

Mech 2291

Chapter 2291: Superweapon Bonanza

Even though the Larkinsons had good cause, it was still illegal for them to break the taboo on weapons of mass destruction.

This was an absolute rule, and one the Big Two had never compromised on. Even when Ves pleaded to Master Willix to give him permission to employ these destructive weapons, it turned out that she lacked the authority to consent to such a controversial request!

Still, many of those superweapons were very potent. Turning some of them against Ulimo Citadel would definitely make it easier to breach the main stronghold's defense network.

Ves pushed on regardless. Eventually, Master Willix promised to advocate on his behalf to an upper administrator at Centerpoint.

Whoever she talked to, Master Willix eventually returned to Ves with an offer.

"The MTA is ready to grant this exception to you on a temporary basis, but only at a heavy price."

"How much?" Ves asked.

"2,000,000 MTA merits."

"That much?!"

"This is a reasonable price considering the consequences of this decision. This price is non-negotiable, Mr. Larkinson!"

Surrendering 2 million MTA merits just to be able to make use of every superweapon they captured from the pirates was almost unbearable to Ves! The only reason why he didn't reject this insane demand was because he knew that it was an investment.

Of all of the taboo weapons at Ulimo Citadel that the Black Cats had tallied so far, the estimated merit bounty of them far surpassed this sum of merits!

Ves briefly entertained the notion of turning down the MTA's offer. Without permission, the Larkinson Clan risked annihilation if they still decided to make use of the pirate-owned superweapons. He could never take such a reckless decision.

As for setting the powerful superweapons aside, that was not in his consideration!

The pirates played dirty and possessed too many advantages.

"I... agree." Ves eventually decided. "Can I make another request as well?"

Ves and Master Willix eventually forged a deal that greatly increased Task Force Predator's chances of victory.

Though Ves instantly lost more than half of the merits he accumulated up to this point, he believed it was worth it. The potential gains of conquering Ulimo Citadel would allow him to recoup his investment several times over while suffering much less losses.

Still, obtaining a temporary pass from the MTA was not enough. Ves had to put a lot of effort into convincing his fellow clansmen to hijack and make use of prohibited weapons!

Breaking taboos was as easy as shaving his stubble to Ves. In contrast, many other clansmen had grown up with the taboos ingrained in their very souls. It was very difficult for them to accept the notion of making use of prohibited weapons, even if they only intended to use them against the scum of the galaxy.

Fortunately, Ves possessed a lot of clout and authority within the clan. As long as he pressed hard enough, enough clansmen volunteered to taint their hands. Of course, they received plenty of bonuses such as Larkinson merits for their trouble.

The vault, though well-protected, opened up without a fuss. The Black Cats had already thoroughly hacked the security systems as well as the fail safes with the help of Lucky.

Once they gained access to the contents of the vault, these weapon techs directed various heavy-duty lifter bots or other transportation vehicles to take out a select number of superweapons.

Most of them consisted of bombs and missiles. The Larkinsons retrieved only a couple of warship-grade laser cannons because there weren't that many stored in the vault. Instead, the Dry Snakes usually made other arrangements for them since most of these heavy weapons were mounted on starships.

At this time, the main stronghold went on full alert! The Dry Snakes and their allies finally faced the threat they had been preparing for all of these weeks.

Even though Grand Protector Roshaw had heard about the formidable sabotage abilities of the Larkinson Clan, he never expected the vault defenses to fail so extensively.

His grand coat decked with expensive exotic-laden trophies shook as he realized that his pirate stronghold might actually fall today!

"This is impossible!" One of his pirate officers responsible for setting up the defenses stated. "Our men have checked those systems over and over! It shouldn't have been possible to tamper with them to such an extent that they failed right when those bastards decided to launch their attack!"

"They managed to succeed regardless." Roshaw angrily grumbled. His men were already in disarray due to the huge failure in preventing the Larkinsons from taking over their outer vaults! "You promised that our defenses would hold. You failed."

Before the pirate officer could offer any further excuses, the leader of the Dry Snakes pulled out a resplendent-looking hand cannon and shot the man in the head!

Bang!

Grand Protector Roshaw may have become old, but he was still a pirate! His furious eyes raked over his other subordinates, but none of them wanted to attract his ire.

"Inspect every single defensive system and other critical systems." The Grand Protector commanded. "Preemptively load every hardware and software backup that can be applied in thirty minutes. If any of you fail me to this extent, your fate will be the same!"

The pirates inside the main base entered into an even greater frenzy! At the restricted sections that the Mirror Raiders failed to penetrate, the highly loyal Dry Snakes weapon operators each checked and reconfigured their respective defensive systems.

Others began to gear up and ready themselves for a difficult fight.

The Mirror Raiders were no exception! The Dry Snakes ordered them to deploy their two mech companies and join the rest of the loosely-organized Ulimo Militia.

Of course, the Dry Snakes did not trust the members of the hastily-formed militia force entirely. The Mirror Raiders were stationed far away from any core Ulimo positions.

None of the disguised Larkinsons minded this assignment. Lieutenant-Commander Abis, Lieutenant Sendra and Dietrich all entered their pirate mechs and obediently followed the arrangements of their supposed pirate overlords.

In order to discourage any trouble, the various mech outfits that had chosen to join the Ulimo Militia had to split up their mechs by squads. This caused the Mirror Raiders to be unable to keep all of their mechs together.

As for the non-mech pilots of the Mirror Raiders, the pirate authorities made different arrangements for them. This was why Ketis, who was ostensibly just a powerful bodyguard, was put on pacification duty. Her job was to keep the civilians in the public marketplace contained and in control.

She was hoping to do more. The time wasn't right, but she already looked forward to unsheathing her cutlass and cutting her way through every opposition!

Time passed as the Larkinsons and the pirates both prepared for the second round of fighting.

So far, the pirates completely failed to prevent the attackers from overwhelming the vaults!

Their unexpectedly rapid collapse not only led to the death or capture of many weapon operators and technical personnel, but also caused the pirates to lose around 360 mechs at once!

The latter was a painful loss, as that meant the pirate defenders were only left with around 3900 mechs!

The huge setback caused Grand Protector Roshaw to recall the relief forces that were making their way to the vaults. It had already become clear that it was a mistake to split his forces up, because he recognized that the Larkinson mechs were superior on an individual basis!

It was at this time that the Larkinsons unscrupulously began to make use of the superweapons they retrieved from the vaults!

In contrast, the pirates were only able to bring a portion of their base defenses online. Several defensive networks and enormous base cannons failed to initiate as the software of these weapons rebelled!

Due to various limitations, only a small proportion of base defenses experienced hardware failures.

Of course, several critical defensive systems remained untouched. After performing some extensive checks, their operators immediately attempted to bring their weapons to bear against the enemies within reach!

At this time, it was extremely dangerous for any mech to be out in the open.

The mechs of both sides therefore withdrew from the line of sight of any destructive superweapon and huddled behind some of the larger asteroids floating around in the region.

The vulnerable machines moved just in time to escape the first exchange of blows!

More than a dozen warship-grade laser beams instantly impacted the conquered vaults! The Dry Snakes were very proud of their Judgement Lasers. Each of them possessed the power to take out a second-class mech with a single full-powered blow.

"Taste our Ghosting missiles!"

Hundreds of missiles launched into space. Some of them bore conventional warheads, but at least a handful of them hosted nuclear warheads!

Due to some clever means, it was difficult to identify which missile contained an enhanced payload.

Even so, the Larkinsons were already prepared. Their ranged mechs peeked out from behind their asteroids to intercept as many missiles as possible.

The Penitent Sister ranged mechs performed the best! Their superior targeting systems and splitting laser beams caused them to take out at least seven missiles per shot!

"Hahahaha! Is that your best?!"

Asteroids continued to bear more and more marks of catastrophic laser impacts. It did not matter. There were so many asteroids floating around in Maynard Fields that the Larkinson mechs simply flew behind another one if their current rock was starting to look shaky.

The Larkinson weapon techs quickly brought more and more weapon systems online. While they were very cautious about employing the warship laser cannons they retrieved from the vault, they were much more haphazard when it came to launching other weapons!

Since much of the weapons in the vault were made by various pirate groups, their diversity was great.

Missiles with varying nuclear and other dangerous payloads launched towards the defenses of Ulimo Base.

Various turrets and thousands of pirate mechs urgently intercepted the incoming ordnance! Though their accuracy was not as good as that of the Larkinsons, their superior numbers along with the reduced amount of missiles from the vaults caused Ulimo Citadel to remain unaffected.

Dozens of radial explosions soon filled up the surrounding space. Though many of the nuclear missiles had been shot to pieces without triggering their dangerous payloads, other ones still managed to explode midway, throwing up lots of energy and interference in the areas between the vaults and the main stronghold!

"Ahh! Our sensors are frizzing up! We're firing blind!"

As more and more nuclear and exotic ordnance silently turned a patch of space into hell, the pirate sensor systems became less and less able to distinguish what went on. They could only fire their weapons at fixed locations.

The Larkinsons suffered from this problem as well, but only up to an extent. They already accounted for this outcome and made preparations accordingly. They deployed purpose-built sensor arrays, spread out a huge network of electronic eyes in every direction and borrowed the powerful sensor systems of the Penitent Sisters to pierce past the expanding interference field!

More missiles and powerful lasers continued to fire from both sides. What was different was that the pirates failed to hit anything important while the Larkinsons accurately brought their hijacked superweapons to bear against the fixed weapon emplacements!

Numerous Judgement Lasers collapsed as deadly laser beams and tactical nuclear missiles succeeded in taking them out!

The threat of the pirates rapidly diminished as their functional superweapons became less and less. Grand Protector Roshaw looked distressed as Ulimo Citadel rapidly lost their most powerful form of protection!

Unfortunately, the party for the Larkinsons did not last long. The vaults did not carry that many superweapons. They quickly exhausted the stolen missiles. The huge laser cannons also succumbed as they couldn't avoid exposing their locations after firing huge, linear laser beams.

Though many of the weapon operators anticipated this outcome and did their best to control the weapon systems by remote, more than a hundred of them still lost their lives!

The second round had passed. The Larkinsons exhausted all of their stolen superweapons, but the price had been worth it. Ulimo Citadel only retained a fraction of their most threatening arsenal!

Grand Protector Roshaw looked grave as Ulimo Citadel began to get stripped apart piece by piece.

Even so, the pirates still managed to retain all of their mechs and enough defenses to keep putting up a fight.

The pirates also retained another trump card. Roshaw began to clench his fist. "If I resort to this option... I'll have to give up everything."

If possible, he didn't want to resort to his final option until there was no other choice!

Chapter 2292: Lopsided Firefight

In the first and second round of fighting, thousands of people had already died!

The pirates suffered the brunt of the casualties. Almost their entire garrisons at the outer vaults had died. The Larkinson infantrymen didn't have the time or leisure to take too many captives.

More pirates died at the main stronghold. Many of the destructive weapon systems that the Dry Snakes brought to bear against the Larkinsons were crewed by specially-trained pirates.

When the weapons they operated got struck by massive overpowering lasers or a tactical nuclear missile, the people around them usually died as well!

Screams echoed throughout several locations on the moon-sized asteroid as they became awash with destructive heat and energy.

Fortunately for the pirates, they built their critical base areas deeper underground. Most of the superweapons failed to threaten Ulimo Citadel proper.

In the lull that ensued, the Larkinson Clan already moved on to the next step. They spread their mechs around. Their ranged mechs continued to use the surrounding asteroids as cover as they fired their weapons at the known pirate superweapon positions that survived the previous exchange of fire.

Though their weapons weren't so exaggeratingly powerful, the Larkinson mechs slowly whittled away at the remaining intact superweapons.

From the start, the Larkinsons always focused on taking out the most destructive options available to the pirates!

There was no way they could accomplish anything else unless almost every single superweapon was taken off the board!

It took a lot of effort to remove the remainder of the superweapons. Even if the pirates held a couple of Judgement Lasers and Ghosting missile launchers back, the Larkinsons possessed detailed intelligence of the precise locations of every weapon emplacement, exposed or not. Any plot to keep them hidden until the Larkinson mechs came closer were dashed!

Thousands of ranged pirate mechs did not remain idle. As soon as the Larkinsons hijacked the vaults, they received orders to fire at any exposed enemy mechs.

It was difficult to pick off the Larkinson mechs. There was so much distance between the main base and the outlying vaults that roaming asteroids frequently blocked their line of sight.

The same could not be said for the Larkinson mechs. Ulimo presented a wealth of targets.

In contrast, the pirate mechs huddling behind their starships, fortifications or asteroids were having a very hard time hitting anything but empty space or solid cover!

"You blasted scum! Hit something already!" A pirate liaison screamed in the command channel of the Ulimo Militia.

A squad of Mirror Raider mechs huddled behind a fortified trench the pirates had dug into a stationary asteroid.

Dietrich's generic pirate mech attempted to hit the distant mechs of the Avatars of Myth.

Even though he and his fellow Mirror Raiders purposefully reduced their accuracy to a level typically expected of pirates, they did not dare to miss too often.

Even so, the few laser beams and projectiles that happened to hit a Larkinson mech effectively achieved no result!

He grinned. He attacked the Bright Warrior and Aurora Titan mechs without any guilt. Their defenses were so high that it was extremely unlikely that the Mirror Raiders would be able to kill a single Larkinson!

The Larkinson Clan purposefully exposed their most defensible mechs a bit more. The clansmen trusted in their defenses, and they served as excellent distractions as the few pirate mechs that managed to hit their targets only wasted their energy or ammunition in vain!

Though some of the pirate officers were aware that their ranged mechs were not achieving anything significant, doing something was better than doing nothing!

Grand Protector Roshaw unflinchingly shot any pirate commander who made any decisions that hinted at weakness.

Blam!

Another high-ranked pirate officer lost his head!

"Conserve resources? NONSENSE!" The pirate lord boomed as he brandished his smoking gun at the remaining pirate officers. "We are facing the biggest threat of our lives! Our fellow Nyxian pirates may have scruples, but these outsiders are killers true

and true! None of the civilized folk treat us with dignity! The only way to resist their aggression is to show as much fighting spirit as possible! We must demonstrate our conviction to fight to the death!"

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Even though the situation looked dire, the pirates weren't willing to give up! Ulimo Citadel was their home and their stronghold. Giving it up would make everyone homeless!

Surrendering was not an option. Running away wasn't an option either, as the Dry Snakes had already turned on any mech or ship that attempted to flee without authorization!

At a distant asteroid close to one of the conquered and bombed-out aults, the Second Mech Company periodically poked out their Bright Warriors.

The mechs with rifles continued to fire at the targets designated by the command net. Even if they didn't know what they were firing at, the mech pilots pulled the trigger regardless, trusting that the orders and targeting data conveyed by other Larkinsons were sound.

The Bright warriors armed with swords and spears exposed their frames as well. The space knight configuration acted the most conspicuously. Even when the pirates utilized more powerful or unusual weapons such as graser rifles, the thick tower shields resisted most of the damage.

That said, not every pirate mech fired at these conspicuous targets. Occasionally, an unlucky Larkinson mech suffered major damage, which impaired their performance or rendered them battle ineffective right away!

Few Larkinson mech pilots died in this exchange of fire, but losing their mechs signified the end of their participation. Task Force Predator possessed too few backup mechs to give the surviving pilots another opportunity to reenter the battle.

"The battle has slowed down." Imon Ingvar impatiently remarked. "When are we going in? I haven't stabbed a single pirate mech with my sword!"

Out of the four different Bright Warrior configurations, he fell in love with the swordsman mech loadout. Though it lacked the defenses of the space knight configuration or the immense impact of the lancer mech configuration, the swordsman mech offered the greatest play to his abilities in combat.

As for his sister, Captain Casella Ingvar preferred to pilot a rifleman mech configuration. Getting too close to the battle often caused her to lose sight of the bigger picture.

"The plan isn't to advance."

"Huh?! What are you talking about, sis?!"

"Who knows what traps or other tricks the pirates have in reserve. Look at the base. We may have destroyed all of their superweapons, but the pirates still retain plenty of heavily protected turrets and weapon emplacements."

After removing or circumventing the faulty software that plagued their conventional defensive systems, the pirates slowly brought their fixed defenses to bear against the attackers.

It took way too much time for the Larkinsons to destroy every single fixed defense system. While none of these weapon emplacements possessed the destructive power of the superweapons that the Larkinsons prioritized right away, their huge volume of fire still deserved a lot of respect!

For this reason, the Larkinsons wanted to entice the pirate mechs to advance from their positions and leave the defensive envelope of Ulimo Citadel.

The pirates weren't fools, though. As much as Grand Protector Roshaw wanted to smash his mechs against the mechs of the Larkinson Clan, he knew that he must resist the temptation and continue to rely on his remaining fixed defenses.

In order to encourage the pirates to abandon their passive posture, the Penitent Sisters finally made a move.

At this point, much of the interference from all of the superweapons had faded. The Larkinson Clan obtained a very detailed understanding of the current positions of enemy mechs.

While most of the Larkinson ranged mechs still directed their firepower towards the stationary turrets and defenses of Ulimo Citadel, the exiled Hexers quickly began to utilize their superior skills and mechs to attack the pirate mechs!

Instantly, the pressure on the pirates increased as hundreds of Penitent Sister mechs fired their second-class rifles and cannons at the pirate mechs regardless of how much cover was in the way!

Whether there were meters of asteroid rock or bulk exotic alloys in the way, the positron beams and gauss rounds made quick work of the obstacles!

Squads of Penitent Sister mechs coordinated their firepower in order to quickly strip a pirate mech of all of their protection. The most devious aspect about their firing patterns was that they did not grant any pirate mech the time to retreat or duck into another cover!

With dozens of high-powered attacks barraging these hapless pirate mechs at once, the pirates quickly lost more than a hundred mechs in a matter of minutes!

The disparity in firepower was incredibly galling to the pirates. If they only had a few superweapons left intact, they could have put up a good fight!

"Sir, we need to go in!" A pirate advisor urged.

"That's exactly what those blasted Larkinsons want us to do! We can't fall into their trap!"

"Diving into their trap is preferable to suffering a slow death!"

Grand Protector Roshaw grew graver and graver. The projections continued to display the drop in numbers. More and more of his mechs were being picked apart by the second-class mechs of the enemy.

"Pull our pirate mechs back."

"What? Are you sure, my lord?"

Up until now, Roshaw ruthlessly squashed anyone who suggested any of the sort. The headless bodies of several unfortunate pirate officers strewn on the deck served as a reminder to everyone that the Grand Protector did not tolerate any cowardice!

Yet strangely enough, the pirate leader changed his mind. Everyone felt mixed at the sudden change.

"Don't question my orders! Pull back our mechs and make sure they are placed behind enough cover to prevent those blasted Hexers mechs from picking off our machines."

While Grand Protector Roshaw still decided to keep his last resort in reserve, he possessed several other options that could potentially turn this situation around.

No matter what, the Dry Snakes reigned over one of the more mineral-rich areas of Maynard Fields! Much like any other local overlord in the Nyxian Gap, the Dry Snakes built a lot of defensive measures. Much of it was in the open, but Roshaw made sure that his pirate group invested at least some resources into other solutions.

"Tell me as soon as our mechs have reached safety. Take this opportunity to replenish their energy and ammunition reserves."

"Yes, my lord!"

The sudden withdrawal of the pirate mechs confused the Larkinsons a bit. Most of them thought that the pirates would either break and run or charge forward out of desperations.

"Are they trying to outlast us? It won't work! Our guns are constantly breaking down their defense networks!"

Several asteroids bore the marks of many weapon impacts. Each of them previously boasted a lot of fixed defenses. Now, most of their guns and weapon batteries only consisted of ruined craters and molten slag.

As long as the Larkinson Clan destroyed every turret and weapon emplacement, the defensive advantage of the pirates would no longer play a meaningful role!

As long as the Larkinsons reduced this battle to a contest between mechs, the pirates would certainly lose!

Back at the Scarlet Rose, Ves began to frown as an unsettling feeling settled over his mind. He became puzzled at this response as well.

"What are the pirates doing? Have we detected any unusual activity?"

"No sir." A bridge officer replied. "We have detected elevated energy signatures or traces of unstable exotics that are typically added to nuclear warheads."

Before Ves could issue another request, the battlefield centered around Ulimo Citadel suddenly changed.

A huge black sphere spread out from the moon-sized asteroid and expanded across many kilometers! The surrounding asteroids were each engulfed by the wave of blackness until they swept over every Larkinson and Penitent Sister mech!

"WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?!" Ves stood up from his chair. "REPORT!"

"Sir, according to our sensors, an atypical anomaly has swept over the battlefield! Both the pirates and our combat forces are isolated from our fleet!"

Ves couldn't believe what had happened! This was definitely not a coincidence! The pirates had somehow managed to summon an artificial anomaly!

Chapter 2293: Unnatural Darkness

The Battle of Ulimo Citadel took an unexpected turn!

Somehow, the Nyxian pirates caused the besieged stronghold and a wide area around it to become engulfed in an anomalous hazard!

While Ves, the Black Cats and the other analysts of the Larkinson Clan guessed that the pirates might resort to drastic measures, this was something else. Who knew that the Dry Snakes were crazy enough to call upon the most fearsome phenomenon of the Nyxian Gap.

Ves and the Larkinson Clan had never encountered such a drastic means of flipping the board!

For a few seconds on the bridge of the Scarlet Rose, everyone looked shocked as the main visuals depicted an ominous, shadowy sphere enveloping the entire battlefield.

It was as if some incomprehensible monster took a bite out of space!

Horror and confusion began to spread throughout the ships and the few hundred mechs that the Larkinson Clan kept in reserve.

"What is going on?!"

"Are.. are they gone? Just like this?"

"We have lost all communications with the units engulfed in the unknown anomaly!"

"We need to rescue our brothers right away!"

"Don't panic! Everything can be explained!"

Throughout the fleet, the hundreds of scientists and engineers attempted to interpret the confusing sensor data. The sensor readings made little sense, as most of the sensors had never been designed to observe such an abnormal phenomenon to begin with! What had happened exceeded the Larkinson Clan's comprehension by a huge margin!

Ves joined the frenzy as well. Even though he did not specialize in astrophysics or any other field related to spatial phenomena, he tried his best to decipher what was going on. It was too bad that he failed to spot a discernable pattern that he could use to figure out this anomaly!

For several minutes, Task Force Predator attempted various moves. Several ships dispatched small, disposable drones and sent them through the sphere.

They were never heard from again. The connection to the drones cut off. Even when these devices received instructions to leave the sphere immediately afterwards, somehow each of them failed to emerge from the anomaly.

"What about sending a ship? Maybe we can still maintain contact through the quantum entanglement node."

"Are you stupid?!" A chief engineer spat. "Many anomalies in the Nyxian Gap completely garble the connection between quantum entangled particles!"

Though more clansmen began to suggest they should enter the anomalous region in order to rescue their trapped compatriots, the risks were far too great to make such a reckless move. Sending in the entire fleet might potentially doom Task Force Predator entirely!

What puzzled Ves was how the pirates could possibly have such a trump card in reserve. After several weeks of probing and infiltration, the Black Cats should have figured most if not all of the strengths of Ulimo Citadel.

How could they have missed something as dramatic as this move!?

He decided to call the leader of the Black Cats.

Her projection depicted a spymaster who was out of her comfort zone. She looked devoid of her usual poise, and her customary smirk was nowhere to be seen.

"Calabast! What is going on!?"

"We are investigating the circumstances. Prior to our attack, we truly haven't found any indications that the Dry Snakes or their subordinate forces are capable of evoking an anomalous hazard on command. We have even researched every independent pirate outfit for abnormal capabilities, but as far as we know, they are all ordinary."

"Have you investigated any other unusual people or organizations at Ulimo?" Ves pressed.

"We have, but none of them appear capable of evoking such a huge movement."

Her answer didn't satisfy him at all. Frustration welled in him as he was lacking a huge amount of answers. The longer this anomaly stayed active, the greater the chance that he would lose most if not every mech deployed into battle.

If it came down to it, losing thousands of mechs was an acceptable price. Though Ves valued mechs a lot as a principle, they were built for a purpose. He could always build new machines as long as he gained access to some production facilities in the Nyxian Gap.

What truly pained him was the prospect losing the lives of the mech pilots who were trapped inside the anomaly!

Such a huge loss not only meant that Task Force Predator would permanently lose a lot of battle strength. This would make it very difficult for the fleet to defend itself against vengeful pirates.

In addition, Ves would have huge pressure in the clan if he returned to civilized space with just a fraction of his fighting forces. His young and fragile clan would not be able to stomach such a heavy blow!

As he kept staring at the boiling sphere of darkness and shadows, Ves suddenly made a small realization.

How did the pirates manage to evoke such a big anomaly in the first place?

Through technology? Unlikely!

Not even the Big Two could make heads or tails of them. Otherwise, they would have swept the entire Nyxian Gap clean of pirates by now! Their warfleets wouldn't have chosen to avoid this dangerous region like the plague!

Ever since the previous incident, Ves hypothesized that anomalies in the material realm might be tied to activity in the imaginary realm.

This meant that this anomaly might have been evoked through spiritual means!

Ves briefly ignored Calabast and everything else and concentrated his mind. He projected a part of his consciousness in the imaginary realm.

"Ah!"

As expected, something new had appeared in the imaginary realm! An identical dark sphere had appeared. The corrosive winds that spun in the motion of the huge vortex seemed to crash against the sphere before parting aside. The nature of this anomaly was different than the one that appeared in the previous incident!

Unfortunately, this didn't really help him that much. He cautiously attempted to probe the sphere in the imaginary realm, only to feel that he had completely lost contact with the tiny spiritual projection he sent inside.

The phenomenon in the imaginary realm seemed to behave identical to the phenomenon in the material realm!

The two were unquestionably tied together!

Ves began to grow suspicious as he retracted his concentration.

"Calabast.. have you performed any investigations on the cults and religions in Ulimo Citadel?"

Her projection blinked. "We have, but their footprint isn't big. The typical church or cult has only attracted a few dozen to a hundred worshippers in the public marketplace section. The Dry Snakes and its subordinate pirate groups aren't religious in nature."

"The quantity or presence of the religious organization isn't important. Which one has the biggest or most mysterious background?"

Calabast briefly ran through the gathered intelligence. "Of all of the known cults in Ulimo, the Hallowed Abyss Temple is the most mysterious and influential. They occupy a small shrine in the most coveted area of Ulimo's public section. From what we have gathered, the local branch of the Hallowed Abyss Temple is highly insular and doesn't amount to more than nine members."

"Tell me more about the Hallowed Abyss Temple."

"While their presence here is small, the cult is known to have a wide reach. Their priests and shrines can be found in many pirate bases. Some of them even set up shop aboard large pirate ships!"

This sounded more and more suspicious to Ves. Even Calabast began to realize that there might be more to the Hallowed Abyss Temple.

"Where do they come from? Where is the Hallowed Abyss Temple based?"

"It's said that their physical temple is actually located deep in the core regions. This is in line with their religious beliefs. The so-called Abyssal Servants do not fear the Nyxian Gap and all of its unknown phenomena. Instead, the cultists worship it. They believe the Nyxian Gap is not a cancerous tumor, but instead a sacred blessing bestowed by their mysterious 'Dark Gods'."

That didn't sound good!

The more he heard about this cult, the more Ves grew certain about this guess!

Ves not only suspected that the Hallowed Abyss Temple may be responsible for calling down the anomaly, but also guessed that it might be another splinter organization of the Five Scrolls Compact!

If the Hallowed Abyss Temple was truly based in the depths of the core regions, then it shouldn't be too far away from the mysterious regional headquarters of the Compact.

From his prior experiences, Ves already knew that the powerful Compact possessed a penchant of starting up numerous seemingly-unconnected daughter organizations. This was one of the methods they used to coverly expand their influence and reach without triggering the Big Two's vigilance.

Back in the Faris Star Region, Ves once experienced the weirdness surrounding the Church of Haatumak.

Now that he thought about it, the Hallowed Abyss Temple bore some resemblance to the Church of Haatumak! It was as if some leader in the Compact reused the same model but adapted it to a different environment!

"Goddamn cultists!" Ves cursed.

Even though he made some very important realizations, that didn't mean he found a solution to the calamity that had descended on his mech troops.

Not everyone possessed his understanding of the spiritual nature of this anomaly.

The more the Larkinsons figured out, the more helpless they felt. Despair began to spread throughout the fleet as they began to fear the worst!

Within the anomalous region, each person trapped inside began to feel an unnerving pressure on their minds.

Strangely enough, those within the main base experienced something different than those trapped outside in space.

Those who resided on the moon-sized asteroid were spared from any danger. Mostly. What discomfited the pirates, guests and residents inside the stronghold was the sudden descent of darkness and shadows.

No matter how much light fixtures illuminated the interior of Ulimo Citadel, everyone's vision seemed to have dropped to just a stone's throw away!

What was even scarier was that the darkness intensified over time! Several worrying fluctuations occurred deeper within, causing frightened Nyxian pirates to imagine all sorts of inexplicable horrors lurking within!

No one knew what was going on. Ketis and her squad of Mirror Raiders had huddled together inside a random shop. Each of them warmed up their rifles and looked ready to shoot whatever threat that emerged.

Everyone kept their combat armor sealed and breathed air from their internal oxygen tanks. No one wanted to take the risk of breathing any toxins brought by this strange phenomena.

Ketis gripped her cutlass with one hand and her compact laser pistol with the other hand. She felt increasingly discomfited by what had descended upon Ulimo Citadel.

"Have we reached the others?" She asked.

"No, ma'am. Our long-ranged communications aren't working anymore. No signal is able to make it past twenty meters." One of her squadmates replied.

This meant that the darkness surrounding them was cutting them off from the rest of their compatriots! This meant that every group of Mirror Raiders had to fend for themselves!

"What do we do?!" A Flagrant Vandal asked.

"This phenomenon is definitely related to the attack on our base. The pirates must have suffered a lot of blows before being desperate."

"Are they trying to kill us all?! This is clearly an anomaly!"

"It's not the same." Ketis remarked. "We aren't locked in time, and I don't see any other unusual effects. Perhaps the pirates have found some way to shield their base from the brunt of the anomaly!"

The disguised Larkinsons made some guesses, but that didn't help them from this predicament. They were completely blind and deaf of everything that happened beyond twenty meters.

"What is going on outside?" Ketis frowned. Her worry kept growing as her discomfort grew with each passing second.

Though the situation within the pirate stronghold only appeared unsettling, the same could not be said for the Larkinson mechs trapped outside!

Each and every mech in space had become engulfed by impenetrable darkness. No matter how close the mechs stuck together, they had become completely isolated from their fellow comrades after the descent of the dark sphere!

No matter in which direction they flew, they failed to stumble upon any friendly mechs.

What was worse was this was just the start!

Chapter 2294: Grey Apparitions

"Avatars! Is anyone out there? Come on! Please respond!"

Imon Ingvar's Bright Warrior flew aimlessly in circles. Despite previously huddling behind an asteroid the rest of the Second Mech Company of the Avatars of Myth, everything disappeared once the wave of darkness swept past their position.

His mech lost contact with the Bright Warrior mechs that were huddling just tens of meters away from his machine.

It was as if the wave of darkness had all taken them away.

What was even odder was that the asteroid that Imon's mech previously used as cover disappeared as well!

"Is this an illusion?"

When Imon experimentally directed his Bright Warrior to fly downwards, he found to his horror that the obscuring darkness wasn't just muffling his mech's sensor.

It had actually displaced him in a completely different space!

Questions continued to well up in his mind as Imon tried and failed to make sense of this abnormal change. His shallow understanding of science didn't help matters either. All he knew was that he had lost contact with every comrade, including his sister!

"Casella! Where are you?!"

In his haste to reconnect to his fellow Avatars, Imon failed to notice that the darkness around his mech slowly began to seethe. It was only when a strange chill ran straight through his body that he suddenly paused.

In the periphery of his vision, Imon suddenly noticed movement!

He withdrew some of his senses from his mech and looked around in the darkened cockpit. Even though Imon dialed up the lights to their highest setting, he could barely spot the cockpit consoles in front of his piloting chair.

"Did I imagine it?" He questioned himself.

A second chill struck his body!

"What is going on?!"

A strange soundless roar suddenly rang through his ears! Imon grabbed his helmeted head. A strange pressure kept mounting on his mind as if some enormous weight was pressing down on him. The most infuriating aspect of all of these weird events was that Imon was completely unable to block them. He felt as if some unfathomable existences were attacking at this very moment!

"I have to fight back!"

Imon ignored every uncomfortable situation and immersed himself into his mech. As soon as his man-machine connection with his mech intensified, Imon found to his relief that his body was no longer subject to as many abnormal phenomena.

He didn't know why that was so, but Imon was not in the mood to look at a gift horse in the mouth.

Sadly, soon after he took shelter in his own mech, the boiling darkness beyond his mech convulsed.

Suddenly, a strange apparition banged against the armor of his mech!

"What?!"

Though Imon was completely caught off-guard, his instincts were still pretty good. His mech immediately retaliated with a sword, only to cut off some kind of strange grey transparent mech.

"The hell?!"

Another ghostly mech attacked his mech from behind. Fortunately, Imon had become fully alert. Before the strange ghostly mech could thrust its half-transparent spear into the rear armor of the Bright Warrior, the latter turned around and cut through the apparition!

More transparent mechs appeared with regular frequency. Some of them even fired rifles that only dealt a fraction of the damage they were supposed to have if fired by physical mechs.

Imon was forced to fly his Bright Warrior through the darkness in order to take out these strange mechs.

All the while, Imon continued to guess at their origin. What was the deal with them? Were they real, or were they merely figments of his imagination that had come to life?

"Wait a minute.. some of these mechs look familiar."

Though the greyish mechs had been stripped of all color, as a mech pilot Imon was trained to study the physical properties of the mechs he fought.

He gradually recognized that the designs of the ghost mechs matched the mechs fielded by the pirates he had just fought!

He even guessed that these ghost mechs all consisted of machines that the Larkinson Clan and Penitent Sisters had previously taken out in the previous rounds of battle.

This was because the grey mechs each exhibited at least some battle damage!

This damage caused the ghost mechs to function less optimally.

Slowly but surely, Imon managed to keep a grip on the situation. No matter the odd appearance of these hostile apparitions, they were considerably weaker than their actual physical counterparts.

First, their transparent nature caused them to inflict less damage than they should be capable of doing.

Second, that same nature caused every attack made by his mech to deal amplified damage to the enemy mechs.

In fact, much of the grey mechs that weren't immediately cut in half stopped functioning after suffering catastrophic internal damage!

Third, the enemy mechs fought as stupid as bots. Even pirate mech pilots knew better than to launch plain and straightforward attacks. There didn't appear to be any human intelligences controlling these ghost mechs!

Even so, Imon's optimism slowly began to make way for creeping worry, which soon became supplanted by dawning horror.

"These ghost mechs don't stop coming!"

It started out slow, but escalated over the course of the battle. The boiling darkness kept spitting out the same grey mechs that his Bright Warrior had cut to pieces before.

In addition, the longer this ordeal took place, the greater the darkness became active!

Each grey mech that reformed out of the darkness became just a little bit stronger than before. Soon enough, Imon's Bright Warrior could no longer cut down these ghostly apparitions as effectively as before.

Though their driving intelligences hadn't increased a single bit, their solidity and force grew with every single reformation!

Imon tried to be clever and stopped trying to take out the ghost mechs. Unfortunately, this caused their numbers to build up. If this kept on, his Bright Warrior would quickly be mobbed by more than a hundred ghost mechs attacking from each direction!

Even if his Bright Warrior was clad with incredibly resilient Breyer alloy, that many attacks would definitely exceed its defensive capabilities!

"Ahhh! What will it take for you to stay down!" Imon yelled in frustration as his Bright Warrior's sword cut through one ghostly swordsman mech while stabbing through the chest of a ghostly space knight. "Casella?! Where are you?!"

His sister wasn't faring well. Captain Casella Ingvar deployed into battle with a Bright Warrior in its rifleman mech configuration. This meant that the all-obscuring darkness around her impeded her fighting ability even more!

Her mech's laser rifle kept shooting at the ghost mechs, mostly managing to take them out in a single hit as long as she aimed at some critical component.

In order to prevent her mech from getting hit, she kept her mech mobile. During her initial confrontations against the greyish mechs, she also noticed that they didn't appear to be piloted by trained mech pilots.

It was as if a layman was puppeting them all by remote!

The attack and movement patterns of these mechs were very simple and did not leverage their individual strengths.

They also did not employ any tactics other than attacking her mech in the most direct manner possible. This meant that even if she was being swarmed by multiple ghostly attackers, they did not employ any boxing formations.

Due to all of these factors, Casella managed to overcome her disadvantageous situation by flying away and kiting her ghostly pursuers.

Since these stupid grey mechs only thought of reaching her mech as fast as possible, they solely flew in straight lines, making them easy targets!

Despite this favorable condition, Casella kept growing more and more worried. The darkness surrounding her in each direction kept becoming more active. The ghost mechs that chased after her fleeing machine were also growing stronger.

Who knew whether the darkness would introduce another danger?

Even if the situation remained the same, Casella still worried about her continued survival. This was because even if the mechs she fought were fake, her own machine was still very real!

"My energy reserves are dropping." She noted with evident concern.

Every mech only carried only so much fuel or energy. Spaceborn mechs were especially notorious for their elevated consumption of energy.

Some mechs designed for efficiency could last for hours even if their flight systems were being stressed.

Other mechs designed for peak performance were not as frugal! They were mostly meant to control their energy consumption until a critical moment had arrived.

The Bright Warrior's rifleman mech configuration consumed more energy than the other configurations. Its laser rifle drained energy with every shot, and its constant maneuvering didn't help matters either.

Even though Casella dialed down the power of the laser rifle to a point where it was just enough to kill a ghost mech, how long would her mech's energy reserves last? If her weapon gradually demanded more power, she feared that her mech might not be able to last more than thirty minutes!

In this all-consuming darkness, there were no friendly mechs to cover her back. There were no ships to get back to in order to replenish her machine.

She was completely on her own, and the continuously-intensifying darkness began to take a toll on her sanity.

"I'm a Larkinson now!" She reminded herself. "I can't give in to my fears!"

Though Casella managed to hold on, many other Larkinson mech pilots fared worse!

The Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers, Vandals and Swordmaidens engulfed by the anomaly all experienced the same difficulties.

The skill of the mech pilot and the quality of their machines generally determined how well they coped with the neverending attacks.

Those who piloted regular premium mechs managed to hold out for a time, but as the power of the grey mechs escalated, the damage kept accumulating.

Each premium mech suffered more and more scars. Some mechs, especially lightly-armored ones, exhibited serious damage that caused their performance to drop!

Once their firepower or mobility took a hit, the distressed machines became less capable of fending off the next wave of hostile ghost mechs.

Some of the mechs failed to kill off enough ghost mechs or lost ability to outrun them. Once that happened, the ghost mechs surrounding their victims kept growing in number until they finally tore apart their prey!

Already, an unknown but considerable number of Larkinson mechs had succumbed in this fashion!

Perhaps the only good news was that some other mechs were faring better!

The expert candidates stood out as the best performers. In another pocket of darkness, Commander Dise of the Swordmaidens maintained her iron will as the greatsword of her swordsman mech cut through three greyish apparitions at once!

"Begone, you fake mechs! You are not a worthy challenge!"

Her battle intent rose even as a part of her worried about the condition of her fellow Swordmaidens.

Too many of her fellow sisters had died in the past few years! The small amount of Swordmaidens who survived all of the ordeals that preceded them were incredibly precious to Dise.

Though she was confident that her fellow Swordmaiden mech pilots would be able to deal with these endless ghostly mechs with similar ease, she wasn't sure whether this would remain true for long.

"I have to get back to them!" She urged herself. Her growing desperation boosted her fighting spirit.

It was not in the nature of the Swordmaidens to shy away from a threat! No matter what kind of oddities took place, Commander Dise was determined to overcome every obstacle!

"If this fog keeps hindering me, I will cut it apart!"

Instead of cutting the constantly-reappearing grey mechs, she collected herself and concentrated her mentality until her swordman mech unleashed a cut with its Breyer alloy greatsword!

A momentary tear into the darkness had formed. The sensors of Dise's mech briefly glimpsed another Larkinson mech!

Even though the tear quickly healed in a matter of seconds, Commander Dise finally obtained some hope!

"If a single cut isn't enough, then I'll unleash more!"

Chapter 2295: Grey Watcher

Several minutes passed.

The crisis situation prompted Ves to change into a suit of combat armor. Since he did not want to get caught flat-footed a second time, he also retrieved his B-stone lockbox from his vault.

Absent a suit of armor lined with a layer of B-stone, wearing the lockbox over his head was better than nothing!

During this time, the dark sphere surrounding the battlefield wasn't weakening.

In fact, the opposite happened. The abnormal sensor readings may largely be incomprehensible, but their fluctuations and energy levels kept rising on a steady basis.

If this trend remained constant, then the anomaly would grow four times stronger after an hour!

This was very alarming news. Even though some of the Larkinsons guessed that this constant strengthening was not good news to the pirates, since this move was targeted against their own mechs, letting this anomaly persist was one of the worst outcomes possible!

Back on the Scarlet Rose, Ves no longer obtained any useful information from Calabast.

Her intelligence gathering wasn't entirely at fault. Even though she discovered his biggest secret, she didn't know anything about spirituality. She was only capable of investigating what was in the realm of her understanding.

Against unusual organizations with very odd capabilities such as the Hallowed Abyss Temple, Calabast and the rest of the Black Cats were unable to recognize the secrets hidden underneath the surface.

Only Ves recognized that the Hallowed Abyss Temple was the likely cause for the appearance of this dark anomaly.

He glanced towards a projection that contained a brief profile of the so-called leader of the shrine based in Ulimo Citadel.

In one of the few archival images that the Black Cats retrieved from a database, an aged priest stared mysteriously into the distance. To Ves, Grey Watcher Xarnus looked very suspicious.

The priests of the Hallowed Abyss Temple were separated into four ranks.

The White Watchers were the most junior priests ordained by the temple. Their status was fairly low and they mostly assisted more senior Watchers.

The Grey Watchers possessed real authority. Not only did they prove their dedication to the temple over a long time, they had also achieved success in managing shrines and temples throughout the Nyxian Gap.

The Black Watchers served as the senior leaders of the temple. The intelligence was rather vague about their role, but there weren't many of them and almost always resided at the main temple.

The leader of the entire cult was known as the Hallowed Watcher. Most Nyxian pirates weren't even aware of this high priest's existence, and even the Dry Snakes barely knew anything more than this powerful figure's title.

If the Grey Watcher stationed at Ulimo Citadel was already this formidable, Ves really didn't want to meet this so-called Hallowed Watcher!

Ves studied the image of the head cultist in the hopes of gleaning some clues.

The grey-bearded cultist's eyes looked a bit intense. This was the sign of intense fanaticism that Ves had seen in many people, ranging from Ylvainans to his very own lover!

In addition, the man's grey robe bulged at some very abnormal points. The Grey Watcher wasn't fat. Instead, the likeliest explanation was that Xarnus underwent a lot of genetic modification, causing his human body to form strange growths!

While there were many pirates in lawless space who indulged in reckless genetic modification, there was just something about this Grey Watcher that caused Ves to sense a significant threat!

This man along with eight other cultists were likely the key individuals responsible for plunging his mech forces into darkness!

The Larkinsons left behind in the fleet were continually grasping at straws. To Ves, they were running around like headless chickens, mostly due to how little they understood what was actually taking place.

To Ves, the situation was a bit more clear. Somehow, the cultists of the Hallowed Abyss Temple evoked something in the imaginary realm and managed to cause it to overlap with the material realm!

Sadly, he didn't know much else. He had no idea how a single priest was able to form something so massive. Was this Grey Watcher relying on his own power? That would make his spirituality as strong as an ace pilot, if not more!

"That is impossible!" Ves remarked.

How else did the cultists manage to call down this disaster? Were they relying on some sort of forgotten alien relic? Had the Five Scrolls Compact cultivated some sort of powerful exobeast like Qilanxo used to be when she was alive?

There were too many possibilities to count. Even if he knew the answers, Ves wasn't sure whether he could do anything about it. The sphere of darkness looked completely impenetrable to his eyes!

"Wait a second. What about the network?"

Ves turned around and called for the Larkinson Mandate. Once Nitaa handed it over, Ves communed with the ancestral spirit looking worried within.

He mentally issued a request to the Golden Cat.

"Can you sense if the mech pilots trapped inside this anomaly?"

Nyaaaaa...

"You really can't? Can you tell them if they are alive?"

Nyaaa! Nyaa.

The anomaly largely dampened Goldie's perception of the people and mechs inside the anomaly.

Not even the Bright Warriors were able to maintain their ties with their design spirit!

Ordinarily, Ves would have grown curious about this intriguing method to interfere with the bond between his mechs and design spirits.

As it was, he had more important matters to be concerned about. The inability for Goldie or any of his other design spirits to reach the mechs and mech pilots trapped inside were very concerning!

The only good news that Goldie conveyed was that she was still capable of sensing whether the Larkinsons trapped inside were alive or dead.

Most notably, Goldie's bond with Ketis and the other members of the Mirror Raiders remained fairly strong!

At the very least, this signified that the anomaly likely didn't affect the pirate stronghold itself.

Ves stroked the surface of the Larkinson Mandate. His hands also brushed against the Restraint Hoop.

Would Lufa be able to help? Ves wasn't sure. This anomaly was so powerful that Ves doubted that the Angel of Tranquility was able to dispel it. The strength disparity was too big!

Nyaa! Nyaa!

His face grew graver at the news that Goldie conveyed. Several more Larkinson mech pilots died. Worst of all was that they died completely unnoticed. If not for Goldie's spiritual bonds, Ves would have remained in the dark about the urgency of this crisis!

As it was, the longer this situation persisted, the greater the chance that more of his mech pilots would die!

"Sir! A shuttle is approaching our ship without authorization!" A bridge officer spoke. "Its passenger requests to visit and talk to you in person."

"Who?" Ves frowned.

"It's... the Living Prophet. James Ylvaine."

"What?!"

Ves didn't recall bringing Ylvaine's clone along. Why did he travel with the task force? Why did he wish to meet him in person rather than call him comm?

A thought came to mind. Since the current crisis was spiritual in nature, ordinary solutions wouldn't cut it. All of the scientists and engineers in the clan weren't capable of wrapping their heads around this phenomenon.

Only someone who possessed at least some familiarity with the spiritual side of reality might be able to solve this crisis.

Even though Ves hated James and regarded him as a delusional cult leader, there were very few people in the clan who were capable of offering any hope.

"Let the shuttle through." Ves reluctantly waved his hand. "Escort him to an office close to the bridge. I'll hear him out as soon as he arrives."

Considering the sensitive topics that James might raise, Ves believed it was best to talk to the so-called Living Prophet behind closed doors.

Once James arrived at a small office compartment, Ves and Nitaa entered through the hatch.

The man who claimed to be Ylvaine reborn nodded respectfully at Nitaa before facing Ves with a serious expression.

"I am sure you are aware that the abyss is alive."

"Uh, no?"

"The dark sphere is a malignant existence." James continued as if he didn't notice Ves' confusion. "It is an abnormality that shouldn't exist."

"I don't see how your statement helps. Why are you telling me this?"

James began to smile. "It is very strenuous to maintain such a disturbance. The culprit responsible for maintaining this dark domain is likely relying on sacrifices to sustain it. Once the sacrifices stop flowing, this dark fog will naturally fade."

"I don't hear anything helpful! Start telling me something useful right away!" Ves erupted.

He really didn't like being led around circles! This was why talking to someone as smug as James always ruined his mood!

"Please calm down. Nothing of what I said is redundant. The truth that I am trying to convey to you is that it takes less effort to correct this abnormality. Different from the incident that our task force has encountered before, this dark fog is not comparable in strength."

A bit of hope welled inside Ves. "It's solvable?"

"Not alone." James answered. "The entire clan must work together to dispel this darkness before it has achieved its purpose. The caller of this disaster will not persist until he has run out of sacrifices or if every single hostile mech pilot is dead!"

"Then give me the solution already! The longer we delay, the more mech pilots we lose!"

"The solution is simple, though the execution is not. While I cannot give you any assurances that my suggestion will work, it is the likeliest to succeed according to my judgement."

"Is that what you have foreseen in the future?"

"No." James shook his head. "I have been blinded ever since I have entered the Nyxian Gap. This is a forsaken kingdom, one that is filled with monsters beyond your comprehension. I cannot provide you with any prophecies. I can only offer you my judgement."

"No more stalling then. Tell me how to break this dark sphere."

"We must attack it from within and without." James spoke. "Every single Larkinson that possesses the trace of transcendence can damage the dark sphere. Think of the expert candidates, for example. As we speak, they have likely found ways to attack the darkness that surround their mechs. It is not enough, though."

"What else must we do?"

"We must rescue the mechs trapped in darkness." James spoke. "The dark fog is currently attacking our mechs without abandon. As more of our mechs fall, the energy spent on taking them down is released. The darkness can take that energy and use it to intensify the attacks on the remaining mechs."

This basically meant that the dark sphere was spreading out its power across a lot of mechs, thereby diluting the strength it could bear against any single mech. However, the fog would only grow deadlier and deadlier as more Larkinson mechs succumbed. If the lethality of the fog surpassed a certain point, then not even the Penitent Sister mechs might last!

"How do we rescue our mechs?"

"We must venture into the darkness." James proposed. "I can guide our ship, but I cannot forge a path in the darkness. I require a lot of assistance. In addition to calling upon the help of my fellow believers, I need your help the most."

"Pardon?"

"You must illuminate our path! Of everyone in our clan, you are the only individual who is capable of dispelling some of the darkness that obscures our sight! You are the Bright Martyr. Only with you can we avoid suffering the same fate as those who are trapped in the fog!"

All of this sounded like nonsense to Ves, but the ongoing crisis left him with no choice but to take the Living Prophet's suggestion seriously!

"The sphere is big. I'm not sure whether we can rescue all of our Larkinson mechs in time."

"That's why we need additional assistance." The clone replied. "My earlier proposal will only delay our downfall. In order to truly survive this calamity, we must end it at the source!"

Ves widened his eyes. "You mean taking out the Grey Watcher?!"

"The ritual must be stopped."

This meant that the Larkinsons who had infiltrated Ulimo Citadel needed to confront the Grey Watcher!

However, how was he supposed to tell Ketis and the Mirror Raiders to attack the cultists? With the anomaly blocking every form of communication, there was no way for Ves to convey instructions to the Larkinsons trapped inside the pirate stronghold!

James waved at the Larkinson Mandate. "You are not without means, Bright Martyr. Take advantage of the bonds that you have formed."

"I can't!" Ves replied, not even bothering to remark how James knew about the Larkinson Network. "The anomaly is dampening every bond."

"You are an engineer, are you not?" James tilted his head. "As far as I know, signals can be amplified."

Ves palmed his face. "Of course!"

Chapter 2296: Spiritual Technology

For a long time, Ves gained awareness that human civilization actually encompassed two societies.

By far, the majority of humans living in this age ignorantly believed that their civilization was based on conventional technology.

That did not mean that humanity eschewed alien or unusual tech, but by and large people always desired to master and advance their own advancements.

This was human civilization in the bright. Most humans believed the most powerful expressions of their civilizations came in the form of starships, mechs, space stations, massive cities and other monuments of technological advancements.

Few people were aware that another society existed in the shadows. Hidden beneath the surface, a few humans possessed awareness that human potential did not solely lie in developing better machines.

Instead, they sought to exploit and strengthen the extraordinary potential within themselves.

Only a tiny proportion of humans acquired this remarkable potential, and even fewer ever gained the opportunity to develop it. Since humanity ascended to the stars, the general public never found out about this hidden facet of themselves.

That said, the existence of the Five Scrolls Compact, which ostensibly guided the rise of humanity in the dark, suggested that the power of spirituality already played a major role.

Somehow, everything changed at the end of the Age of Conquest. All Ves knew was that the Five Scrolls Compact lost many of its Sacred Scrolls and was driven even further in the shadows.

In their place, the MTA and CFA rose up and took charge of humanity. They did so in the open, thereby gaining an immense amount of wealth, power and legitimacy.

The Big Two obviously possessed a different governing philosophy from their suspected parent organization. Not only that, they also emphasized the development of conventional technology rather than weird and unnatural spiritual sorcery.

As far as Ves was concerned, the Common Fleet Alliance pursued the path of pure technology. The fleeters worshipped the power of destruction and expressed their devotion by building formidable warships that carried a formidable arsenal of massively scaled-up weapon systems.

The MTA followed a different trajectory. It focused on promoting the development of more modest-sized war machines that were much more constrained in their destructive potential.

In addition, the MTA had not entirely abandoned the development of spiritual power. The advent of mechs provided a clear route for spiritually-active individuals to develop into mech pilots and mech designers.

Ves was one of the people who had stepped onto one of the paths proscribed by the MTA. Within the clan, several expert candidates had also developed their spiritual potential by merging their willpower with their ability to pilot mechs.

Even though both mech designers and mech pilots had the potential to become spiritually formidable, their applications were almost exclusively tied towards mechs.

On the surface, mechs were purely mechanical expressions of technology. The public was hardly aware that the mechs developed by more formidable mech designers partially depended on the manifestation of spiritual phenomena to augment their performance.

Strangely enough, pretty much every human who didn't live under a rock openly worshipped the supernatural power of high-ranking expert pilots.

It was a strangely effective form of misdirection in the open. Even though there was clearly something abnormal about how certain mech pilots were capable of warping reality through their willpower alone, the public just regarded them in the same manner as superheroes!

Hardly anyone looked deeper into the source of their power. Spirituality or psionics never came up in any conversations.

Ves tipped his hat towards the MTA. They truly knew how to keep secrets while paradoxically keeping some of them in the open. It was a very contradictory but effective means of keeping most humans in the dark.

For some reason, everyone who interacted with spirituality in some way all abided by a covenant. Neither the MTA, CFA or the Compact publicised or spread the secret of spirituality to the common people.

Why?

Why must something so powerful and with limitless applications be withheld from the rest of humanity?

Was it because the few powers who exploited it wanted to keep it for themselves?

Another mystery that confounded Ves was why the Five Scrolls Compact bothered to play by the Big Two's rules. Since the cultists who ostensibly controlled humanity in the past had lost a huge power struggle, what was the use of protecting this secret?

Regardless, the Compact which he only knew from second-hand information still retained an enormous heritage of spiritual development.

Even though it resembled magic on the surface, so far Ves was more inclined to treat it as another branch of science. Though the members of the Compact tended to come across as crazy, Ves thought that they were truly some of the most passionate researchers in the galaxy!

As a more obscure expression of 'human technology', spirituality was not as illogical and arbitrary as he thought.

Though Ves discovered many fuzzy mechanics about spirituality that reminded him of magic, he discovered it operated according to its own rules. The existence of spiritual engineering proved that this extraordinary force could be manipulated like conventional forces such as gravity or electromagnetism.

In fact, he also discovered that it was possible to adapt a lot of existing engineering principles based on other forces to spirituality.

Power was power. Energy was energy. Matter was matter. Even though spirituality abided by some very funky rules, the basics still remained the same. Ves successfully applied many common rules of nature such as the inverse-square law, the second law of thermodynamics, Newton's third law of motion and so on in his spiritual creations.

Right now, as the dark sphere enveloped Ulimo Citadel and a wide perimeter around it, Ves had fallen victim to his old mentality.

He mistakenly viewed the artificial anomaly as an inexplicable manifestation of transcendent power. He let his unpleasant experiences with the Church of Haatumak color his judgement and reinforce his fears towards the unknown.

It was only now that he recognized that he was too weak and ignorant back then. He failed to see that the worshippers of Haatumak likely engaged in their own form of spiritual engineering that was taught to them by the Five Scrolls Compact.

The same should apply to the Hallowed Abyss Temple as well. Despite the immense reach of this dark sphere, the guidance provided by James woke him up to the fact that it wasn't comparable to a true anomaly.

The strange temporal incident that had swallowed the Nova Krakow came and went like an unstoppable force of nature. Back then, Ves felt that there was no chance at all to resist such might.

This time was different. Once Ves studied the anomalous hazard in a different light, he discovered that the power exuded by it was not as overwhelming as he thought.

"You're right." He said to James as he ignored all physical boundaries and observed the huge spiritual manifestation with his spiritual senses. "An immense amount of power is sustaining this anomaly. Because the area of effect covers such a huge volume, the concentration of energy is actually not that big. We might be able to pierce or overpower a portion of the sphere!"

It was difficult for a mosquito to fight a human in open combat. The power disparity between the two life forms was too immense!

However, if the mosquito wanted to achieve something more modest such as sucking the human's blood, it could sneakily employ its proboscis to drill through its unsuspecting victim skin.

There were many ways for the weak to surpass the strong. In fact, humanity's rise was almost entirely dependent on leveraging technology to overcome the limitations of its race.

What Ves needed to do now was to develop a couple of new applications of spirituality to accomplish two different objectives.

First, he needed to overcome the dampening effect of the dark sphere in order to communicate with Ketis and the Mirror Raiders trapped inside the pirate strong.

Second, he had to develop some sort of means to push away the dark fog and rescue some of his trapped mech troops.

James smiled as if he possessed absolute confidence that Ves was able to solve these problems.

"You are capable of accomplishing more than you think, Ves. Power can be expressed in many ways. The possibilities are endless, but too many people are constrained by

their limited imagination and the dogmas that their teachers have imparted to them. You are different from the rest. You possess the heart and mind of a creator."

Though Ves still felt that James was annoying as hell, he had to admit that he wouldn't have known what to do without the clone's advice.

His opinion of James had changed. Perhaps it wasn't so bad to keep this religious nut and his flock of fanatics in the Larkinson Clan. While Ves would have liked to employ more rational spiritual engineers, he wasn't sure whether these types of people existed in the first place.

It seemed that Ves had no choice but to settle upon the obnoxious git as his only available advisor in spiritual matters.

"Let's start with trying to communicate with Ketis." He said as he reminded himself of the urgency of the current situation. "From what I have observed, the dampening effect generated by artificial anomaly is probably analogous to the interference fields generated by signal jamming devices."

Ever since Calabast first introduced their existence to him, Ves frequently made use of signal jammers to hold private conversations or do something that he didn't want to expose to others.

He possessed a great familiarity with the principles and mechanisms surrounding ECM and jamming technology.

Unfortunately, he possessed little understanding of the spiritual mechanisms that sustained the dark sphere.

This meant that it wasn't possible for him to figure out and exploit the dark sphere's dampening effect in a short amount of time.

How could he possibly take the time to observe and study the phenomena that was destroying his mechs and killing his mech pilots with every passing second?

Ves needed to resort to more expedient solutions. Overcoming the spiritual jamming through brute force appeared to be only viable means for him to quickly reach out of Ketis.

As his spiritual senses looked at the immensity of the dark sphere, he felt a bit inadequate, but just for a moment.

He didn't need to overcome the entire dampening effect. He just needed to push through to a tiny portion of it. To achieve his goal while expending the least amount of energy, he needed to form some sort of direct connection to Ketis.

He turned to the Larkinson Mandate. "Goldie. Let's try something new. Can you strengthen the bond you share with Ketis?"

Nyaaaa. Nyaa?

"If you can't leverage enough power, what if I can help? I have plenty of spare energy to go around."

He opened his B-stone lockbox and pulled out a P-stone that stored a decent amount of excess spiritual energy.

"This rock contains my energy." He placed it on top of the Larkinson Mandate. "While it carries my imprint, I believe you can draw upon it. I used a part of this very energy to bring you to life. Try and see if you can draw upon as much energy as you need to strengthen your spiritual bond."

The Golden Cat tentatively tried to draw upon his spiritual energy. Just as Ves suspected, Goldie was tentatively able to make use of his spiritual energy, though she exhibited some difficulty in harnessing it. She ultimately failed to make adequate use of his energy to overcome the dampening effect.

Nyaaa.

"It's okay." He reassured the downcast ancestral spirit. "Maybe you need my help. It's my energy, after all. There are many efficient ways to propagate signals. Let me try something to boost the signal."

It was too much to hope that Goldie was able to adapt seamlessly to his spiritual energy. The spiritual entity was unlike his mother in this regard.

Perhaps his mother had to exert effort or employ some technique to absorb his spiritual energy.

In any case, this just meant that Ves had to employ some of his expertise to upgrade the Larkinson Network!

Chapter 2297: Struggle in the Dark

While Ves worked together with the Golden Cat to boost her signal propagation, the Larkinson mech pilots trapped inside the artificial anomaly were still fighting for their lives!

Strange echoes rang in their minds even though their ears heard nothing. Strange flickers winked in their views. Whenever the mech pilots tried to look at them, they failed to notice any additional presences aside from the grey, transparent mechs that formed out of the dark fog on a constant basis.

The grey mechs were growing stronger. In the beginning, their attacks only dented the armor of the weakest mechs. This gave every mech pilot who had become confused and distressed at the sudden turn of events some time to become accustomed to their new situation.

Yet as time went on, the pressure increased, much to the detriment of weaker and less resilient mechs and mech pilots.

Those who piloted the stronger mechs were usually clansmen who had earned the right to pilot them. Joshua and many other Avatars did not experience as much pressure as many of the other trapped comrades because their Bright Warriors were incredibly resilient to damage. Their combat instincts and piloting skill also allowed them to remain on top of the situation!

The Penitent Sisters fared even better. Not just the armor but also the offensive capabilities of their mechs were vastly superior to third-class mechs.

Since the ghost mechs were derived from the pirate mechs that had fallen in the battle, their power level was very low. Even so, the way these grey mechs constantly returned stronger than before already started to worry many Penitent Sister mech pilots.

Each of them began to employ measures to reduce the power consumption of their mechs. No longer did their second-class mechs inflict overpowering attacks that caused them to waste huge amounts of energy. Instead, they dialed down their power settings in order to stretch out their operating times.

Other Larkinsons lacked these advantages. Their premium commercial mechs accumulated more and more damage as every mistake caused the grey mechs to land increasingly painful blows.

The small number of Swordmaiden mechs fought just as cunningly and ferociously as Commander Dise!

Though the regular mech pilots of the Swordmaidens weren't expert candidates, their veterancy, elite training, mental resilience and mastery of swordsmanship caused each and everyone of them to show strength in this time of adversity!

"Cut!"

A swordsman mech swept its Breyer alloy greatsword through the torsos of three approaching ghost mechs. The mech subsequently boosted upwards in order to dodge a lancer mech charging from behind.

Just as the grey lancer mech missed its mark and flew onwards, the Swordmaiden mech quickly struck it from underneath!

The broken ghost mechs tumbled back into the darkness, providing the Swordmaiden mech pilot with a tiny retrieve before the next attackers arrived.

"No matter how many times you come back, I'll cut you down like the vermin you are!"

The Flagrant Vandals experienced greater difficulties. A significant proportion of their mechs fell into the light weight class, which meant that their mechs possessed very little margin for error. Their energy reserves were also limited which meant that their mech pilots were very constrained in what they could do. Several Vandal mech pilots had already fallen as their mechs suffered crippling damage too quickly!

"I have faced worse in the Sand War!"

The Battle Criers fared decently well in comparison. While they piloted generic medium mechs, the mech force led by Commander Cinnabar largely consisted of steady, experienced Kinners who had lived through various crises in their former mercenary careers.

"My life belongs to the clan patriarch!"

The mech force that fared worse was unquestionably the Living Sentinels.

Many of their mech pilots didn't possess a lot of battle experience. While the Sentinel mech pilots managed to make up for this shortcoming during the excursion into the Nyxian Gap, they still had a long way to go before they truly became steady mech pilots!

The Sentinel mech pilots who lacked confidence in themselves or piloted vulnerable mechs died on a regular basis. The grey mechs that continually assaulted them did not stop until they harvested human lives!

In one moment, a vulnerable rifleman mech tried and failed to fend off the ghostly light skirmishers attacking it from multiple directions.

The Larkinson mech dropped its rifle and pulled out a knife in desperation. With a hasty slash, the ranged mech managed to take out one of its assailants, only for another grey light skirmisher to stab its half-solid weapon deep into the rear armor of the vulnerable ranged mech!

Due to the lack of protection afforded to its rear, the Larkinson ranged mech sustained serious damage to its power management system. Its flight system already started to sputter!

"My mech! Ahhh!"

Without sufficient mobility, the mech could no longer distance itself from the next wave of fake mechs. Less than a minute later, three grey mechs fired their ethereal rifles at their heavily-damaged target, blasting the cockpit and the clansman inside into pieces!

Tragedy continued to unfold throughout the artificial anomaly. The isolation imposed by the boiling darkness forced each mech pilot to rely on themselves and their mechs to survive.

This resulted in a brutal cleansing where the weak and inept among the mech forces were cleaned up first!

What added to everyone's difficulties was that the darkness not only cut the mechs off from each other, but also diminished the glows of every mech designed by Ves!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan already learned the perils of developing a dependence on glows. Plenty of Larkinson mech pilots had received training in fighting their battles without the assistance of glows.

For the first time since he piloted the Quint, Joshua no longer experienced the familiar Larkinson warmth from his own mech. Its vitality had dimmed, causing him to feel considerably worried.

"Shine for me, Quint!" He uttered as his mech accelerated and impaled a duo of ghostly ranged mechs with its lance! "Hahaha! I knew it! There is still life left within you! You are more than your glow! Let us pierce this darkness and seek our way back to the source of your life!"

Joshua honed his willpower and began to immerse himself deeper into his masterwork mech. He wasn't satisfied with remaining trapped in this shadowy cage!

His Bright Warrior soared ahead and attempted to pierce through the fog. Its charge seemed to have collided with something a bit more tangible, causing a small hole to form in space.

Even though it closed immediately afterwards, Joshua's eyes lit up. He had stumbled upon the same phenomena as Commander Dise!

Throughout the dark sphere, the other expert candidates found out that they were able to attack the dark fog in their own ways.

Commander Orfan of the Flagrant Vandals scowled as she found that her strange mental connections to Commander Dise and some others were cut off! The absence disturbed her a bit, but not to the point of disturbing her combat rhythm!

Her spearman mech impaled an attacking swordsman mech and slammed into a light skirmisher that approached a second later.

"Vandals! Momma is coming to get you all! Hang on as long as possible!"

Just like Commander Dise, Rosa Orfan did not worry about her own safety. Instead, she wanted to break the isolation imposed onto her mech in order to relieve her fellow comrades.

Empowered by her desire to rescue the other Vandals, her spear stabbed with greater force and momentum! Slowly but surely, her attacks against the void began to tear greater and greater holes in the mist!

"It's working!"

The greater the holes, the more encouraged she became, thereby causing her to inflict even larger holes in the isolating darkness! Her battle intent rose and became more and more honed as she single-mindedly struck down every grey mech that approached her mech as it slowly overcame the intangible barrier that separated it from the nearest friendly mech!

Of all of the expert candidates engulfed in the artificial anomaly, Jannzi Larkinson was the only one who resisted the darkness in a different manner.

Her large and sluggish Shield of Samar steadily cut down each and every approaching grey mech with precise, strong blows.

The ghostly ranged mechs posed the greatest to her mech. If not for the fact that the enemy mechs floated in the same place, the super-medium space knight would have been flooded by a sea of attacks at this time!

Jannzi's mind wasn't on the grey mechs that continually pressured her mechs. Her urge to reach out to her fellow Larkinsons was stronger than every other mech!

As a space knight specialist, she trained to embody the role as a protector and guardian of her fellow mech pilots.

A space knight that was taken away from the mechs it was supposed to protect was a great indignity! There was no meaning to its existence if it solely fought in isolation!

None of the previous battles caused her to feel as distressed as now. Her face continually frowned as her willpower increasingly urged her to unravel her forced isolation.

Without the reassuring presence of Qilanxo, Jannzi was left on her own. Her Shield of Samar felt considerably dimmer than normal, yet the heart that beat inside of it grew stronger as her need to link up with her fellow Larkinsons pushed her to an unprecedentedly desperate state!

"BREAK FOR ME!" She roared.

Though no visible phenomena emanated from the Shield of Samar, a whole portion of darkness disappeared!

An Aurora Titan from her Shieldbearer squad bore increasingly more scars as its sluggish attacks failed to take out the grey mechs in a timely manner. Unlike the Shield of Samar, the regular Aurora Titan's armor wasn't made of Breyer alloy, thereby making it considerably more vulnerable against the ghostly attackers!

"Ma'am! You're here!"

As soon as the Shield of Samar arrived by the mech piloted by the Shieldbearer, the pressure imposed on the latter decreased!

Even though the ghost mechs that haunted Jannzi's mech had followed their original target, Jannzi and her squadmate were able to coordinate their defenses and fend off the flood of grey mech with greater efficiency!

"We can't stay here. We need to link up with more of our clansmen." She stated.

"Lead the way, ma'am! I will cover your back even if it costs my life!"

With some of the Larkinson mechs beginning to break free from the shadowy cages that kept them separated, Ves finally achieved a breakthrough of his own back on the Scarlet Rose.

He worked together with the Golden Cat to reconfigure the Larkinson Network. The spiritual network she supported through her own existence was not comparable to a normal network. Much of its workings were shrouded in mystery as Ves hadn't really thought of the details when he initially created the ancestral spirit.

Though it took a lot of fumbling, Ves managed to 'teach' Goldie how to accomplish more with the Larkinson Network. One of the capabilities she gained was the ability to allow him to gain a direct means of mental communication towards any other member of the Larkinson Network!

He tested it out immediately with James.

"Can you hear me?" He mentally communicated through the Larkinson Network.

The Ylvainan nodded. "You are heading into the right direction."

Such a novel accomplishment should have been a cause for celebration to Ves. He invented a completely new means of communication with his fellow Larkinsons that couldn't be blocked or intercepted with conventional technology!

Sadly, this was not the time to bask in his latest invention.

Ves knew that the range of this spiritual communication method wasn't unlimited. For example, he tried to pass on a message to Gloriana, but evidently his signal decayed before it could travel very far through the network.

However, Ketis and the Larkinsons trapped inside the Citadel were much closer!

"Let's see if we can boost our signal to overcome the anomaly's dampening effect. We can do it, Goldie!"

Nyaaa!

Chapter 2298: Meow

Inside the center of the anomaly, the pirates and residents of Ulimo Citadel were largely spared from the threats that appeared in space.

At least at first.

As time went by, Ketis and her squad of Mirror Raider infantry began to sense more and more unusual phenomena from the darkness that surrounded them in every direction.

Faint screams echoed in the distance, though the sound sensors of their combat armor failed to register any unusual voices.

The temperature around them began to fluctuate. At certain points, a chill swept through their bones, causing the disguised Larkinsons to become even more worried. Their pirate supervisors stopped issuing orders to them as the local communication network no longer worked.

One of the Mirror Raiders snapped his rifles in a specific direction. "Did you see that?!"

"What did you see?" Ketis asked as her heavily armored form faced the direction.

"I-I don't know! It looked like one of the Roid Rats, but grey!"

"Grey?"

"I swear it's someone I killed when we raided the Roid Rat base."

More grey flickers flickered in and out of the dark void. The Larkinsons gripped their weapons carefully as they looked out of the shop they had huddled in. As the darkness slowly pressed forward, the grey shapes became more and more visible.

One of them suddenly shot out from the darkness and charged at the shop while firing a badly-constructed laser pistol!

To everyone's surprise, the laser beam was grey instead of the typical red or other bright colors used to light it up. The grey beam impacted straight into the chest of one of the armored soldiers.

Before the grey Roid Rat could fire again, several Mirror Raiders already fired back. The attacker instantly broke up into a grey mist that rapidly swirled back to the darkness that spawned it. Confusion spread among the Larkinsons.

"Alert! There's more!"

A short time later, several more grey ghosts emerged from the darkness. They looked different from the Roid Rats and came armed and armored with better gear.

Now that the Mirror Raider squad was fully alert, these strange ghosts barely lasted a second before they broke up into mist!

Yet this was not the end. A few minutes passed as more ghosts appeared in the form of pirates. Despite their strange nature and weak attacks, their threat was very real!

"What the hell?! Are the pirates turning against us or something!"

"I don't think the Dry Snakes are responsible for this." Ketis spoke as her laser pistol fired a low-powered shot through the chest of one of the ghosts. "We aren't the only ones under attack! Look at the shop to our left!"

The Mirror Raiders weren't the only ones under attack. More pirate ghosts appeared. They attacked the door that blocked their way until it succumbed under the attacks. Soon enough, the ghosts stormed inside and began to kill the local Nyxians!

"Ahhh! Help! Guards, save me, please!"

The Mirror Raiders did not move to help. None of them cared about the lives of the local residents. They were also afraid that the ghosts were trying to lure them into a trap.

"Deploy a drone to scout the interior of the neighboring shop."

One of the Mirror Raiders that carried various gadgets deployed a small flying drone that quickly peeked into the shop. While many forms of wired and wireless communication methods no longer worked across the pirate base, the problem wasn't serious at very short ranges.

Ketis accessed its feed with her helmet view.

"Damn! Look at those bodies! They're all dried out!"

Every Mirror Raider who accessed the same view all saw the same macabre spectacle. The grey ghosts seemed to draw something out of the base residents they killed. With each passing second, the dead bodies lost both volume and volume. The ghosts were sapping some sort of energy essentially from the fresh corpses, causing all of them to transform into mummified remains!

The inexplicable sight frightened the Mirror Raiders and caused them to develop an even greater fear towards the darkness that limited their sight!

"What are the pirates doing?! Why are they killing their own people? Have they gone crazy!?"

No one had any answers. Not even Ketis. With no clarification and no orders, the squad of Mirror Raiders decided to remain in the shop.

Every few minutes, new ghosts began to emerge from the darkness. While their attacks posed a threat against the unarmed residents of Ulimo Base, the Mirror Raiders easily cleaned them up within seconds.

However, all of them worried whether this was the extent of the strange phenomena. As time continued to pass, Ketis began to feel a strange pressure in her mind.

"Ketis?" A familiar voice vaguely rang in her mind.

"Ves?! How are you talking to me? Our communications are blocked!"

"That's not important! I'm wasting a lot of energy to boost this 'signal' at the moment. I need you and as many people that you can bring to move to a shrine within Ulimo. Right now, the entire space around Ulimo Citadel is engulfed by a dangerous anomaly that is slowly killing our mech pilots as we speak."

"Huh?!"

"It's a long story! Anyway, do you have a map of the base or something? Look for a shrine that is placed in the center of the public section. It's occupied by a cult called the Hallowed Abyss Temple. While I'm not sure, I think you'll be able to find the source of this anomaly inside. Kill whoever is inside and destroy anything that looks important. Each of us is depending on you, Ketis!"

"Understood." She replied while her battle intent rose. "I'll try my best to smash this shrine. There are strange ghosts inside the base who are attacking and draining anyone they can defeat."

Ves reacted with shock on the other side of this strange communication channel. "What?! Those ghosts must be fueling the ritual through sacrificing the people who live inside the base. In fact, this might be the reason why the Dry Snakes welcomed many residents to live in a section of their pirate stronghold! They need lots of lives to sustain this powerful anomaly!"

"We'll make sure to end it, Ves. Wait for all of this weirdness to drop!"

"I'm counting on you. Lucky has snuck inside the base as well. I'll tell him to rendezvous with you. You can also find other help in the base. The shrine will definitely be heavily defended by the Dry Snakes, so don't attack it head-on! The lives of our mech pilots is important, but your life is important as well!"

"Don't worry, Ves. I'll interrupt this ritual or die trying! I'm a true Swordmaiden! I never shy away from what is necessary!"

The connection dropped as Ketis felt ready to move out!

She didn't question why Ves could speak to her through her mind. Her frustration at the strange darkness that spat out hostile grey ghosts had grown to the point where she wanted to get rid of them as fast as possible!

"We're moving out, boys!" She instructed her squad. "I just received an order telling us to go to a shrine of the Hallowed Abyss Temple and stop whatever ritual is taking place inside. As long as we ruin this ritual, our mech pilots inside won't be trapped by this anomaly anymore!"

It didn't take much convincing to get her men to follow along with her plan. Each Mirror Raider believed it was better to be proactive than staying in place. Once they obtained a clear goal, they were more than willing to venture out, especially when they learned that their mech pilots were counting on them to break this trap!

Ketis referenced the map she obtained from the pirates and quickly located the shrine. It was located close to the center, which meant that she and her men had to pass through some heavily-defended gates meant to keep out the riff raff.

With the gear they possessed, the Mirror Raiders weren't capable of sneaking past these obstacles. They had no choice but to attack these checkpoints head-on. The only consolation was that the communications blackout imposed by the anomaly likely prevented the local pirate garrisons to call for backup. Reinforcements likely wouldn't be coming unless the pirate made more elaborate arrangements.

"Let's head out!"

The squad of pirates exited the shop and strode towards the center of the public marketplace.

As they moved, roughly twenty meters of space around them remained clear. Occasionally, they encountered grey ghosts. If the apparitions weren't attacking other pirates or residents, they mindlessly attacked Ketis and her men.

"Stay down, you annoying ghosts!"

The ghosts weren't strong, but the darkness constantly bred more of them. In addition, Ketis and her men were being constantly plagued by different phenomena. Distant screams, sudden chills, a moment of light-headedness and more began to beset the Mirror Raiders.

If this went on, Ketis wasn't sure whether they would make it all the way through the shrine!

As they neared one of the gates, Ketis suddenly paused as the living mind sword in her mind grew active.

It pulsed and moved on its own. An unknown impulse prompted her to concentrate and channel her superpower onto her cutlass. She cut her weapon in a specific empty space, only to see a grey ghost that had somehow remained invisible to everyone being cut apart!

"Ahhh!"

"Damnit, check around us if there are more stealthed ghosts!"

Ketis looked a bit confused. "Sharpie?"

Her sword intent vibrated concern.

A warm sensation swept through Ketis. She smiled underneath her helmet.

"Thank you, Sharpie."

Feeling a bit more confident now that she could count on the perception of her sword intent, she continued to lead her men forward.

Eventually, they reached the first gate. Thick alloy gates and turrets barred their way. Tall walls that stretched straight to the ceiling ruled out any possible way to sneak through unnoticed.

"How are we getting through that?" One of the Mirror Raiders asked.

"I don't know yet." Ketis frowned.

As a mech designer, she understood the lethality of defenses much more than the rest of her men. Let alone a squad of infantry, not even a mech could overcome some of the heavy weapons defending this passage!

"Meow!"

"Lucky!"

Ketis and the other disguised Larkinsons welcomed the appearance of the clan patriarch's famous cat. Until recently, none of them knew that this mechanical cat was such a deadly commando.

Currently, Lucky looked straight out of a spy drama. The Misfortune Harness affixed to his body caused him to look like an ominous black cat that was ready to spread bad luck to anyone in his sights!

The cat floated over to Ketis' heavily armored form and brushed his flank against her helmet.

"Hehe. This will be so much easier now that you're here! Can you sabotage all of those heavy turrets and help us kill off all of those pirate guards?"

"Meow."

Though Ketis didn't possess the ability to understand Lucky's meows, the cat was still capable of conveying his thoughts through nodding or shaking his head.

"Is that a yes or no?"

"Meow." Lucky offered her a very hesitant nod.

"You.. you're not sure? Do we need to gather more men? That will be difficult. The Dry Snakes split all of our fellow Mirror Raiders up and spread them out. It will take too long to gather them all. Is there any other way you can get us through?"

"Meow." A nod.

How?

"Meow." Lucky pointed his paw at the gates several times.

"Uh, what?"

"Meow meow!"

"I don't speak cat! I don't know what you're trying to say!"

"Meeeeeeeeooooow!"

"Can't you just.. Write something with your paw?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"You're a mechanical cat, right?! There is no reason for you to talk in meows. Can't you speak in standard language like some of the other mechanical pets on sale?"

"MEOW!"

"What are you talking about, Lucky?!"

Chapter 2299: Effective Persuasion

The dark sphere surrounding Ulimo Citadel boiled ominously. Engulfing every Larkinson mech that advanced towards the pirate stronghold, the fate of these machines and their pilots became bleaker and bleaker over time.

The strength of the Larkinson Clan never revolved around its wealth. Though the continued rise of the LMC showered the clan with an abundant amount of money, the key to this success was the people who made it possible for the mech company to sell so many mechs.

Ves always valued people over assets. Ever since he abandoned the Mech Nursery at Cloudy Curtain along with many other assets on Bentheim, he experienced the pain of being forced to abandon some heavy investments.

Being driven from the Bright Republic and subsequently the Ylvaine Protectorate caused him to develop a reduced appreciation for assets that anchored him in place in a single location.

He instead developed a much greater appreciation for assets that were portable and more enduring. This was why he greatly valued the ships that he and his clan were about to acquire from the Hegemony at great cost.

As the future homes, workplaces, fortresses and method of transportation of the Larkinson Clan, ships were vital in keeping the clan free and unfettered.

Yet not even the factory ship that Ves ordered from the Hegemony was irreplaceable. If it ever came down to it, he would rather sacrifice his capital ships than to lose most of the members of his clan.

People were always more important than objects.

As long as the clan continued to be filled with capable talents that could help Ves in many matters, he could always make a comeback after suffering a setback.

Having the right people around could make or break an organization. The LMC was but an empty shell if not for the presence of Ves, Gloriana, their assistant mech designers and their capable workforce.

Even if the LMC ended on the spot right now, Ves and all of those people could simply start a new mech company and continue onwards on a clean slate.

As the leader of the Larkinson Clan, Ves mainly two groups of people.

The core business and competitive earning potential of the Larkinson Clan revolved around its mech designers. Though only Ves and Gloriana were the only ones who possessed the strength to fund the entire clan, in the future some of their assistants might join the ranks of Journeyman and expand the LMC's profit-generating ability.

Yet the more wealth the clan accumulated, the more they attracted hungry predators. Competition was intense, and all sorts of malcontents existed in space who would like nothing more than to plunder the Larkinson Clan or wipe it out entirely.

The galaxy was filled with war. In a huge region of space encompassing hundreds of billions of stars stretching across hundreds of thousands of light-years, it was hard for any single authority to maintain order.

Ves already learned the hard way that relying on governments and other external help never guaranteed his safety and the safety of his clan.

If they wanted to do something right, they needed to do it themselves. This was why Ves always invested so much in nurturing mech pilots.

Mech designers enabled the clan to grow. Mech pilots guaranteed their survival!

For this reason, Ves became very distressed when the artificial anomaly trapped most of his mech pilots!

Though the fleet and a couple of hundred of mechs in reserve remained safe, Ves knew that the foundation of the clan and his own success would collapse if he didn't make a move.

The Dry Snakes were more devious than Ves expected. After mentally communicating with Ketis, he discovered that the pirates probably never considered Ulimo Citadel's public marketplace to be a source of wealth.

The pirates had a more dastardly reason for opening up the base to traffic and allowing tens of thousands of mixed Nyxian residents to settle inside.

It turned out that the pirates welcomed all of those ignorant visitors in order to treat them as sacrificials to fuel an enormously powerful ritual!

Once Ves discovered the existence of the Hallowed Abyss Temple, he dug a little deeper into the background of this mysterious cult.

He became more and more convinced this influential cult possessed ties with the Five Scrolls Compact. Not only was it based deep in the center of the Nyxian Gap, pretty much every major pirate group or alliance hosted its Watchers!

For some reason, these cultists who worshipped the Nyxian Gap had extended its tentacles to every major pirate organization past a certain scale.

The diplomatic effort required to insert its Watchers into every pirate organization regardless of their hostility towards each other was massive.

There was definitely something suspicious about this cult! The ability to call down a dark calamity and use it to eliminate mechs with enough strength to raze a planet frightened Ves considerably!

Ves did not necessarily fear the likes of the Friday Coalition or any other conventional enemy. Each of them fought with familiar means such as mechs, guns and spycraft. The Larkinson Clan wasn't weak in any of these areas.

What they did have trouble with were enemies who were capable of wielding incomprehensible powers. Against opponents like the Grey Watcher who was likely responsible for summoning this disaster, none of the mechs, guns and spycraft of the Larkinson Clan could do a thing to stop it from running its course!

Fortunately, all hope was not lost. Perhaps this devastating trump card might have worked against the likes of more powerful mech troops. Ves even suspected that the pirates especially prepared this powerful measure to defeat an MTA or CFA warfleet!

The Larkinson Clan wasn't nearly as powerful as the Big Two. If this anomaly was powerful enough to devour the most powerful mechs and warships that humanity was able to field, then how could the Larkinsons ever measure up with its paltry third-class mechs?

"There is still a chance!" Ves boldly announced after he left the private office with James in tow. "This darkness will not devour us! Form up some mechs companies around the Scarlet Rose. Let us propel our ship forward and open up a path!"

"Sir, every probe that we have sent isn't heard from again. The anomalous region is incredibly dangerous!" A bridge officer called.

Ves responded with a stern look. "This is an ongoing battle. While I welcome your advice and appreciate your sincere concerns, trust in my judgement. Move our ship up to the edge of the dark sphere's border. Let us see whether we can enter this bubble."

The bridge officers of the Scarlet Rose looked shocked! The anomalies of the Nyxian Gap had already traumatized the clansman before. Nobody thought that flying anywhere closer to this ominous mass of darkness was a good idea.

Just looking at it caused any human to feel as if they were staring at something profoundly wrong! The mental oppression radiated by the anomaly caused every Larkinson to rightfully fear it. Ves did not blame the bridge officer from voicing some doubts.

The problem was that nobody moved to execute his orders!

The helmsman froze, and so did the other crew. Ves' face grew ugly.

"What are you waiting for? Move!"

Despite his supreme status in the clan, none of his subordinates responded to his orders. The fear that his clansmen held towards the anomaly exceeded their willingness to obey his instructions.

It was as if the anomaly exuded a similar kind of oppression as the Doom Guard's glow.

Ves knew he shouldn't really blame his underlings for failing to move. The Larkinson Clan possessed a rather flat hierarchical structure. This was something that Ves and the trueblood Larkinsons originally valued and wished to retain in their growing clan.

Nobody ought to be powerful enough in the clan to dictate everything. Not even Ves. Everyone who held rank was not above the regular clansmen. No one was more noble or entitled than others. Every Larkinson, when it came down to it, was kin to other Larkinsons.

As a consequence, the power distance between Ves and other clansmen wasn't actually big. The Larkinsons also emphasized the independence and self-thinking ability of the lower ranks.

In combat, this gave smaller mech units the room to exercise their own judgement according to the situation. While this required a lot of trust, this was something that the clan as a whole was willing to extend to everyone.

Now, the downsides of letting the lower ranks think for themselves became evident. None of the bridge officers thought it was a good idea to venture forth into the abyss!

The issue was even more egregious when Ves recalled that most of the crew of the Scarlet Rose consisted of Kinnners. These former mercenaries for sale were famed for their reliability and loyalty.

Yet even if the Kinner-born clansmen were willing to execute a wide range of orders, that didn't mean they were willing to drive their ship straight into a star or other destination that guaranteed certain death!

At this time, James stepped forward. "Larkinsons, listen to our Bright Martyr. I know you have doubts, but know that he is far more capable than you think. He is the star of the Larkinson Clan. The glows he makes are rooted in the divine. The brilliance of his mind shines brightest in the darkest of times. Trust in him and obey his will. His light shall illuminate our path and drive back the shadows!"

Though Ves felt like vomiting, the bridge officers reluctantly changed their minds!

The Scarlet Rose started to advance towards the anomaly. After transmitting some orders, a couple of mech companies of Avatars and Sentinels began to surround the mobile supply frigate.

Ves became speechless.

Why did a direct order from him fail to find purchase, but some religious-themed nonsense spoken by a crackpot succeed in persuading his men?

There was something very wrong with this situation!

The ongoing crisis did not leave him with any time to dig into this problem. Right now, Ves urgently needed to see if he could dispel some of the shadows like James suggested.

Through his spiritual senses, he could sense the awesome might of the artificial anomaly better than others.

Defeating it outright wasn't possible. Ves had to take many steps back and settle for trying to erect a safe zone around the Scarlet Rose's perimeter.

As long as his ship could venture inside the dark sphere safely, he had hopes of rescuing some of his distressed mech pilots!

Even if he would only be buying time according to James, Ves was willing to take this risk to rescue his stranded mech troops.

A big reason why he felt confident was because he believed he possessed the means to repel the darkness.

Once the Scarlet Rose's bow halted just a hundred meters away from the edge of the dark sphere, Ves began to perform an experiment.

He looked down at the book in his hand and brushed his fingers against the Restraint Hoop enveloping the medallion on the front cover.

"Lufa, demonstrate your might." He spiritually communicated to his latest spiritual product. "Enter my mind and let me channel your powers!"

Though the newborn design spirit wasn't all that intelligent, it trusted Ves unquestionably and did as instructed.

With Ves actively opening up his mind, a portion of Lufa moved inside.

Ves then began to meld with Lufa. Despite their incompatible spiritual attributes, they possessed an intimate relationship with each other. Ves was literally Lufa's creator, so he encountered no hindrances when he donned the design spirit over his mind like a mask!

Ves abruptly began to radiate a glow of his own. An unprecedented feeling of calm and peace radiated from his body. James, Nitaa and every other clansmen in the bridge felt some of their fear towards the dark sphere washing away.

"Bright Prophet.." A bridge officer whispered in admiration.

"The Ylvainan is right. Ves is the light that can drive back the darkness!"

Exaggerated claims aside, Ves wasn't entirely satisfied with the effect. Being able exude the Angel of Tranquility's glow was progress, but its range left much to be desired!

He needed to amplify Lufa's glow so that it encompassed a wide area around the Scarlet Rose.

He looked towards Nitaa, who held the B-stone lockbox that contained a partially-charged P-stone.

"Will this work?" He wondered.

Chapter 2300: Hopebringers

The dark sphere that enveloped the space around Ulimo Citadel tried its best to snuff out all of the light inside its turbulent depths.

Though the energy needed to sustain it was incredible, half an hour had passed without any signs the anomaly was receding!

Through harvesting the lives of tens of thousands of Nyxian residents and pirates, the dark ritual that sustained this deadly phenomenon would continue to kill off the trapped Larkinsons until there was no one left!

With the Golden Cat constantly sensing the fall of another Larkinson mech pilot, her brightness dimmed. The Larkinson Clan continually weakened with the ongoing loss of its valiant and courageous warriors.

How could Ves ever let Goldie feel sad?

It was easier than he thought to channel Lufa's glow. Though he found it rather absurd that the Sanctuary Project hadn't even reached completion, that did not stop him from taking advantage of his latest spiritual product.

Though their compatibility was high, the glow of exuding from his body only stretched so far. Instructing Lufa to pump more power in its outward expression only modestly extended the range.

How could he magnify the range?

What could he do to make Lufa's glow expansive enough to generate an actual safe zone around the Scarlet Rose?

"Perhaps supplying more energy will work."

Normally, feeding an excess amount of his spiritual energy to his design spirits was problematic. The incompatibility between their respective spiritual attributes produced varying amounts of rejection.

Earlier, Ves already experienced some difficulties in his attempt to amplify Goldie's spiritual transmissions.

The circumstances were different this time. Ves brought Lufa into his mind. By donning the design spirit as a mask, if only a little bit, the two had partially melded together.

This modest integration caused Ves to develop a bold theory.

Would it be possible to feed his spiritual energy to Lufa in this state?

He decided to try it out. He placed his hand on the P-stone held by Nitaa and began to draw upon the energy reserves stored inside.

Ves channeled the energy through his mind and into the spirit that had temporarily become a part of him. Though a bit of loss and inefficiency still remained, the problem was much less impactful than before!

"It's working!" His eyes lit up!

The potential of this technique extended far beyond this crisis! Though Ves already channeled his design spirits in previous occasions, most notably with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment and the Golden Cat, this was the first time he employed it for a greater purpose than hoodwinking his audience.

Perhaps it might be possible for Ves to perform every ability of his design spirits!

If not for the fact that Qilanxo wasn't one of his creations, he might have tried to see if he could channel her powerful space barrier.

Just the thought of accomplishing this feat significantly increased his sense of security! It would be as if he carried a shield generator that could never be removed from his person!

He shook his head. "This is not the time to get caught up in wild ideas."

With his conscious effort and Lufa's invaluable assistance, the glow surrounding not only grew stronger, but extended far beyond the ship!

Amazingly enough, the glow even managed to form a concave cavity from the edge of the dark sphere!

Though Ves mentally winced at the rate of energy he was extending, this wasn't the time to hoard his reserves.

"Proceed forward! My glow will protect us! I can't keep this up forever, so don't take it slow!"

While a number of clansmen were reluctant to obey, they nevertheless executed his command.

Soon enough, the ship flew forward together with its escort. The vessel continually accelerated, cautiously at first, but more confidently once everyone discovered that the darkness failed to approach further than a couple of hundreds of meters away!

Strange grey flickers collided against the edge of the void, only to disappear right away.

"Where to, patriarch?"

"Fly to the last-known coordinates of the Living Sentinels. Their distress is probably the most acute." Ves answered with a strained expression.

Goldie already conveyed to him that the bulk of the deaths came from the Sentinels. Though some Avatars and other elite mech pilots began to fall as well, their casualty

rates remained relatively low, which signified that they were able to hang on for the moment.

Time passed until they stumbled upon the first sign of wreckage.

Ves recognized the remains of a commercial cannoneer mech. Only parts of it remained as weak but numerous weapon impacts shattered the mech to pieces.

The cockpit had been breached as well.

"Dead. Let us move on. We will bring the remains home after this crisis has passed."

The rescuers encountered several other clouds of wreckage before they finally encountered their first intact mech!

"Patriarch! You're here!" A relieved mech pilot called as his banged-up light skirmisher was just reaching the limits of its energy reserve. "What is this glow? Those grey ghosts aren't haunting me anymore! It's a miracle!"

Ves ignored the mech pilot's gratitude. "Take the mech pilot from his mech and bring him back to the ship. His machine isn't important right now, so just leave it. We'll retrieve it later."

It was too much of a burden to bring back the mechs trapped in the anomaly. As long as Ves rescued the mech pilots themselves, he could always provide them with other mechs.

The Scarlet Rose flew on, encountering much more wreckage than Ves expected. It became clear that the Living Sentinels suffered heavily as they encountered more broken than functional mechs!

While Ves and his ship steadily drove back some of the darkness and offered sanctuary to those who needed it most, other parts of the dark sphere began to make room for hope as well!

Each of the expert candidates found their own way to overcome the darkness around them. Filled with the need to overcome their isolation and come to the aid of their comrades, their willpower shone brighter than ever!

The most dramatic result came from Jannzi Larkinson! With her Shield of Samar as the center, she infused her willpower in the mech that she had developed a partnership with. Though it took some time, her mech ultimately worked together with her to manifest some of her will in a radius around her mech!

Certain limits within her mind had loosened as she tried her best to maintain this invisible, intangible protective field by herself. She clenched her teeth and propelled her slow mech forward.

The isolating darkness that prevented her mech from approaching other mechs parted silently at the passing of her mech. Before she knew it, she succeeded in crossing over to the shadowy cell of one of her subordinate Shieldbearers!

"Thank you!"

"This isn't the time to talk. Fly close to me and help me drive back the ghost mechs!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Though the grey mechs weren't able to fly past the barrier that Jannzi erected, they were still able to damage it with their attacks!

Fortunately, as Jannzi began to pick up more Shieldbearers and Avatars, the mechs she offered protection paid back her efforts by killing the grey mechs on her behalf!

As her 'army' of rescued mechs grew, she failed to notice that she had entered an elevated state of mind.

Her attention wasn't entirely focused on the present anymore. She piloted her mech forward on instinct and on autopilot as she began to contemplate the growing responsibility she held towards the mechs and mech pilots that sheltered in her field.

She didn't notice how much energy she expended to keep up her barrier. Her willpower could only sustain such a large protective field for so long. It was impossible for her to last this long on her own merits!

Not just the duration of her protective umbrella appeared suspect, but the scope of her field was also astounding.

Her protective field slowly covered more space. As the mechs she rescued rose in number, her field never ran out of space.

Before she knew it, over a hundred functional mechs crammed in her field!

The rescued mech pilots all regarded Jannzi and her Shield of Samar with amazement. Their best efforts only allowed them to fend off the grey mechs. None of them were able to project a field that could forcefully push back the darkness that threatened to lock them up until the grey mechs tired out their machines!

The other expert candidates weren't able to match Jannzi's efficiency. However, they found their own ways to offer relief to their fellow comrades.

"CUT!"

Commander Dise's swordsman mech chopped its weapon against the darkness, opening up a wide scar that failed to heal right away!

"Go through!" She commanded.

Her mech alongside twenty other Swordmaiden mechs quickly drilled through the hole. Once the last mech passed through, whatever force prevented the cut from healing dropped, causing the darkness to repair its wound.

"CUT!"

It didn't matter as Dise cut another hole that led to another trapped mech! Through cutting any barrier in her way, she soon managed to rescue every Swordmaiden mech in the field, though it wasn't as if they needed it in the first place.

The grey ghosts failed to break one of their ranks!

Commander Dise observed her reformed Swordmaidens mechs with pride. However, she knew that her job wasn't done. She wasn't solely a Swordmaiden anymore. She was also a Larkinson!

"Let's cut through this void and rescue the other Larkinsons!"

"Yes, commander!"

In another part of the sphere, Commander Orfan pierced through the darkness in a similar manner. Though the holes she generated closed much faster than usual, she simply attacked repeatedly, sustaining the vulnerability long enough to let every rescued Vandal mech through!

"Come on, hurry up! Our light mechs are expending too much energy now!"

Elsewhere, Joshua's Quint charged forward with great momentum. With his lance pointed forward, the masterwork mech punched through shadow after shadow, blasting open wide holes that reformed slowly enough for the trapped Bright Companion and Avatar mechs to fly towards their nearest comrades.

Though Joshua wasn't able to gather a huge army with his rapid passing, the sheer amount of breaches he made provided many isolated mechs the opportunity to reach out to their closest neighbors.

The space knights who were incapable of wiping out every ranged ghost mech and the rifleman mechs who incurred too much damage from melee ghost mechs eagerly

gathered together. By combining their strengths and covering their weaknesses, the groupings achieved enough synergy to defeat a lot more grey mechs!

Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson achieved even better results. His light skirmisher wasn't suited to fight in these conditions and his mech still possessed limited energy reserves.

The light mech specialist found his own way of breaching through the barriers that kept the Larkinson mechs apart.

His light skirmisher boldly flew ahead with even greater speed than the Quint's momentous charge!

The expert candidate concentrated his will to achieve the greatest speed possible. Nothing was allowed to stand in his way! No barrier or limit was allowed to hold his mech back as he accelerated his mech to greater velocities!

"My freedom is sacred! No cage shall ever lock me in place!"

Many trapped mechs only noticed a rapid mech passing through their cage before breaking through the shadows with its own frame!

Dozens of holes opened in an instance, and Tusa's mech was already in the process of opening up additional cavities!

No matter how these expert candidates worked to save their comrades, each of them succeeded in surpassing their previous limits.

Though none managed to achieve apotheosis at this desperate hour, their wills became more honed than ever. Their lights expanded throughout the dark sphere, thereby illuminating some of the trapped mechs and slowing down their fall.

Yet hindering the anomaly was not enough to stem this crisis! As time went on, the dark sphere grew stronger. Each expert candidate encountered increasingly stiffer resistance.

"This can't go on!"