why couldn't it have been a Living Sentinel ship?

The value of an Avatar mech company was incomparable to a Sentinel mech company! Ves would rather lose three or four Sentinel mech companies than a single Avatar mech company. Due to the lower recruitment and training standards of the Sentinels, he could replenish their losses a lot easier!

As for the Avatars, training forty new elites was not as easy as posting a recruitment notice. The Avatars had to hold a cumbersome selection process, filter out the ones who were somewhat suitable and invest a lot of time and resources in training them up to standard.

The only consolation that the unlucky occurrence spared the more important Avatar ships such as the Redfeather and the Greenfeather.

This meant that the Melkor, Joshua, Jannzi, Tusa and the Ingvar siblings were all safe and sound.

Nothing happened to the Shield of Samar and the Quint.

Of course, the rest of the Larkinson Clan thought differently.

It was one thing to lose a light carrier and a full mech company in a valiant battle against evil pirates.

It was another thing to lose so many assets and lives against a terrifying anomalous hazard that came and went warning and couldn't be defended against in the slightest!

While the panic in the fleet may have subsided, the fear that welled in everyone's hearts had only grown stronger. Many clansmen began to develop the desire to drop everything they were doing and leave the Nyxian Gap as soon as possible.

Who knew whether they would disappear from reality in an instant the next time they got caught in an anomaly?!

#### *Chapter 2276: Low-Probability Event*

There were two reasons why the Nyxian Gap developed a fearsome reputation.

The ferocious pirates that called the Nyxian Gap home deterred many adventurers and treasure seekers from entering this mysterious region. If not for their great threat, many

outfits would have entered the Gap in order to hunt for alien ruins, traces of rare exotics that normally didn't show up in the galactic rim and other treasures.

The second reason why the Nyxian Gap posed such a great threat was the occurrence of anomalies. The closer to the center of the region, the greater the chance of falling victim to a random anomalous hazard.

Yet that did not mean that the periphery of the Nyxian Gap was safe! The chances that an anomaly might form in the edge of the region was small, but not zero.

Any fleet that entered the region only had to suffer one moment of bad luck to fall victim to a deadly anomaly.

The longer the fleet remained in the Gap, the greater the likelihood of encountering a natural disaster!

Up until this incident, Task Force Predator had not bumped into a single anomaly. More than two months had passed since the Larkinsons entered the Nyxian Gap, and the only threat that occupied their minds were pirates.

Unconsciously, Ves and many other clansmen began to drop their vigilance against anomalous hazards. Most of them assumed that Maynard Fields and the periphery of the Nyxian Gap was mostly spared from these dangers.

They were right. It was just that matters of random chance sometimes sneaked up on people anyway! Low probability events might still occur no matter how small the odds appeared!

Hours went by as the fleet maintained a guarded posture while trying its best to investigate the whereabouts of the Nova Krakow.

Ves occupied himself by pulling up the logs, sensor data, scientific reports and other data. While he wasn't an astrophysicist who specialized in studying temporal anomalies, he was the only Larkinson who possessed a clear understanding of the spiritual side of reality.

He tried his best to interpret the mountains of raw and barely-relevant data and tried to combine them with his own theories on the turbulence that took place in the vortex raging in the imaginary realm.

Sadly, he obtained few results. None of the ship and mech sensors that watched out for any unusual signs had managed to capture any indication that an anomaly was about to form.



Ves only realized later on that he was just wasting his time. He knew little better than the various science officers and engineers who attempted to explain the mystery of what had occurred.

The temporal anomaly couldn't be solved at their current level of understanding. Their knowledge base simply didn't encompass anything that could put the dangerous incident in context.

What all of this meant that Task Force Predator remained vulnerable to the same kind of disaster at any time. Anomalies came and left without warning and their properties meant that there was no way for the Larkinsons to defend against them. How could anyone in the fleet feel at ease with remaining in the Nyxian Gap?

At the end of the day, Major Verle and a projection of Commander Melkor met with Ves at his stateroom.

Clearly, everyone still held some lingering fears about the disaster that had struck their fleet. Lucky had turned into a scaredy cat all of a sudden and didn't want to leave Ves' embrace.

"Meow. Meow!"

Ves petted his tense cat. "Why do you think I can keep you safe? If a similar anomaly gulps our entire ship from reality, there is nothing I can do! You're no safer whether you're with me or not. Besides, there is a significant possibility that the Nova Krakow and her crew haven't been erased from existence. One of the theories that have been circulating states that the missing ship is simply displaced in time. She might appear again after a couple of thousand years."

"Meow!"

"Regardless of the ultimate fate of the Nova Krakow, it is likely that we will need to write her off." Major Verle stated with a heavy expression. "It gives me no pleasure to give up on our missing clansmen, but every record about anomalies produced by the Nyxian Gap has made it very clear that anything swallowed by them never appeared again."

Commander Melkor looked pained. Even though his modern visor blocked most of his expressions, his clenched hands clearly betrayed the frustration he experienced.

"The morale of our Avatars has sunk. Each of us feels miserable at the loss of hundreds of brothers. The fact that we couldn't have done anything to save them from this disaster is weighing on us as well. Right now, my Avatars are not in a prime shape for battle. Not only have we lost around seven percent of our battle effectiveness, our confidence has also taken a strong blow."

"What about the rest of the task force, major?"

"I have received reports that the other Larkinsons are also concerned." Verle answered. "While the drop in morale in our other mech forces isn't as dramatic, the Living Sentinels and so on have all become less enthusiastic about our current purpose. Our clansmen don't want to stay here anymore because they can't fight against these kinds of disasters."

Ves frowned at that news. "We can't leave right now. Ketis and a number of other disguised Larkinsons are still stuck in Ulimo Citadel. From what we have gathered, the Mirror Raiders are doing a good job at deciphering its defense measures."

Both Major Verle and Commander Melkor looked troubled at that reminder. The Larkinsons valued fellowship. They considered every clansman to be their brother or sister. There was no way the task force would just turn around and leave!

"From what we know, the chances of suffering a similar accident are still small." Major Verle sighed. "We went two months without encountering an anomaly. Unless our luck is considerably bad, we will hopefully be spared from similar incidents for at least the same amount of time."

"In fact, our chances of encountering another anomaly is slightly higher." Ves corrected him. "The emergence of anomalies in the Nyxian Gap is influenced by at least two factors. The most important one is the distance from the center of the region. We are quite far from that location, so the odds are fairly low. However, don't forget that the asteroids around Ulimo Citadel contain small amounts of higher grades of exotics. From what we know, a higher presence of energetic exotics means that the chances of suffering a disaster is higher!"

That caused everyone to feel concerned. Staying in this section of Maynard Fields was quite risky! At least Xiphard Base was mostly surrounded by asteroids that mostly contained Kavenit, which was much less energetic and prone to feeding disasters.

"How do the Dry Snakes and the other pirates at Ulimo bear with such a capricious and overwhelming danger?" Commander Melkor asked. "In fact, how are the large pirate alliances in the core regions able to resist suffering the same fate as the Big Two's warfleets?"

Ves shrugged. "We don't entirely know. Calabast came up with two guesses. First, the local pirates understand the outbreak of anomalies much better than others. They might even be able to avoid or defend against the hazards. Second, the emergence of anomalies appear to have a strong relation with the presence of energetic exotics. The highly advanced battleships of the CFA and MTA that are filled with high-grade exotics and high technology. What do you think the Nyxian Gap will respond to such high concentrations of energy?"

Those huge and powerful warships might as well be magnets for anomalies! The more powerful the ship, the greater the likelihood that some weird phenomena might devour them whole!

In contrast, the low quality ships and mechs of the local pirate organizations possessed a greater chance of survival. Hardly any of their hardware attracted any danger.

"Are the pirates immune? Have they figured out a way to defend themselves entirely against anomalies?"

"Again, I don't know, Melkor. The intelligence I've read states that pirates such as the ones who linger at Ulimo Citadel have sporadically suffered from disasters in these parts. The Dry Snakes, the mining vessels and random visitors have all fallen victim to anomalies over the years. Perhaps one day, an anomaly might even vanish Ulimo Citadel from existence."

Both Verle and Melkor shuddered.

This was the reality of the Nyxian Gap! No pirate or scum was truly safe from these great threats!

Ves momentarily thought about his own parents. They had spent years in the Nyxian Gap. Not only were they being pursued, they also had to fend off many pirates.

Perhaps not even his mother possessed the capability of defending or avoiding against these fearsome hazards!

He couldn't do anything for his parents at his current state. He still had a lot more to grow before he could help his parents escape their predicament.

The three Larkinsons continued their discussion. They talked about how to limit the damage, how to prevent the fleet from becoming affected by awful news and how to deal with the aftermath of the disappearance of the Nova Krakow.

Once everyone knew what they had to do, they left in order to enact their plans.

Ves relaxed a bit after the discussion.

"Meow."

Lucky still clung to his body.

"It's not as bad as I thought. The task force hasn't reached its breaking point yet. Our clansmen won't back down so easily. With Major Verle in charge, I have no worries about the morale of my soldiers."

A confident grin appeared on his face. He had experienced first-hand how Major Verle was able to use the power of speech to manipulate his listeners. Restoring calm and raising morale happened to be one of his strengths!

Since Ves didn't have to make any moves, he turned his attention back to his unexpected gain. "Let's visit the vault after I perform a quick inspection."

He left his stateroom and toured the entire ship. While he trusted the crew of the Scarlet Rose to inspect every component and device, he didn't think they would be able to detect anything on a spiritual level.

Ves patiently inspected every single compartment in person. Fortunately, nothing looked out of place. The only sign that something had changed was the strange fluctuations in Compartment G-13.

Obviously, the hidden chamber where Cassandra Breyer's escape pod constantly duplicated itself had also been affected by the disaster!

"Damnit, has something gone wrong?!"

Alarms should have gone off if any serious changes took place in Compartment G-13. As the main source of Breyer alloy in the Larkinson Clan, Ves really did not want to lose this free source of armor plating!

He felt massively relieved when he observed that the Breyer alloy production loop was still intact. The escape pod failed to resist the great heat of the forging machine and melted down without any issue. The corpse of Cassandra Breyer remained as dead and silent as ever.

As Ves observed his surroundings with his spiritual senses, he only perceived some faint spiritual ripples that were already fading away.

Something had happened, but Ves failed to spot anything amiss. He paid very close attention to Cassandra Breyer's corpse, but it looked the same as ever.

Was Cassandra Breyer faking it? Did she harvest something as well from the incident?

He frowned. Despite exploiting her powers, Ves lacked the confidence to confront Cassandra Breyer in spiritual matters. She was far more powerful than him in that regard.

Ves closed his eyes. His intuition didn't sense any significant danger. The situation here was still under control. For now.

There was nothing he could do here. Ves reluctantly put down his worries and left the secret chamber. He reminded himself that the Scarlet Rose carried another strong spiritual prisoner.

"I need to check the Ancient Sarcophagus!"

#### *Chapter 2277: Grey Phantom*

Ves finally reached the vault. After passing through several mandatory security checks, Ves, Lucky and Nitaa finally entered the space which held some of his more valuable objects and treasures.

Curiously, his spiritual senses did not perceive anything inherently threatening.

Back at Compartment G-13, Ves felt vaguely ill at ease. He couldn't really explain why he felt unsettled. It was as if Cassandra Breyer had become a bit more dangerous, but everytime he studied her and her escape pod, he perceived no changes from his previous observations.

Here in the vault, Ves felt as if everything was still fine. He turned towards a certain section of the vault which held the Ancient Sarcophagus.

As he approached it, Ves did not feel any of the signs of creeping fear that usually settled over him as he came close to the red coffin.

Before he entered the Nyxian Gap, Ves always had to guard his mind carefully, lest he succumb to the terror that made the Doom Guard so effective at scaring away people.

Yet after he raided a number of pirate groups, he managed to get his hands on a number of B-stones. While their exact sizes varied, Ves obtained six times the amount of his original B-stone.

This was an incredible gain! After living through the incredibly threatening anomalous hazard, Ves became more determined than ever to collect more B-stones. He believed that if he wore a suit of combat armor that was made out of this remarkably exotic, he might have been able to resist the strange temporal effect!

This was why he did not want to give up on raiding Ulimo Citadel. He was very confident that he might be able to expand his collection with at least a couple more rocks.

While Ves didn't have enough B-stones to build a solid suit of combat armor, he had enough to form a vague net around the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Ves cautiously exposed the Ancient Sarcophagus and drew back some the B-stones. Once he was able to perceive the red coffin with his spiritual senses, he performed his inspections carefully without getting too close.

"Phew. Nothing has changed."

Nyxie, the ancient alien spiritual entity that was trapped in the crystalline coffin, was as trapped as ever. The ancient barriers that contained the alien spirit still looked serviceable, though Ves didn't understand anything about how they worked and why they held for so long.

Though Nyxie posed a great threat to him, Ves did not believe the danger was imminent. As far as he was concerned, the anomaly didn't affect the hostile alien spirit.

Was this strange or something to be expected? He wasn't sure.

He knew that some treasure hunters originally excavated the Ancient Sarcophagus from some alien ruins in the Nyxian Gap. The discoverers eventually brought the coffin back to civilized space and put it up for auction, where ultimately obtained this valuable relic.

Now that Ves brought the Ancient Sarcophagus back to its natural habitat, he had always been a bit suspicious whether something might happen to it. He wondered whether Nyxie was connected to the Nyxian Gap's strange state or the huge vortex that spun in the imaginary realm.

Sadly, after several months, Ves was no closer to learning more about Nyxie and his prison than before. The Ancient Sarcophagus and its prisoner did not react any differently to the change in environment.

"You're still a mystery to me." Ves sighed and gave up his investigations.

He put the red coffin back into its place. With several B-stones placed around it, Ves no longer felt any creeping fear overtaking his mind.

"B-stones are so handy." Ves grinned.

If he truly wanted to protect himself against the likes of Nyxie and Cassandra Breyer, then obtaining enough B-stone to build a suit of armor was not enough. He needed to plunder several tons of the material in order to isolate the two powerful spiritual entities completely!

Until that happened, Ves always had to remain on guard against any spiritual attacks from their direction.

Hopefully, the rumor that the Dry Snakes had access to an entire B-stone mine was true. It would be great for him to obtain enough B-stone to build an entire ship with the material, though Ves knew better than to entertain this delusion.

After inspecting all of the other goods in the vault, he finally arrived at his only gain from the incident.

Back when he was trapped in the temporal effect, he managed to nab a grey phantom for lack of a better word.

Once he carefully opened the B-stone lockbox and retrieved the P-stone that kept the spiritual entity in place, he took the time to inspect the state of the unknown spiritual entity.

The entity appeared like a vague, grey and misty humanoid in his vision. The entity constantly moaned in agony while trying its best to pull itself away from some kind of restraint.

The restraint appeared to be an unknown collection of spiritual energy with very incomprehensible properties. Both the trapped entity and its restraint possessed a large amount of alien spiritual attributes that Ves failed to interpret.

As for the attributes he did manage to recognize, many of them were negative. Ves detected attributes that reminded him of torture, fear, death erosion and more unpleasanties.

He frowned. The abundance of these spiritual attributes in his latest spiritual catch meant that there might not be a way for him to communicate with the grey phantom.

He tried anyway.

"Hello. I am Ves Larkinson, a human and a mech designer. Who might you be, Mr. ghost?"

Of course, Ves did not say that out loud, but conveyed it to the grey phantom through a spiritual communication method.

Nothing happened.

The grey phantom continued to behave as if it was in pain.

"Hello? Can you understand me? I'm talking to you, you know!"

No matter what he said, the grey phantom continued to ignore his attempts at talking to it! The more he observed the spiritual entity, the more Ves realized that it was old. Very old. Unimaginably old.

"You're not human, that's for sure."

Aside from the agelessness that emanated from the grey phantom, Ves also had a feeling that it may have existed in this tortured state for eons!



Spending tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of years in this undead, painful state while floating in the middle of a spiritual vortex in the imaginary realm did not sound fun!

Ves found it difficult to imagine what caused this grey phantom to endure such endless torment. How did the spiritual vortex come into existence? Who was the grey phantom and who condemned it to eternal torture?

He shuddered a bit. After studying the grey phantom's restraint, he suspected that it wasn't natural. Someone put those restraints on the grey phantom!

The restraints had at least three effects as far as Ves was aware of. First, it induced constant pain. Second, it kept the grey phantom alive. Third, it trapped the grey phantom and stripped it of all of its strength.

These were some very scary shackles!

Ves warily eyed the restraints. He didn't know whether he was capable of freeing himself from them if they happened to snap onto his Spirituality. There was no way he would test its power in person! In fact, he didn't even know whether he could remove the restraint!

"Maybe I can alleviate your suffering."

He concentrated his mind and carefully tried to probe the restraint. Even when Ves applied some force, the restraints still held together.

"Damn. You're quite strong!"

None of his rough handling affected the integrity of the restraint, but the phantom was another story. Each time Ves touched it, the phantom seemed to bear an unimaginable amount of pain!

Afraid of damaging or killing the grey phantom, Ves stopped probing it. He didn't want to break something of value, especially when he gained some interesting ideas.

Even though he felt disappointed that he wasn't able to get anything useful from the grey phantom in its current state, there might be other ways for him to extract value from its existence.

"This ghost is truly a shell of its former self."

The state of the grey phantom reminded him of the spiritual fragment that his mother had gifted him. Back then, the spiritual shard that she managed to dig up from somewhere had undergone an incredible amount of erosion.

Though Ves found it astounding that the spiritual remnant of the luminar race leader managed to remain in existence for so long, the constant environmental attacks caused it to lose a lot of weaker elements.

Only portions of its strongest obsessions and spiritual attributes remained!

When Ves studied the grey phantom, he gained a similar impression. Though the phantom bore much more weaknesses, it also showed some signs of erosion.

However, due to the protection offered by the restraint, the grey phantom hadn't been purified as much.

Since it didn't appear that he would get much out of the grey phantom out of studying it, Ves wanted to make it useful in other ways.

He first thought of using it as a design spirit, only to scrap the idea immediately afterwards.

This was no Qilanxo who possessed a calm, sentient mind. This was no Zeigra who hated his guts but was at least normal enough to predict its behavior.

The grey phantom was one of the most damaged spiritual entities that Ves had ever seen! He doubted that it could still be reasoned with. Ves would never turn it into a design spirit for a mech design in its current state because the chance of harming the mech pilot was too high.

"Besides, its current spiritual attributes are very detrimental!"

This was why Ves favored the second option. If using it in its raw form was unwise, then Ves just had to process it into something different!

By using the grey phantom as an ingredient, Ves would be able to combine it with other ingredients to form a completely new spiritual product that inherited some of its traits!

Ves lit up his eyes. "I just happen to miss a design spirit for one of my upcoming mechs!"

Of the six projects he was working on, the Sanctuary was the only mech design that wouldn't be hosting one of his existing design spirits.

He decided early on that he would be providing his Sanctuary with a new design spirit.

However, creating a suitable design spirit to a mech that was supposed to block and restrain glows wasn't easy!

At the very least, he needed to find the right spiritual attributes, and this was very difficult.

This time was different!

Though the grey phantom was polluted with an abundance of negative and incomprehensibly alien spiritual attributes, it contained a modest amount of attributes that Ves found helpful.

A portion of the grey phantom yearned for safety, liberty, relief, forgiveness, mercy and so on. Surprisingly, despite spending eternity in agony, the grey phantom clung very strongly to these attributes as if nothing else mattered!

If Ves could isolate the best traits of the grey phantom and use what he had gathered as a spiritual ingredient, then he might be able to birth a fitting design spirit for the Sanctuary mech!

Of course, this was not the time to do so. Ves still wanted to perform a lot of studies on the grey phantom in order to make sure he hadn't missed anything vital.

"Well, stay safe. I'll visit you again." He put the P-stone back into the B-stone lockbox before putting it all away.

As long as the grey phantom didn't pose a threat, Ves wasn't in a hurry to study it or use it as an ingredient for the creation of a new spiritual product.

Right now, the anomalous incident reminded him of the great danger of remaining in the Nyxian Gap. His main priority was to attack Ulimo Citadel and earn 10 million MTA merits in one fell swoop! As long as he accomplished this feat, he would order his task force to leave right away!

#### *Chapter 2278: Necessary Sacrifice*

The temporal anomaly that gulped the Nova Krakow and froze a third of the fleet served as a big wakeup call to the Larkinson Clan.

The Nyxian Gap was too dangerous and unfathomable to everyone. Since anomalies had a higher tendency to emerge at places with a high concentration of energetic exotics, powerful ships such as the Scarlet Rose and the combat carriers of the Scarlet Rose were at greater risk than others!

This meant that if the chance of a random vessel disappearing was one percent, then the chances of the Scarlet Rose suffering the same fate was at least three percent!

Despite the risks, Ves did not opt to leave his personal ship. The weaker vessels in the task force might offer him a greater chance of survival against inexplicable anomalies, but they were much more vulnerable against pirates!

What if a group of pirates fired a warship-grade laser cannon at the ship he was on? A third-class light carrier that boasted relatively frail armor such as the Redfeather would instantly crumble!

In contrast, the much smaller Scarlet Rose might get heavily damaged depending on the power of the attack, but would more than not survive a direct blow.

Since the Nyxian Gap was infested with pirates, Ves figured that protecting himself against material threats was a lot more important than mitigating his exposure to the unexplainable!

The strange incident left a scar in the hearts of the Larkinsons. In order to restore everyone's morale and make them willing to attack Ulimo Citadel, Major Verle visited each and every ship and held a speech to the crew in person.

Though this was a very time-consuming endeavor, his speeches nonetheless managed to get the members of the task force to focus on what was important.

"Will you let the missing clansmen down by running away like a coward? The Nyxian Gap will not break us! If you want to become a true Larkinson, then summon your courage and prove you have the guts to laugh in the face of danger!"

Even though a number of scientists still worked on the futile task of deciphering the anomalous effects that had engulfed the fleet, fewer and fewer people paid attention to the disappearance of the Nova Krakow.

Through Major Verle's deliberate manipulations, even the Avatars of Myth began to direct their attention to the future rather than the past.

This was exactly what Ves wanted. There was no benefit to worrying over the Nova Krakow and her crew.

While many of his clansmen believed that there might be a way for them to pull the Nova Krakow from whatever temporal hole they dropped in, Ves knew that the Avatar light carrier had long moved out of reach.

The strongest indication for that came from the Larkinson Network. When Ves held the Larkinson Mandate and attempted to find the clansmen who crewed the Nova Krakow, the bonds that connected them to the Golden Cat had snapped.

Nyaaa.

Goldie looked truly upset at the disappearance of hundreds of Larkinsons. She knew each of them for months or years, but now the anomaly had moved them out of reach, if not wiping them out entirely!

"I know, Goldie." Ves sighed as he caressed the embossed surface of the book.  
"Chasing after riches is always accompanied by danger. No one, not even us, can avoid these threats."

Nyaa nyaa?

"In an ideal reality, we wouldn't need to take so many risks. Sadly, we don't live in that reality. There are great threats in this galaxy. If our Larkinson Clan wants to thrive, we will inevitably come into conflict with others. We need strength in order to survive these clashes. What we are doing here in the Nyxian Gap is vital to our future success."

He had already harvested plenty of gains from this excursion. The loss of a couple of hundred loyal and committed Larkinson mech pilots and other personnel was regrettable, but within his range of tolerance.

As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, Ves actually had a duty to safeguard the lives of his fellow clansmen. However, he had made it clear from the start that those who became a part of the Larkinson Clan would not be enjoying comfortable lives.

Ves promised plenty of rewards to those who actively took part in this dangerous excursion. This was the compensation that he was willing to pay in order to obtain the fighting strength needed to accomplish his goals.

Therefore, he felt no guilt for leading hundreds if not thousands of clansmen to their deaths. The loss in talent and manpower pained him quite a bit, but as long as his gains exceeded his losses, everything was worth it in the end!

Of course, Ves knew that voicing his true thoughts would not go well with his clan, so he kept them firmly to himself. Only Goldie understood his rationale, and though she was a lot more sentimental than him, he had raised her with the belief that sacrifices were always necessary to achieve ambitious goals.

Per angusta ad augusta!

As the living embodiment of the Larkinson Clan, the Golden Cat ultimately abided by its motto.

Personally, Ves felt that her reaction to the disappearance of the Nova Krakow was too sentimental. While he wanted the ancestral spirit of the clan to be compassionate, that did not mean he wanted her to grow soft and weak!

"We live in a violent, wartorn reality." Ves taught her. "Human space alone is filled with conflicts between humans. The Komodo War that is causing millions of citizens to die each day is just one of many instances of instability. Anyone caught in the vortex of one of these confrontations must have the strength to defend themselves. We are no different. If we do nothing, we will remain weak, allowing anyone strong enough to wipe us out to the last man. This is why I'm working so hard to progress my career and strengthen my clan. As long as we join the ranks of the powerful, we will have a lot more capital to survive!"

From the Age of Stars to the Age of Mechs, a lot of spacefaring powers emerged in human civilization. Many of them shot up like rockets, but few of them avoided crashing after the passing of a couple of generations.

While Ves did not spend too much time on performing his duties as a clan patriarch, he still took the time to study the rise and fall of various organizations.

What he admired the most were states and organizations that managed to withstand the test of time. They managed to achieve continuity through good times and bad times by displaying exceptional patience and planning.

For example, the Greater Terran United Confederation used to reign over the entirety of human civilization, but had now devolved into a diminished state that had to abide by the strictures of the MTA and CFA.

It was no secret that the Big Two wanted to get rid of the first-rate superstates. Yet even after suffering great damage from the Rubarthan Rebellion and the defection of a lot of warfleets to the CFA, the Terrans still survived to this day!

Many people eagerly learned from the examples set by these ancient and enduring powers, but few managed to succeed.

This was because everyone's circumstances were different. What worked for the Terrans and Rubarthans might not necessarily work for others.

What Ves merely did was to study some of the successes and derive some good practices that he could easily apply to the Larkinson Clan.

One of the most important lessons he derived was that suffering setbacks was inevitable. The Terrans failed to overcome the Rubarthans and the Big Two surpassed them both.

Perhaps in the future, the great Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance might succumb as well. Their continued survival depended upon whether they could adapt with the changing times.

If even the most powerful organizations of human civilization couldn't guarantee their continuity, how could Ves remain complacent about the continued survival of the Larkinson Clan?

For this reason, he consciously wanted to push his recently-founded clan to its limits. Heading into the Nyxian Gap was just one of the ways he came up with to stimulate his clansmen. He wanted to prevent them from growing stagnant in a phase which was very conducive to rapid growth.

As he explained all of these theories to Goldie, the young ancestral spirit reluctantly accepted his rationale.

Nyaaaa.

"I don't want to destroy our clan, Goldie." He whispered to the intangible spirit as he stroked her back with a spiritual projection. "However, you should know that creation is often accompanied by destruction. Without tackling any challenges, how will our clansmen be able to exceed their limits? The upcoming battle will be our final and most dangerous test."

All he cared about right now was cracking open Ulimo Citadel in order to harvest a huge amount of loot and merits. Once he accomplished this feat, Ves immediately intended to leave the Nyxian Gap as fast as possible.

As for the various goals he set such as searching for his parents, rescuing Sokok Reyva, learning the mystery behind the spiritual vortex raging in the imaginary realm, Ves had long thrown such considerations away.

The Nyxian Gap was filled with unknowns, many of which bore a lot of relations to spiritual phenomena. If Ves had the time and leisure to stay, he didn't mind going deeper in order to study some of these secrets.

His time happened to be in short supply, though. He not only had to make it back in time for his wedding, but also had to accumulate tens of millions of merits.

While Ves recognized that defeating pirates who employed taboo weapons was a great way to earn a lot of merits, he knew very well that the Larkinson Clan had attracted too much notoriety in the region.

The Nyxian pirates who dared to defy the Big Two weren't afraid of Task Force Predator! As long as the locals banded together, even the Penitent Sisters might not win!

Aside from that, the inability to defend against the onset of anomalous hazards had also frightened him a lot. Even a habitual risk taker like him did not wish to linger any longer in the Nyxian Gap than necessary!



Since Ves firmly pushed the task force to attack Ulimo Citadel, every clansman in the fleet worked hard to prepare for the tough battle ahead.

With thousands of mechs, elaborate defense matrices and a huge arsenal of taboo weapons, there was no way that Task Force Predator would win while suffering negligible casualties this time!

Therefore, Major Verle and every mech commander frequently met together in order to plan their upcoming assault. Even Commander Chancy of the Penitent Sisters dropped some of her airs in order to voice her own concerns during these meetings.

As for Ves, he temporarily dropped his design duties in order to help with the preparations. He claimed the mech workshop of the Scarlet Rose to himself and fabricated a number of products.

A lot of valuable exotics and materials kept pouring into the Scarlet Rose. In return, the ship disgorged some containers that held something of greater value.

While all of these preparations took place, the mech pilots of the various mech forces each took part in many simulated drills.

Ever since the Mirror Raiders transmitted a lot of data on Ulimo Citadel and the pirates that defended it, the Larkinsons finally understood a bit of what they were up against.

Many of these simulated battles did not go well. As long as the Nyxian pirates made use of just a portion of their superweapons, the Larkinsons easily suffered catastrophic losses!

The initial results proved that if the Larkinsons wanted to defeat their foes, they had to take these superweapons off the board right away.

"It's difficult, but not impossible!"

Ves often glanced in the direction of Ulimo Citadel during this time. No matter what, in order to advance his ambitions, the base must fall!

#### *Chapter 2279: Spiritual Restraint*

During the time he assisted with the preparations for the upcoming attack on Ulimo Citadel, Ves also directed some of his attention to studying the grey phantom.

The more he examined the tortured alien spirit, the less interested he became.

There was not much value in the existence of this eroded entity. It was old, undying and completely incapable of forming any coherent thought.

Ves attempted to communicate with it many times. He achieved no results. The only instance where he managed to elicit a reaction was when he did something that hurt the grey phantom.

The entity released even greater wordless cries when Ves stabbed it with a spiritual projection.

Strangely enough, the torture that Ves had inflicted on the phantom never persisted. For some reason, the ancient alien entity immediately returned to its previous form immediately afterwards.

This was very strange to Ves. Normally, spiritual entities were very fragile when they existed by themselves. In fact, such spirits usually succumbed to the corrosive winds in the imaginary realm after a period of time.

Whether that meant that the actual 'souls' of the deceased had returned to nihility or passed on to a completely different realm, Ves didn't know. He had not performed any studies on life after death. His mother probably knew a lot more, but she was never in the mood to share.

Though Ves found the grey phantom's condition to be intriguing, he soon found out that this remarkable property did not originate from the entity itself. The more he knew the alien spirit, the less exceptional it appeared.

It lost too much. There was no sentient thought left in the phantom. Long years of torture had rendered the grey phantom into an instinctive beast that solely existed to endure the endless soul-searing pain inflicted on its being.

This was why the phantom managed to cling on to a few helpful notions such as relief, forgiveness and mercy. Without at least some pillars of strength, the grey phantom would have certainly devolved into an even more pathetic existence!

As Ves spent hours in the vault to study the grey phantom, he no longer paid attention to the upper half of the spiritual entity. Instead, he cast his eyes downwards.

The interesting part about the grey phantom was that it was visible to the naked eye ever since Ves pulled it out of the spiritual vortex.

This was why even Calabast and Nitaa could perceive the spiritual entity with the naked eye.

The cause of this effect and many other abnormalities was the spiritual restraint that had fused with the grey phantom!

Visually, the grey phantom looked like a humanoid whose feet and lower legs were engulfed by a swirling cloud of energy.

It was this cloud of energy that was truly responsible for turning the grey phantom into an undying, tortured soul!

Even Ves exhibited a little fear at the spiritual restraint. While the grey phantom was fairly weak, Ves could not say for sure whether he would be able to defend himself against the powers of this fearsome spiritual tool!

Yes, spiritual tool!

Ves recognized the spiritual shackles to be a very sophisticated application of spiritual engineering.

While Ves could study the Grand Dynamo in his mind at any time, it was just a single example to him. Its extreme complexity and profound, high-level principles meant that he couldn't really derive anything valuable from the spiritual energy generator.

When he cautiously studied the spiritual restraint from a distance, he vaguely felt a similar degree of incomprehension.

It was too advanced! Ves felt as if he was a first-year mech design student staring at a mech designed by a Master. The gap was so wide that it would take hundreds, if not thousands of years of dedicated study in order to decipher all of its principles!

Obviously, Ves couldn't spare the time on such a marginal endeavor. As powerful and versatile as the spiritual restraint appeared, its design principles were completely alien and did not conform to his own methods.

As an innovator, the work of other spiritual engineers merely served as references to him. Ves never wanted to follow the footsteps of others. He preferred to innovate his solutions that fit his needs and capabilities the best!

Therefore, Ves also planned to shatter the grey phantom and its shackles and reform the broken shards into a completely new spiritual product!

This way, not only would he be able to obtain a design spirit for the Sanctuary mech, but also convert something incomprehensible into a form that he was more familiar with. Turning something that had completely lost every coherent thought into a design spirit that he could communicate with was a solution that suited him best!

Of course, Ves was aware he needed to pay a price for this radical act.

At least some form of destruction preceded each act of creation. Destroying the precise, exquisite spiritual engineered mechanisms that empowered the spiritual shackles meant losing a lot of strange but powerful restraining capabilities. Ves would lose access to much of the unknown, alien spiritual engineering principles.

"It's a worthy price to pay." He muttered as he continued to stare at the dangerous cloud of energy engulfing the lower half of the grey phantom. "It's not as if I'm interested in learning these alien methods in the first place."

He didn't mind learning some alien engineering principles if it was worthwhile for him to do so. The reason why he eagerly studied luminar crystal technology was because it was accessible and didn't impose too much demand.

This was different. He didn't have access to textbooks or research papers that could help pave the way for him. Ves would have to start from scratch, and that was unacceptable.

He constantly reminded himself that he was a mech designer rather than a spiritual engineer.

He only dabbled in spiritual engineering because it improved his mech designs.

When his studies in spiritual engineering began to form a detriment to his primary profession, then Ves resolutely stopped his current pursuit no matter how interesting it seemed.

"I'm only one person. I can only do so much."

Therefore, Ves did not exhibit excessive interest in the grey phantom's shackles. He only studied and recorded as much as he could observe on the surface. He had no intentions of probing deeper, knowing that he wouldn't be able to make any short-term gains.

When Ves reached the limit of what he could learn from the grey phantom on the surface, he resolutely halted his examinations.

Instead, he began to plan the formation of his latest design spirit.

The Sanctuary mech was supposed to dampen and weaken any glow that entered its range.

Before, Ves did not have any solid ideas on how to accomplish this feat.

Yet now that he obtained the grey phantom and figured out some of the properties of the spiritual restraint, Ves believed he held the key to achieving the effect he desired.

"This restraint has an interesting interaction with B-stones."

In order to indulge in his curiosity, Ves had commanded a bot to pick up a B-stone and bring it close to the grey phantom.

When the B-stone touched the grey phantom's body, the entity suffered a great amount of discomfort!

Sadly, the experiment failed to prove that B-stone could be used to make weapons that were easily capable of harming spiritual entities. The material merely blocked spiritual energy, which vastly limited its offensive properties.

What surprised Ves a bit was that B-stone interacted much differently when it came into contact with the spiritual restraint.

As far as he knew, As long as a B-stone was big enough, it could block any spiritual energy!

Yet as soon as the bot caused the B-stone to overlap with the spiritual restraint, the two showed no signs of repulsion!

"This is amazing!"

Exceptions were very rare, and now he happened to observe one of them in action. Ves immediately revised his theories on spiritual energy and B-stone upon observing this seemingly impossible phenomenon.

B-stones weren't supposed to get along with spirituality! Yet now it did, and that interested him a lot!

"What are B-stones, and how are they connected to spiritual restraints?"

No one could answer this question for him. Ves was completely in the dark as far as he was concerned.

All he could tell was that the two were likely related to each other. He came up with numerous new ideas from this experiment.

"Can I use a B-stone in the creation process?" Ves asked himself one day.

The idea sounded ridiculous. How could he form a new spiritual life in the presence of something that naturally constrained anything spiritual?

Yet the idea simply did not disappear once he came up with it. He believed that as long as he involved a B-stone, he might be able to form a design spirit that completely conformed to his demands!

Every other design spirit he created or employed up until now were at least somewhat constrained by B-stones. Adding a new design spirit in his collection that was immune to their blocking effects sounded very interesting!

Ves had to plan the creation process carefully, though. He did not intend to waste this opportunity.

He took the time to form a number of spiritual images that defined the personality, role and capabilities of his upcoming spiritual product.

He knew quite well that there was not much point to adding lots of detail. Life was inherently chaotic and rarely emerged as planned. What Ves merely did was to add some guidelines to the formation process of the spiritual product so that it did not go out of bounds and evolve in an planned direction.

"Your only role is to constrain glows. Nothing more."

The images were relatively pure and one-dimensional by design. He did not tack on anything else because splitting up the purpose of his new design spirit would only weaken its primary function.

Ves believed it was better to create something that was strong to begin with and modulate its power expression afterwards depending on the application.

If he created something weaker because he added too much complexity, then the resulting design spirit would lack a lot of strength just when he needed it most!

The more he planned the creation of his upcoming design spirit, the more he feared its potential.

What would happen if the resulting design spirit turned against him? What if it defected to his enemies and used its spiritual restraining powers to neuter his strong Spirituality?

This was an unacceptable outcome!

As someone who believed in good preparation, Ves implemented some additional solutions that would hopefully minimize these frightening possibilities.

"It would be stupid of me to create my own doom!"

After a couple of days, Ves was ready to form his latest spiritual product.

With his fleet slowly calming down and the preparations for the upcoming base assault nearing completion, Ves calmly prepared the ingredients for his latest act of creation.

This might be one of his riskier acts of creation. Yet it would also be one of the more exciting ones due to the innovations he came up with. He couldn't wait to implement his ideas!

"Hehehe." He grinned. "If one of these innovations succeeds, then all of my future spiritual products will possess greater potential as well!"

Ves moved ahead with this creation process because he believed the resulting spiritual product might be useful in the coming days. Even if he did not instill the newborn entity in any mech, its intrinsic properties and powers might be able to protect him against unconventional threats!

"Meow.."

Lucky huddled on the far side of the vault. As a cat who accompanied Ves for years, he keenly recognized that his owner was up to something again!

"Relax." Ves dismissively replied. "This won't be like last time. The main reason the birth of the Superior Mother went out of control was because I involved my mother. She's not here right now, so there is no way that the situation will spin out of control!"

"Meow!"

#### *Chapter 2280: Repulsion*

Ves did not intend to use a lot of spiritual ingredients this time.

The Sanctuary was unlike the Superior Mother. The latter not only served as the ancestral spirit of the Hexer people, but also embodied the six phases of existence.

With potentially the entire Hexadric Hegemony worshipping her in the future, the Superior Mother would not only be flooded with spiritual feedback, but also come in constant contact with Hexers whose beliefs and ideals largely conformed with her own nature!

Ves guessed that these interactions would make sure that none of the abilities of the Superior Mother would be weak!

The design spirit of the Sanctuary design didn't need to do so much. Ves could already resort to other design spirits if he wanted to fulfill a different purpose or needed some additional versatility.

He aimed to instill the strongest spiritual restraining abilities to his next spiritual product. He gave up everything in order to achieve this extreme.

This was why he only made use of four main ingredients.

He did not include the minor ingredients in this consideration. The spiritual images that served as the initial programming of his upcoming creation only guided the birth process.



Only the main ingredients were capable of defining the resulting spiritual entity!

Ves carefully inspected each main ingredient.

The grey phantom that was caught in its spiritual restraint looked as tortured as ever. Nothing had changed despite pulling it out of the imaginary realm for a number of days.

As the key ingredient of his new design spirit, Ves knew he had only one shot at making the most appropriate design spirit for the Sanctuary. He doubted whether he could stumble upon another turbulent wave in the imaginary realm where he could grab another imprisoned ghost.

He was a little bit worried whether he could succeed in killing and shattering the grey phantom. So far, it appeared to be completely vulnerable to normal attacks.

If necessary, Ves was willing to draw upon the precious charge of his F-stone to empower his attacks. He did not want to fail in the very first step of his plan!

The second ingredient that Ves intended to add was a spiritual fragment that Ves had taken from Goldie.

It hurt the ancestral spirit quite a bit to lose a fraction of her strength. Ves had to do a lot of persuasion in order to borrow another spiritual fragment from her being.

It was for a good cause, though. While he wanted to keep his upcoming creation pure, he was too worried about the possibility of betrayal. In order to instill a strong sense of loyalty towards him and his clan, he wanted the newborn spirit to appreciate him and his clan down to its very soul!

Since Ves only wanted to borrow Goldie's essence in order to guarantee the loyalty of his resulting creation, he did not take too much. Her spiritual fragment likely wasn't big enough to grant any other powers to his upcoming creation.

The third ingredient was a dose of universal life-attributed energy derived from another drop of life-prolonging treatment serum.

Though he only had so many drops in his possession, Ves did not intend to save it up. It was worth it for him to invest this rare resource in the upcoming process.

In the short term, Ves wanted to gain some protection against mysterious spiritual phenomena. While he wasn't naive enough to believe that a single spiritual entity could fend off an entire anomalous hazard, as long as he received a bit more protection, he might be able to fight for his life!

Nothing was more terrifying to him than becoming engulfed by a lethal anomaly! He did not want to become the next victim who lost his bond with the Larkinson Network!

In the long term, Ves wanted to continue to enjoy the protection of such a useful spiritual entity. He couldn't wait for it to grow into power gradually. Making it as strong as possible right from the beginning was much more desirable to him. Expending some universal life energy was not a big deal, especially since it might empower his spiritual product in other ways.

In fact, Ves already prepared a very specific plan for that. Some of his previous experiments granted him the confidence that this little addition might turn out well.

The last major ingredient was his own spiritual energy. Different from the universal life energy derived from the serum, his own life-related attributes weren't good at nurturing. What they were actually good at was breathing life where none existed!

This was something that even the serum couldn't do! This was a product of his personal domain which he formed after developing his personal ideals and convictions as a mech designer.

Considering the ambitious nature of this creation attempt, Ves prepared a P-stone filled with excess spiritual energy.

He had constantly pumped at least some of his spiritual energy into P-stones every day. Since his Grand Dynamo churned out lots of spiritual energy, why should he waste it by leaving his mind a full capacity all the time?

He was glad that he did so, because he intended to invest a lot of his own spiritual energy this time. He had a feeling that trying to combine the spiritual shards that originated from the spiritual restraint was going to be very difficult.

Its properties were opposite to more conventional varieties of spiritual energies. The fact that it was able to get along well with B-stones was reason enough to believe that the spiritual restraint was difficult to process!

After he finished his inspections and ran through his plan one last time, he decided to pull the trigger.

"Well, this is as good a time as any to start." He muttered.

Ves concentrated his mind and began to form a spiritual hammer in order to shatter the grey phantom.

Of course, he did not waste his time on attacking the main body of the tortured ghost. The key in breaking the grey phantom lay in destroying the spiritual restraint.

As soon as his hammer slammed against the cloud of spiritual energy, it met a surprising amount of resistance!

"Ahh! I knew it wouldn't be easy!"

The toughness of the spiritual restraint exceeded his imagination!

However, Ves had plenty of energy left to spare. He paid no mind to his previous failure and struck his spiritual hammer again.

"Damn! Why is it so hard?!"

He repeated his actions again and again. He kept slamming the spiritual restraint, guessing that its ability to withstand attacks was finite.

Ves suspected that the vortex and the spiritual energy contained within may have fed the spiritual restraint.

Right now, the grey phantom and its shackles no longer floated in the spiritual vortex.

Like a fish out of water, Ves hypothesized that the spiritual restraint could only last so long out of its natural habitat!

After dozens of repeated impacts, Ves finally saw some signs that his guess was right!

"It's breaking down!"

The resistance had lessened after each hit. The strange cloud with unusual properties visibly weakened, and after his thirtieth strike, the spiritual restraint eventually broke!

As soon as the grey phantom lost its shackles, it experienced an unprecedented feeling of relief, hope, bliss and other positive emotions.

It had awaited this moment too long! While Ves quickly collected the shards of the spiritual restraint, the grey phantom strangely began to turn white as its repressed positive emotions swelled as its earnest desire had finally come true!

Though Ves honestly did not expect the grey phantom to turn into this form, he recognized the value of this unanticipated consequence.

"Haha, this is a good opportunity to reduce my loss!"

Because the grey phantom was filled with alien attributes and attributes related to negative states such as pain, hate, despair, hopeless and so on, Ves initially thought that he needed to cut them all out. After all, for a design spirit that was meant to provide Sanctuary, he couldn't allow it to induce any negativity!

Yet now, the grey phantom had turned white, which was an indication that its positive attributes had spiked while its negative attributes lost a lot of steam!

Before this spiritual torture victim could ascend to the afterlife or enter the cycle of reincarnation or something, Ves quickly slammed his spiritual hammer against its spiritual body.

The weak ghost shattered after just a couple of hits!

"I need to work quickly now!"

He collected the shards of the phantom into a separate pile and quickly began to sort through them. He pulled out any shard contaminated by a large amount of alien, irrelevant or negative spiritual attributes and tossed them away, causing them to slowly fade back into the spiritual realm.

Ves adopted a fairly strict standard in order to ensure the greatest amount of purity. Only a select few attributes that would be helpful to a mech design like the Sanctuary remained in his grasp.

Though his filtering process weakened the quantity of usable spiritual shards by at least seventy percent, Ves didn't care!

After processing the first main ingredient, he quickly dealt with the second main ingredient.

He shattered Goldie's spiritual fragment and began to blend the resulting shards with the shards of the phantom.

As for the shards of the spiritual restraint, he did not toss them all into the mix. Instead, he partitioned them into half.

One half of the spiritual shards entered the main pool of shards. As soon as this happened, a strong rejection reaction took place.

The spiritual shards that originated from the phantom and Goldie repelled the spiritual shards that originated from the spiritual restraint!

Ves already theorized this outcome, and did not panic. Instead, he began to inject a copious amount of spiritual energy that originated from himself and began to cautiously fuse some of the shards together.

"Hahaha! It actually works!"

Ever since his mother noted how 'impossible' it was for him to be able to form life by stitching different kinds of spiritual ingredients together, he suspected that this was one of his greatest strengths.

For some reason, he possessed the power to merge incompatible attributes into a unified whole in the process of creating a new life form!

Now, he understood a bit more how exceptional this was because the incompatible shards actually fused together with his own spiritual energy as a medium!

Of course, the fusion process wasn't easy. Ves felt as if he was forcefully trying to glue the ends of two magnets with the same poles together. While it was possible to overcome the repulsion force, Ves needed to expend an even greater amount of spiritual energy in order to force this result!

"No matter! I have plenty of energy left to spare!"

Ves only fused a number of incompatible shards together in order to make sure that this process was sound. Before he continued it, he stopped his current actions and instead directed his attention to the remaining half of the shards that originated from the spiritual restraint.

He had something special in mind for these weird shards!

"Let's see if I can't make something else out of these exceptional remains."

He began to fuse the shards together. Since they originally consisted of a single whole, there was no rejection at all. However, it was not his intention to revive the spiritual restraint.

Instead, he began to blend in some prepared spiritual images into the mix.

While continuing to fuse the shards, he also began to mold and shape the unfinished amalgamation while applying many other spiritual techniques.

After several minutes of complex manipulation, during which he also infused a small portion of universal life energy in order to add more strength, Ves finally completed his sub-creation!

What he created out of some of the remains of the spiritual restraint was something similar to a spiritual construct!

"And not just any construct!"

This one happened to share some similarities to Ketis' mind sword. It was a living, evolving spiritual construct that was capable of activating a unique ability!

Since his time was limited, Ves only briefly inspected the finished construct before shoving it inside the unborn spiritual product!

It was as if he was adding an implant to his upcoming design spirit. If this experiment worked as expected, then his design spirit would likely be born with the ability to activate a specific effect!

"My new design spirits will finally come with their own innate abilities!"

Innate abilities!

None of his artificially-created design spirits possessed this powerful feature. Qilanxo was able to form space barriers. Zeigra was able to induce corrosion. Ylvaine could cast his sight into the future.

As for his design spirits? They couldn't do any of that! Most of their abilities mainly pertained to manipulating the moods of people. Not even the Golden Cat and the Superior Mother were capable of affecting reality so directly.

This was different! If this experiment truly worked, then he was one step closer to creating actual gods!

"Ahem, not gods!" He quickly corrected himself. "I mean extraordinarily empowered artificial spiritual entities!"