

Mech 2301

Chapter 2301: Bringer of Bad Luck

While the Larkinsons outside the pirate stronghold began to resist some of the darkness, the interior of Ulimo Citadel began to grow bleaker and bleaker!

The darkness slowly bred some strange grey apparitions. Driven by cruel instructions, these ghosts that took on the form of deceased pirates hunted down every human inside the public marketplace.

The grey ghosts easily managed to fell the many shopkeepers, technicians, administrators and other ordinary workers that called Ulimo Citadel home. While a portion of these native Nyxian residents were armed, their lack of combat training and poor equipment failed to keep them alive for long.

Only the Nyxian residents who banded together or sought shelter from a friendly gang managed to remain alive for some time longer.

However, each person that grouped together also brought their enemies along. The pirates who sheltered the lightly-armored residents out of friendship discovered that their group needed to fend off a lot more grey ghosts than before!

Though there were some odd pirates at Ulimo who possessed uncorrupted hearts, many other pirates straightforwardly ditched their useless baggage.

Anyone who wasn't strong enough to repel the grey ghosts wasn't worth bringing along!

The streets and structures of the public marketplace became filled with dried and lifeless husks. The deaths of thousands of Nyxian residents and pirates underscored the great price that needed to be paid to sustain this dreadful anomaly.

In fact, even the Dry Snakes and other pirates faced attacks as well! The grey ghosts did not possess the ability to discern their opponents. They attacked innocent bystanders, hidden enemies and friendly pirates alike!

Fortunately for the latter, Grand Protector Roshaw always insisted that all of his subordinates be equipped for battle as frequently as possible.

The half-prepared pirates easily fended off the sporadic ghost assaults, though the same could not be said for the subordinate forces of the Dry Snakes.

Much of the Xona Stalkers, Farmund's Own, Rapid Qlinters and the outfits that comprised the Ulimo Militia had been completely caught off-guard!

Though many of these pirates wore armor and carried weapons regardless, much of their support personnel did not, causing them to die unjustly!

In order to keep this powerful move as hidden as possible, Grand Protector Roshaw told no one about the deal he made with the Watchers of the Hallowed Abyss Temple.

Though many allies of the Dry Snakes and the Grand Protector grew furious, the constant attacks by the grey ghosts and the communications blackout prevented them from conveying their discontent.

At the heavily-defended security checkpoint that barred most people on Ulimo from accessing the restricted center area, an intangible cat quietly phased through a wall.

Lucky, clad in his Misfortune Harness, carefully stalked forward. He kept most of his body phased through a solid object, taking care only to peek out his head in order to observe his surroundings.

A lot of large machinery filled the interior of walls. Large power generators, capacitors, regulators and other equipment all made sure that the large turrets placed outside remained in working condition.

What discomfited Lucky somewhat was the large amount of pirates on guard. Armed and armored pirate infantry vigilantly patrolled the interior while technicians and experts constantly kept their eyes on the integrity of the various weapon systems.

Sabotaging these systems without triggering some sort of alarm was impossible. All of the previous targeted sabotage were planned ahead of time. The Black Cats prepared custom hacks and specific suggestions on which components to break or tamper with in order to deactivate a system without exposing to the pirates that anything was amiss.

Since the Black Cats never intended to sabotage these checkpoint defenses, Lucky had to resort to blunter ways to deactivate the deadly turrets.

There was one condition that made it a bit easier for Lucky to do his work without interruption.

The ghosts that assaulted everyone inside the pirate base also plagued the pirates here as well!

The Dry Snake guards were well prepared though. Each technician wore combat armor or at least a protective hazard suit and the abundant number of guards prevented the few ghosts who spawned inside to do any serious harm.

"Careful with where you are shooting!" A foreman warned a couple of guards who just shot a ghost. "I told you time and time again to watch the direction where you are shooting your guns. You almost shot one of our power connectors!"

"Sorry, boss."

Between the occasional noises of weapon discharges, Lucky silently phased through the floor until he reached underneath an important power generator.

Having sabotaged many similar models of power generators, the stealthy cat did not need to know the actual design of this device to destroy it from within. His claws briefly phased back into the material realm, allowing them to destroy several important processors!

Alarms immediately began to ring. The power generator kept working as normal as its backup processors and other systems provided some crucial redundancy.

"Meow!"

If destroying one part was not enough, then Lucky would just have to take out the backups as well! He briefly searched around until he finally eliminated the other three critical processors!

Without the processors keeping every system under control, the power generator automatically initiated its emergency shutdown procedure. Unless the pirate technicians replaced one of the broken processors, the device would stay shut!

Though it wouldn't take that much time to get the power generator back to work, Lucky hastily moved on the next important machine. He needed to sabotage as many defenses as possible in a very short amount of time! It didn't matter if the pirates were able to repair some of the damage within an hour, because Ketis and the Mirror Raiders didn't intend to stall so long!

As the last major defensive system went down, some of the pirate guards who shot down yet another annoying grey ghost still remained on high alert!

The ghosts only cared about killing people. They never targeted any machines!

"Wait, what's that?"

"MEOW!"

"Ack!"

An armored pirate officer clenched his neck as a swift energy claw had cut straight through the gorget of his combat armor that shielded his neck! Blood poured from the horizontal cut as the man quickly collapsed.

"We're under attack!"

"What just killed him?! I didn't see anything?"

"My suit sensors detected some sort of black cat!"

The pirate guards quickly became disarrayed as they tried their best shoot and guard against the black cat that relentlessly launched guerilla attacks against them. Sometimes, laser beams or ballistic rounds passed through his phased body, which made it increasingly harder for him to maintain his current form.

Eventually, Lucky momentary couldn't hold it any longer as he endured too many laser attacks than he could bear. Once his body fully phased back into the material realm, half-a-dozen attacks struck the surface of his armor!

Due to the thin Breyer alloy plating of his Misfortune Harness, the cat suffered no meaningful damage. Even so, the repeated physical rounds impacting his frame kept interrupting his course and constantly pushed him back!

"Meow! Meow!"

As dozens of pirates all focused their firepower on bullying the black cat, most of the defenders failed to discover the approach of a squad of pirate soldiers.

The squad approached vigilantly, but kept their weapons expressly pointed away from the defenders. The alloy armbands and other markings on their armor signified that the newcomers were members of the Ulimo Militia.

The pirates on guard against the grey ghosts pointed their weapons at the approaching group.

"Halt! This checkpoint is off-limits to anyone except authorized personnel! Unless you have orders or the right permits to pass through, get out of here!"

"Wait, don't shoot!" Ketis's armored form stepped forward. She even slid her helmet open in order to expose her face. "Ever since these dark clouds appeared around us, the streets have become dangerous! All of us had to fight past hundreds of ghosts in order to reach here. Can't you let us in? We're part of your militia! We can still fight!"

The patrol leader expressly pointed his rifle into Ketis' face. "Stop right there! Don't get any closer! You militiamen don't belong here! There are hostiles in our midst and we don't need trash like you getting in our way!"

"Can't you make an exception for us? We're the Mirror Raiders! Our mechs helped fend off the Larkinson Clan earlier!"

As Ketis kept stepping forward despite the urgings of the pirate leader, a couple of ghost pirates emerged out of the dark fog. Armed with cheap rifles, the ghosts shot at both the Mirror Raiders and the pirate guards on patrol.

Without receiving any orders, the pirate guards all shifted their aim towards the attacking ghosts and took them out within seconds.

Even though some of the ghosts that appeared attacked the Mirror Raider soldiers in the rear, none of the disguised Larkinsons turned around to wipe out the apparitions.

Instead, the Mirror Raiders immediately took advantage of the distraction afforded by the ghosts! They pointed their rifles at the pirate guards they had already marked and fired their rifles without hesitation!

"Ahh! Traitors!"

"Have you gone crazy?!"

Though the pirate leader reacted the fastest and brought his rifle back to bear on Ketis, his target had already closed her helmet!

Instead of shooting her opponent with her laser pistol, Ketis instead charged forward! Her upgraded Red Rising Dragon fearlessly withstood every attack as it rapidly allowed its wearer to reach within knife-fighting distance to the pirate leader!

A sharp cutlass swung and cut off one of the pirate leader's arms!

"Ahhh!"

The combat armor worn by the victim hardly offered any resistance against Ketis' attack. With just a single swing, she managed to disarm and cripple the pirate who refused to allow the Mirror Raiders to step forward!

Her momentum didn't halt. An instant after cutting off the arm, her armored bulk collided against the pirate leader's lighter suit of combat armor. The unfortunate collision victim immediately bounced backwards and slammed against a wall!

"Die!"

Ketis fearlessly chopped the closest pirates around her. With each swing of her cutlass, she always managed to cut through the armor of her opposition. While the Dry Snakes equipped their foot soldiers with better gear than usual when it came to pirates, none of them offered any meaningful resistance against a woman with vastly superior gear and combat training!

Blood splattered in every direction as Ketis single-handedly spread panic throughout the ranks of the pirates. Her fellow Mirror Raiders managed to shoot down their targets with greater ease as a consequence!

In just thirty minutes, the Larkinsons wiped out the entire pirate patrol!

"Don't slow down, men!" Ketis called as she swung her cutlass at the side. "Lucky is still keeping them busy. Let's go and wipe out the rest!"

She didn't wait for her fellow Mirror Raiders to move forward. Instead, she utilized the full capabilities of her upgraded combat armor and charged forward with indomitable might!

Though no pirates were near, she snapped up her other arm and fired the compact laser pistol that Ves had gifted her beforehand.

A bright red laser beam blasted out of the muzzle of her modestly-sized pistol and burned straight through the armored forms of three pirates in the way!

"Wow! No wonder Ves wanted to give me this gun!"

Ketis fired a couple of more shots but stopped when she neared another group of pirates. She preferred to cut her opponents down.

The more she killed, the closer she came to understanding the essence of swordsmanship.

The closer she understood her own relationship with swords, the more ideas she formed about possible designs!

To her, killing was the best way to gain inspiration! Each blood splattered seemed to contain a different design idea and each corpse that fell in front of her way seemed to light her path forward!

With all of the heavy turrets that could have posed a threat to her being taken out of commission, Ketis exhibited no fear against the remaining pirates!

Chapter 2302: Worthy Opponent

Two heavy laser repeaters mounted inside a bunker spat out a continuous rain of powerful laser beams at an approaching red armored form!

Continuous cracks sounded out in the air as both pirate guards and fixed defenses fired at the approaching enemies.

In the meantime, unheard screams echoed through the battlefield as the ghosts of dead pirates emerged out of the darkness and besieged every human no matter their allegiance!

"Lucky!" Ketis shouted as her armored form braved the storm of lasers despite the extreme threat they posed to infantry personnel. Large portions of her armor no longer appeared red due to its coating. Repeated battles had already worn it away.

Instead, her armor glowed due to the increasing amount of heat it absorbed!

If not for the isolating layers protecting the wearer, Ketis would have been cooked alive by now! Even then, the active cooling systems of her equipment had to work overtime in order to siphon away the heat. Powerful flows of air entered and exited through the back of her combat armor. Anyone following from behind would instantly get burned!

Ketis didn't care. She whipped out her laser pistol, only for the little weapon to beep an alarm. All of the shots she fired caused it to overheat!

It didn't matter. She still had her cutlass and plenty of power left to swing it around!

"Watch out, ma'am! They're launching grenades!"

A heavily-armored Dry Snake guard stepped out from a building and raised its huge grenade launcher. The weapon quickly fired five grenades that were bound to hit a small area before her current path.

Not only that, but two ballistic cannons mounted on the back and shoulders of the formidable pirate began to fire a slow staccato of explosive shells at the charging Mirror Raider.

"Damn!"

She quickly holstered her pistol in a protective slot in her armor before her position and the entire area around her exploded!

More weapons continued to fire in the raging area. With the help of powerful sensors and scanners, the smoke and heat could not hide Ketis' huge and distinctive energy signature!

Even so, Ketis still stormed forward despite the increasing amount of scars and heat accrued by her armor.

Just earlier, Lucky followed the same plan and sneaked into the interior of the defense complex. He encountered a strange sight once he peeked at his surroundings.

Instead of posting more guards, the pirate commander at this checkpoint drew them back. Only half as many guards and specialists were on patrol or manning the workstations. This caused Lucky to destroy the huge power generators and sensitive weapon components with greater ease at the beginning.

However, shortly after alarms started ringing, something drastic happened.

The entire interior exploded!

Over fifty pirates and a lot of costly defensive systems blew apart as hidden explosives planted throughout the entire defense complex automatically triggered!

What Lucky didn't know was that the pirate commander tasked a programmer to develop an automated routine that looked out for any intrusion.

The local pirate commander in charge of defending this gate was unlike his peers.

Usually, the pirate leaders attempted to counter any attempts at sabotage by assigning more pirates and system operators. Each of them were tasked with paying close attention to the vital machinery that kept the heavy turrets and other defensive systems in working condition.

Their presence exposed Lucky faster, but did little to stop him from completing his purpose! By keeping his phased body through the walls, ceiling or floor of any given site, the pirates failed to detect him, let alone prevent his destructive spree!

The first two pirate checkpoints fell easily due to this reason. Without the help of their powerful turrets and other defensive systems, Ketis and Lucky alone were enough to clean up the remaining pirate infantry.

From the moment the commando cat's initial sabotage became known, various sensors and AIs evaluated whether the malfunction originated from an ordinary mechanical failure or deliberately induced.

Once the AIs judged that deliberate sabotage had taken place, they mercilessly followed their programming and commanded the planted explosives to detonate!

If these explosives were ordinary, then that was still somewhat manageable to Lucky.

The problem was that some of those bombs contained small, enriched nuclear payloads!

Radiation sensors momentarily went wild as the protective armor of the surviving guards and attackers resisted the deadly particles and energy rays that spread as a result of these detonations!

"Meow!"

Despite the violent explosions, Lucky managed to cling to life, but not without a cost! His Misfortune Harness bore far too many holes as entire chunks had been blasted away. The thin layer of Breyer alloy and B-stone hadn't been able to hold together after withstanding so many simultaneous blasts!

Even his hardy tiger-striped body began to show cracks and tears. Bright blue light shone from his wounds. Though the bone-metal-like plating already began to show signs of regenerating, the rate was far too slow to restore the gem cat back to peak condition.

What was worse was that the damage he suffered prevented him from activating his phasing abilities or flying away. In desperation, Lucky could only press the button on his collar, which somehow managed to survive earlier blasts. His form turned invisible, causing the pirates who arrived from elsewhere to lose sight of their primary target.

However, these pirate soldiers were different from the decoys who died unjustly by the explosives planted by their own sides.

The Dry Snakes cultivated their own groups of elites. The multi-headed lizard pattern painted over their chests signified that these pirates belonged to the Hydra Battalion!

The Hydra Battalion was one of the best commando units. Answering directly to Grand Protector Roshaw, the Hydras received orders to defend this critical gate which barred the way to the innermost area where the crucial shrine resided.

As an elite pirate unit, the Hydra Battalion was meant to raid large pirate ships or assassinate powerful pirate lords. For this reason, the Dry Snakes invested heavily in their selection, training and outfitting.

With each individual Hydra soldier armed and armored with gear that cost as much as a mid-range mech, the Grand Protector often treated these heavily-armored troops as his sharpest knife.

Now, these elite pirates had received orders to kill the saboteur that was responsible for the downfall of many pirate groups!

Since the Hydras received orders to defeat an elusive opponent who likely possessed powerful stealth capabilities, how could they be stumped when their target disappeared from view?

"Deploy our first countermeasure!"

A handful of Hydras carrying fluid projectors strode forward and began to spray large volumes of semi-transparent slime around Lucky's last known position. The special,

viscous slime quickly piled up and soon managed to catch an invisible cat that attempted to sneak out of the envelopment.

"Hostile detected!"

"Cage his position and shoot him down!"

"Meow!"

The slime not exposed his position due to the unavoidable displacement his presence caused, but also hampered his mobility. It was as if he was swimming through a pool of glue!

With Lucky in so much distress, how could Ketis ever stand by? While the other Mirror Raiders were still trying to catch up while firing their rifles at every pirate in sight, she smashed her way through the ranks of regular pirate guards in her path and was about to crash straight into the ranks of the Hydras if not for the appearance of an obstacle!

A well-armored Hydra captain dropped his rifle and withdrew a large scimitar. Energy quickly lined its edge, showing that it was more than a simple metal weapon!

The challenging posture of the Hydra captain caused Ketis to slow down her charge until she came at a stop in front of her opponent.

Though she could have continued to storm forward, she recognized that she might regret her choice. From the prepared stance adopted by the pirate standing in her way, she recognized that she faced a true blademaster!

"I am Captain Wenter of the Hydra Battalion. Are you a Larkinson?"

"It doesn't matter who I am." Ketis spat as her hot armor constantly released excess heat into the air. "Get on with it already!"

"Very well." The armored pirate grinned underneath his dome-like helmet as his gauntlet began to flourish his heavy sabber. "I respect your swordsmanship. It has been too long since I have dueled a worthy opponent. Take care though, girl, as I have slain over fifty challengers. I have no problem adding one more head to my pile."

"Dispense with the jabbering and fight!" Ketis replied as her damaged armored bulk began to advance.

With Lucky in dire straits, she didn't want to bother with all of the etiquette surrounding duels to the death. She simply wanted to overpower and defeat this blademaster as fast as possible!

Though she was tempted to borrow the momentum of her forward movement to add additional power to her attack, she knew that this wasn't the best option at the moment. Such attacks were very predictable, and against a trained swordsman or bladesman, this was a big taboo!

Her caution turned out to be justified when her opponent read the simple feint she used to fool most of her opponents.

Clang!

Surprisingly, Captain Wenter's blade managed to block her attack!

Through this simple exchange, Ketis rapidly discovered several aspects about her opponent that caused her to feel even more pressure.

First, the flat of the blade of Captain Wenter's energized scimitar managed to block the edge of her cutlass without incurring any significant damage.

Second, the power she leveraged from her Rising Red Dragon suit was very considerable. The fact that Captain Wenter managed to maintain the block without getting pushed back meant that the power exerted by his combat armor was actually on par with her own!

This hadn't happened since she used her cutlass to slay every pirate in her way. The strength and sharpness of her weapon allowed her to overpower any typical pirate equipment.

"Are you surprised, lass?" Captain Wenter chuckled. "I'm not the same as the trash you previously cut apart. The best armorer of Ulimo Citadel built my gear using all of the medium and high-grade exotics that I have earned in the service of the Dry Snakes. We pirates can make quality gear of our own if we want to! Underestimating me is the last mistake that you will make!"

The powerful Hydra captain launched his counterattacks. With continuous slashes, his energized scimitar crashed into Ketis over and over.

The sudden momentum exhibited by the pirate captain continually forced Ketis to step back as she failed to regain the initiative.

Forced into the defensive, she tried her best to block the scimitar, but Captain Wenter was considerably older and more experienced than the Swordmaiden mech designer.

After his attack was parried for the twelfth time, a hidden single-use cannon built into his armor suddenly fired a powerful kinetic projectile!

Though the sneak attack failed to penetrate her armor, Ketis unavoidably tilted backwards due to the force acting on her bulk.

Though Captain Wenter had been pushed back as well due to firing the round, he braced himself for the recoil beforehand. He recovered a moment faster than Ketis, activated a command that caused the edge of his scimitar to brighten before slashing it across Ketis' weapon arm!

The Hydra captain deviously aimed at a scar that a number of earlier attacks had already landed on the Rising Red Dragon suit. The middle layer of the suit had been cut by the energized blade!

With only one more layer of armor in the way, Wenter only had to attack this vulnerability one or two more times to cut off Ketis' arm!

Instead of halting, Ketis continued to step back in order to open up some distance. Through her helmet HUD, she studied the damage reports of her combat armor with considerable alarm.

Not even Breyer alloy could withstand Captain Wenter's attack!

This blademaker posed a true threat to Ketis! She couldn't rely on her superior gear to overcome this challenge. She needed to employ true skill to win this duel!

Chapter 2303: Superior Technique

While Ketis became embroiled in a duel against Captain Wenter of the Hydra Battalion, the situation outside Ulimo Citadel became more dire for the Larkinson Clan!

The situation seemed hopeful at first. Through channeling Lufa's glow, Ves managed to save a lot of stranded and isolated Living Sentinel mechs.

It wasn't easy to maintain such a powerful field that caused the surrounding darkness to recede. Ves went through his partially-charged P-stone so quickly that he had to order Nitaa to stop by the vault and bring out all of the other P-stones that contained some of his spare energy.

He was draining months of diligent energy savings in a matter of minutes! Projecting and amplifying a design spirit's glow so that it could encompass a large volume of space demanded a huge amount of energy.

This was the price of using an ability that was beyond his and Lufa's strength. Unlike the cultists of the Hallowed Abyss Temple, Ves didn't know how to fuel his abilities through human sacrifice.

Perhaps this was for the better, though a part of him still felt a bit jealous at the Grey Watcher in Ulimo for being taught such a useful trick.

When he and his escorts managed to retrieve hundreds of surviving Living Sentinel mech pilots from their damaged and depleted mechs, the situation in the dark sphere abruptly changed.

The entire anomaly began to convulse before channeling more power than before! It was as if it had surpassed some kind of threshold that caused it to take on a greater form!

The darkness exhibited even more activity as the pressure on everyone's minds increased even further. The glows of every LMC mech went from faint to nonexistent as the spiritual suppression from the dark sphere received a substantial boost.

"Ah! Tighten the formation of our mechs! Quickly!" Ves warned.

The tranquility field he channeled contracted by at least a third! The active mechs that protected the Scarlet Rose lost a lot of room for maneuver as a consequence.

"We have to leave, sir!" A bridge officer advised.

"Not yet!" Ves gritted his teeth. "We still have enough energy to collect more mech pilots. Head to the last-known position to the Battle Criers. They shouldn't be able to last much longer than the Living Sentinels!"

The change in circumstances did not just increase the oppressive power of the surrounding darkness.

The ghost mechs that mindlessly assaulted the Larkinson mechs also changed!

The greyish mechs bred by the dark fog looked more substantial than before. When these mechs began to confront the escorts of the Scarlet Rose, the defending Larkinson mech pilots discovered to their astonishment that the ghost mechs were just as threatening as actual mechs!

"Careful! These ghost mechs are a lot more powerful than before!"

Their forms became a lot more tangible than before. Everyone recognized the increased danger of this adverse change.

"Hurry up! Our comrades won't be able to last if they're assaulted by too many of these new ghost mechs!"

Fortunately, the Battle Criers stranded in the dark sphere numbered much less and maintained a tighter formation.

Many of the Battle Crier mechs that had fallen already succumbed much earlier. The ones who managed to cling on until now possessed rich battle experience.

Even so, the Larkinsons only managed to retrieve half of the Battle Criers that took part in the attack against Ulimo Citadel!

The Living Sentinels also lost half of their numbers. This was the most painful loss the clan had suffered since the Battle of Kesseling VIII. Pain and frustration marred Ves' face, but he knew that the crisis wasn't over yet. He still hadn't rescued the Avatars, Vandals and Swordmaidens.

Though he wanted to retrieve them as well, time was running out. He had expended so much energy that he was down to his last P-stone. Once this rock ran out of spiritual energy, Ves would be forced to drain his mind until he completely ran dry.

While the intensified crisis increased the pressure on everyone trapped in the anomaly, Ketis still hadn't managed to get past the pirate blademaker blocking her way!

Only a short time had passed as they only exchanged a couple of blows. Nonetheless, Ketis already learned the hard way that Captain Wenter was stronger than her in almost every way!

His combat armor was bigger and taller than hers. Though that ordinarily should have made his movements slower, the servos and artificial musculature of his powered limbs were actually able to leverage more power than her Rising Red Dragon suit!

It couldn't be helped. Her high-quality combat armor was designed to accommodate heavy rifles and other ranged weapons.

Enhancing its ability to wield melee weapons was only a secondary priority to its original designer! Though the Rising Red Dragon suit was considerably better off in this area due to its expensive price tag, it was still inferior to Captain Wenter's custom-designed combat armor that was precisely tailored for his physique and fighting style!

With an energised scimitar that could cut through Breyer alloy and a battle-tested fighting style that mixed superior technique with dirty tricks, Ketis found no opportunity to counterattack!

She was forced to hold her cutlass with two arms in order to withstand the force of Captain Wenter's more powerful blows. Sometimes he fainted, putting considerably less power in his attacks.

Caught off-guard, Ketis responded a bit too slowly as Captain Wenter sliced the brightened edge of his scimitar across her already-damaged arm section!

At the last instant, she forced her Rising Red Dragon to turn, causing the empowered scimitar to tear through the upper layer of her plating!

Due to her move, her footing became unstable, which Captain Wenter eagerly took advantage of. His combat armor design featured considerably more range of movement for his legs, which he eagerly used to snap another kick against her foe!

Fortunately, Ketis possessed just enough experience to accept the kick. She used the force to perform an ungainly roll before regaining her footing just in time to block another heavy scimitar blow!

"I've taken your measure, lass!" Captain Wenter's helmeted form voiced. "Your technique is not half-bad, but mine is better!"

Both of them recognized the disparity in skill as they exchanged a couple more blows. The Hydra captain that insisted on dueling Ketis had training to fight with a scimitar for decades!

As for Ketis, her preferred weapon was a two-handed greatsword. This was because the Swordmaidens mainly oriented their swordsmanship towards slaying huge and tough adversaries such as exobeasts.

The fighting style of the Swordmaidens not only allowed them to duel powerful exobeasts who massed twenty times their own bodies, but also remained relevant in mech combat.

The Swordmaidens excelled in cutting weaker mechs in half with a single blow! Their killing efficiency against weaker mechs was unparalleled, while tougher opponents also experienced a lot of threat!

However, the downsides of the Swordmaiden fighting style became evident through this duel. Compared to other swordsmanship traditions, the Swordmaidens placed much less emphasis on finesse.

While they often sparred against each other and honed their moves and countermoves against other sword-wielding opponents, the essence of their swordsmanship style always revolved around overpowering their enemies.

A part of the reason why the Swordmaidens chose this brutish way over sword fighting was due to their deficient training environment. Focusing on simple, powerful moves demanded less acute judgement, fine body control and advanced training methods.

This was not necessarily enough to put her on the backfoot. With a large and massive enough greatsword, Ketis still would have been able to overcome her opponent's superior technique through sheer force.

The problem now was that her cutlass did not conform to the sword type that she fought best with. It was shorter and considerably lighter and possessed many other characteristics that prevented her from employing the moves she needed to reverse the trend.

These differences might not be important against ordinary opponents, but were influential enough to put her at a heavy disadvantage!

Captain Wenter was able to utilize his more focused training and his other advantages to maintain superiority throughout the duel.

He resolutely gave no chance for Ketis to turn the tables against him! If not for the fact that Captain Wenter wasn't able to channel his scimitar at full power for a long time, her Rising Red Dragon suit would have been breached at this time!

It frustrated her enormously to be forced on the defensive. Time was running out and while her fellow Mirror Raiders were putting at least some pressure on the Hydra Battalion soldiers bent on killing Lucky, the elite pirates weren't easy foes!

If Ketis couldn't find a way to break this deadlock, then Lucky might actually die in this cursed pirate base!

She had no other choice. She needed to use her trump card. The only reason why she felt reluctant to do so was that she couldn't make this move too often and that Captain Wenter was skilled enough to circumvent it if he knew what she was capable of doing.

"Clang!"

The energized scimitar hit the flat of her cutlass blade again, leaving behind another scar and diminishing the durability of the weapon even further.

After blocking three more attacks, the back of her armor suddenly collided against a wall.

Captain Wenter saw a chance and performed another feint before slashing his energized scimitar against the neck collar of her opponent! The brightness of his weapon's edge abruptly rose higher than ever before, signifying that his next attack might be powerful enough to cut through all of the layers of armor that protected Ketis' neck!

The break in pattern astonished Ketis for a moment. The Hydra captain constantly aimed to cut off her arm in his previous attacks. Targeting her neck all of a sudden genuinely caught her off-guard!

Even so, she did not stop from making her own move. She concentrated her mind and actively sought to lean on Sharpie.

"Please lend me your strength!"

Her sentient mind sword had always supported Ketis as she fought through the pirates. With each enemy she slayed, Sharpie grew more and more active. It was as if the act of killing with swords slowly evolved the living spiritual construct in a certain direction!

Sharpie answered her call. It resonated with her mind and began to boost her effort to augment her blade.

A different glow covered the edge of her cutlass. Captain Wenter only had moments to widen his eyes as Ketis used the sharp side of her sword to parry his supercharged scimitar!

"Foolish! When I overloaded my prized weapon, not even second-class armor plating can block it from cutting through!"

A bright line seemed to have cut through air and metal.

Captain Wenter only had moments to realize that the simple cutlass wielded by his opponent managed to slice straight through his fully energized scimitar with unnatural ease. Not only that, but the partially-glowing cutlass continued on to hack into the shoulder plating of his combat armor before slicing off his arm and shoulder, armor included!

The powerful attack enhanced by Sharpie took a lot out of Ketis. She became incredibly tired and momentarily lacked the strength to attack her dueling opponent again.

"Impossible!" The Hydra captain spoke with astonishment.

The catastrophic injury he suffered was beyond his combat armor's means to patch up. Blood spurted from the cut sections of his flesh as his damaged armor collapsed on the ground.

"How.. did I lose?"

Ketis wearily grinned as she caught her breath. "You are better than me in any way except for one area."

"And what.. is that?"

"You lacked a sword intent."

"I see..." Captain Wenter's eyes glazed over. "I did not die unjustly. As one duelist to another, I... I am proud to die under your blade. Take your trophy from me.. so that I will be remembered..."

This formidable pirate elite and one of the most powerful melee duelists in Ulimo Citadel perished.

Ketis soon managed to regain enough energy to proceed forward. Before she did so, she grabbed Captain Wenter's broken scimitar and gripped it with her other hand.

"I'm coming, Lucky!"

Chapter 2304: Tiring Struggle

After a couple of hellish rounds of fighting, Ketis, Lucky and the remainder of her Mirror Raider squad managed to fight their way through three successive gates.

The cost was considerable.

Lucky's Misfortune Harness barely hung on his injured frame like a threat. Precious shards of Breyer alloy and B-stone littered the battlefield amidst the cut and broken pirate corpses.

The elite Hydra Battalion truly deserved their high regard. Their excellent gear, battle tactics and training was not worse than that of the Swordmaidens!

Ketis and the Mirror Raiders only managed to defeat them while outnumbered by taking advantage of their superior armor.

Aside from Captain Wenter who traded a lot of merits and wealth to order a powerful suit of combat armor, the rank-and-file Hydra Battalion soldiers were not as ludicrous when it came to their gear.

While their kit bridged the gap between third-class and second-class equipment, they ultimately fell short of the superior durability of Breyer alloy!

After an arduous struggle where Ketis had to resist a considerable number of unusual and heavy weapons, she managed to slice the broken scimitar she wielded with her offhand across the neck of the final Hydra soldier.

The pirates fought to the last man. Ketis genuinely respected their courage and commitment to their duties. In truth, the Hydra Battalion surpassed the Swordmaidens in many aspects. It was just that Ketis possessed some unique advantages of her own, such as an expensive suit of combat armor and a living 'pet' courtesy of her second mentor!

"How are you, Lucky?"

"Meoww..."

Lucky held on for a surprising amount of time after the pirates managed to box him in. The many holes in his Misfortune Harness clearly exhibited how much he suffered. The relentless attacks against his slim body had left many scars and even deeper wounds across his exposed body.

"Meow meow meow..."

Though his Rorach's Bone-derived regeneration ability would eventually allow him to be restored to new, it would take a very long time for him to heal all of the damage. For now, it seemed doubtful that he was able to contribute any further to the fight.

"Can you go invisible?"

"Meow." Lucky shook his damaged head.

One of his glowing green eyes had dimmed.

"Can you phase through walls?"

"Meow." He shook his head again.

"Can you do anything?"

"Meow..."

"It's okay, Lucky." Ketis gently responded. "We'll take care of the rest. Just stay close and stay safe. According to the map, this is the last checkpoint in our way. The shrine that Ves wanted us to smash should be just ahead. Our fight is almost at an end."

Before she advanced any further, she took stock of their situation.

Though her condition was better than Lucky, Ketis neared the end of her endurance. Her damaged armor bore several new vulnerabilities and weak points due to Captain Wenter's attacks.

His energised scimitar also cut through a handful of minor servos and other modules, thereby impairing the mobility of the Rising Red Dragon suit to an extent. Though Ketis was still powerful enough to bull through groups of ordinary pirates, she no longer possessed the agility required to keep up with another Captain Wenter.

She dearly hoped she wouldn't encounter another weapon master at the shrine.

After she ascertained her own combat ability, she turned to her squad of Mirror Raiders, or what was left of them. Their firefight against the Hydra Battalion went less than ideal, mainly because the latter possessed the advantage in numbers.

Only five of her squad still retained some combat ability. Their armor suits were not as damaged as the others, but they had obviously suffered several telling blows.

Ketis noticed that their rifles were running low on ammunition and energy.

"We can't salvage the pirate weapons, but we should be able to pilfer their spare batteries if they're the same format."

There was an incredible variety of energy battery models in use these days, but many of them still stuck to a format in order to ensure greater compatibility. Developing batteries that conformed to a proprietary format generally didn't sell very well on the market.

Fortunately, the pirates didn't use anything fancy or obscure. Ketis looked relieved as she opened up the back compartment of the combat armor of the fallen Hydra Battalion soldiers.

Ketis and her Mirror Raiders hurried to replace their heavily-depleted batteries with those that contained more charge.

Once they finished this quick resupply, the six Mirror Raiders along with a heavily damaged cat proceeded forward, shooting down any ghost pirate with a barrage of lasers as soon as they emerged.

"Don't you think these ghosts are appearing more often than before?" One of the disguised Larkinsons voiced his doubts.

"The frequency is indeed higher now that I think about it. This proves we're heading in the right direction!"

Ketis diligently followed the route on the map until she stumbled on a bare metal plaza.

She halted, and so did the other survivors.

"Meow..?" Lucky looked puzzled as he faced the empty ground.

"Is the map inaccurate?" Ketis perplexingly guessed.

This might be the case! The Larkinsons ripped the map she currently used from the data banks of the Dry Snakes. There was little reason to suspect the pirates would intentionally falsify the maps for their own use, but this was an exceptional case.

If the shrine to the Hallowed Abyss was truly at the heart of the artificial anomaly, then how could the leaders of the Dry Snakes ever expose such a critical location to most of their own men?

The center of the public marketplace was a heavily-restricted area which housed many important offices and administrative centers. If not for the indiscriminate ghost attacks and communications blackout, Ketis and her band would have encountered a lot more resistance on the way!

Still, after fighting through three successive gates and barely overcoming the elite Hydra Battalion, how could their destination be wrong?

Had Lucky almost lost his life for nothing? Had Ketis dueled and traded a lot of combat strength in vain?

"WHAT THE HELL?! AFTER ALL THIS FIGHTING, THERE'S NOTHING HERE BUT GHOSTS AND EMPTY SPACE?!"

Every Larkinson looked completely bewildered. The situation looked completely unacceptable. Was their intelligence really wrong? Why wasn't there anything in this place?!

"You are not in the wrong location." An amplified female voice sounded out.

Amidst the mindless pirate ghosts, some of which took the form of the deceased Hydra Battalion soldiers, a more corporeal form appeared.

Ketis raised her laser pistol while some of the surviving Mirror Raiders brought their own rifles to bear.

"Halt!" Ketis called out. "Drop your weapon and don't take a single step further!"

"Ahem, forgive me for not complying to your demand." The armored pirate replied as her laser pistol fired a green beam at a ghost that was aiming an opaque grenade launcher in her direction. "I am not your enemy, miss. If you will allow me to approach, I am willing to surrender my weapons to you as long as you allow me to explain myself."

Though Ketis found the presence of this odd pirate to be very suspicious, She currently lacked clear directions.

"Step closer, but not too close. Stop. Quickly drop your weapons and kicked them in our direction. Don't leave anything out, understood!"

The pirate efficiently dropped her pistol and withdrew another pistol as well as some combat knives out of her slim suit of armor.

"Is that enough to earn a moment of your time?"

"Explain, and do it quickly!"

"Very well." The pirate smiled and tapped the side of her helmet. Her faceplate turned transparent, allowing Ketis and the rest to see the friendly smile on her face. "Let's begin with introductions. I am Lieutenant Qwasma Ineron. As you can see from the appearance of my armor, I am a Xona Stalker."

"We know that! Tell us why we shouldn't kill you!"

"I can tell you where the shrine you are looking for is actually located. The map you are using isn't wrong. It's just that this base is more complicated than you think. As soon as the Grey Watcher called down the abyss, the shrine descended to a secret and more guarded site."

"What?!"

It turned out that the Hallowed Abyss shrine rested on a platform that had descended downwards as soon as it became a critical site. A large amount of tunnels was built underneath the current floor that led to various destinations.

Without any clues, there was no way that Ketis would be able to find where the shrine had moved before the anomaly succeeded in killing every Larkinson mech pilot trapped outside!

"Can you bring us to the actual location of the shrine?" She urgently asked.

"I can. I am at your disposal, miss."

Ketis suddenly narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Why are you turning against your own side?"

"Not all of us are willing to continue to live and die as pirates." Lieutenant Ineron replied. "We used to be ordinary intelligence operates from Majestic Teal. The reason why we were forced into the Nyxian Gap and took up the mantle of pirates is because we fell victim to a scheme. This is a heavy blow to us because it is very difficult for us to get rid of our outlaw status and restore our innocence. Many of us have left many friends and families behind."

ZAP!

Ketis fired a warning shot with her compact laser pistol that just brushed past Lieutenant Ineron's helmet!

"I don't have the time to hear your entire backstory! Get on with it already before more of our mech pilots die!"

"I'm a defector!" Qwasma Ineron got straight to the point. "I am part of a faction within the Xona Stalkers who have made secret contact with one of the Black Cats among you Mirror Raiders. He goes by Lincoln, though that is certainly a pseudonym."

Ah. That was why Lieutenant Sodo Rodan always acted smug and sneaked out so often. The intelligence officer had actually made a secret deal with some of the members of the Xona Stalkers!

Ketis lowered her pistol, showing that she was inclined to believe Qwasma's explanation.

"What does this deal entail?"

"It's quite complicated, but the most important point is that your patriarch has promised to clear our names with the MTA by exchanging a considerable amount of merits. In exchange, we have provided his clan with a lot of insider knowledge and crucial intelligence. How could your infiltrators circumvent most of our stealth detectors without our hidden assistance? My fellow defectors have also performed a bit of sabotage and are ready to stir some trouble against our fellow pirates, some of which include our own comrades."

All of this sounded too detailed to be a fabrication. While she wasn't an excellent judge of character, she sensed that the defecting pirate lieutenant hadn't lied.

"Do you think she's telling the truth, Lucky?"

"Meow." The gem cat hesitantly nodded.

Whether his judgement could be trusted or not, Ketis wasn't sure.

"Let's leave this deal aside." Ketis waved her cutlass. "I'm just responsible for killing some cultists. Where has it moved and why didn't defectors provide us with an accurate map in the first place?"

"We were in the dark as well, miss." Lieutenant Ineron helplessly shrugged. "Most of the Dry Snakes didn't know about this desperation move, let alone us Xona Stalkers! Grand Protector Roshaw kept his cards very close to his chest. The good news is that now that this measure is in the open, we managed to trace where the shrine has relocated. I have even prepared some transportation that will allow us to pass through the tunnels unobstructed until we reach the site. I have to admit that the Hallowed Abyss has moved to a very odd section of Ulimo Citadel."

"Send over a map."

"My pleasure."

The lieutenant obediently transmitted a data package which Ketis confirmed to be clean. A new map loaded in her HUD. A blinking section immediately attracted her attention.

"This.. are you joking?"

"We are absolutely sure the shrine has moved there."

The destination.. turned out to be the local nutrient processing plant! The one responsible for producing Ulimo Citadel's signature specialty food!

Chapter 2305: Individuality

The situation outside Ulimo Citadel became more and more dire. The anomaly not only pressured the Larkinsons down to their souls, but also changed over time.

The danger had risen since Ves ventured into the darkness! After rescuing the Living Sentinels and the Battle Crier pilots who still managed to survive, the Scarlet Rose became stuffed with mech pilots who had just fought the battle of their lives.

Only a small number of Sentinel and Battle Crier mechs retained sufficient combat effectiveness to continue the fight. These bedragged, battle-scarred machines remained on standby while the fresher mechs that used to make up the reserves did all of the heavy lifting.

The ghost mechs had changed. Fewer of them emerged out of the darkness, but each of them possessed the strength of a real mech!

What was worrisome was that their numbers slowly increased. The fog spat out more and more solid grey mechs that mindlessly attacked the nearest mechs.

The non-existent intelligences driving these fake mechs remained as dimwitted and simplistic as ever. That made them easy to defeat, but that had never been the problem.

The true horror of the dark sphere was that its ghosts were endless!

A lot of Sand War veterans gradually experienced deja vu as they felt as if they had traveled back in time. The constant reformation of hostile ghost mechs reminded them of the relentless tide of sandman fleets breaking into human-occupied star systems.

Though no one wanted to relive those harrowing days, the experienced veterans who participated in the Sand War quickly began to direct their fellow comrades.

"Don't employ wasteful methods! Conserving your mech's energy, integrity and ammunition is your greatest priority!"

"Break up into groups of four mechs! Each group must rotate and handle every ghost mech as quickly as possible! Don't kill them from the front. Surround them and target their vulnerable rear. Real mechs can't withstand much damage at the back, and these fake mechs are no different!"

"Ranged mechs, don't intervene. Your firepower is finite. Only employ it when we truly need the help."

"We need to get out of here! Why aren't we out yet?!"

The Scarlet Rose attempted to exit the dark sphere some time ago. The problem was that the dark fog had intensified in a way that made it impossible to exit its confines!

The Scarlet Rose already traversed enough distance to reach the edge of the sphere, but for some reason the ship remained trapped!

The ship traveled in a straight line. It should have left the sphere or at least bump into other asteroids or something.

Instead, there was nothing but darkness, ghost mechs and the occasional debris or stray Larkinson mech.

This was bad news for everyone involved! Ves expended so much energy to rescue some of his mech pilots that he had consumed a huge amount of energy.

Just when his last P-stone drained its charge, another unexpected change took place.

An even larger bubble of protection overlapped with the tranquility field!

The surviving Sentinel and Battle Criers mechs brought their weapons to bear, only to drop them a bit when they welcomed the arrival of their remaining comrades!

"It's the Avatars!"

"Look, the Vandals and Swordmaidens are here as well!"

"Where are the Penitent Sisters?"

"I don't know, but they can take care of themselves."

The arrival of several hundred Larkinson mechs significantly boosted everyone's morale. What particularly emboldened everyone was that the other group was led by the expert candidates of the clan!

It turned out that Jannzi, Joshua, Tusa, Commander Orfan, Commander Dise had managed to collect the remainder of their fighting forces. They then sought each other out, causing them to bump into each other and pool their respective strengths!

Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson acted as the scout of this reformed unit. His fast mech was less bound by the boundaries imposed by the darkness than other mechs. In fact, he discovered the Scarlet Rose a few minutes earlier and returned to his comrades to guide them towards the ship.

Whatever the case, it was better to pool their strengths together than to resist the dangers of the artificial anomaly separately!

While Tusa bravely ventured away from the main group in order to watch out for any stranded Larkinson mechs, the other expert candidates each did their own part.

Commander Orfan's spearman mech heroically confronted the ghost mechs all by herself. With her elevated skill, she easily defeated every ghost mech within a couple of precise but powerful stabs.

Strangely enough, the ghost mechs she defeated took a much longer time to reform. It was as if the damage she inflicted was harder to repair than the mechs destroyed by other mechs and mech pilots!

It turned out that this was the case for the other expert candidates as well. Commander Dise's swordsman mech straightforwardly sliced the grey mechs regardless of what kind of moves they made. With her mech's unparalleled greatsword, no false mech could withstand more than a single attack!

Joshua's Quint was even more exaggerated. Though his masterwork mech currently came with a lancer mech loadout, he eschewed performing charges in order to conserve his energy.

Instead, Joshua fought similar to Commander Orfan, but his deadly lance seemed to possess even greater destructive might towards the grey ghost mechs!

It only took a single stab to pop the fake mechs. Joshua initially aimed at the weak points of his opposing mechs, but he eventually discovered that his Quint was somehow the natural enemy of these ghost machines.

Even if the Quint brushed the surface of its target with its weapon, the stricken ghost mech quickly dissolved!

As soon as he discovered this, Joshua ramped up his pace! The Quint flew back and forth and killed many ghost mechs in quick succession.

His aid turned out to be very necessary as the concentration of several hundred mechs attracted the ghost mechs like moths to a flame!

Apparently, there were no more outlying Larkinson mechs. This meant that the artificial anomaly concentrated all of its destructive efforts towards containing and destroying the Larkinsons trapped inside its belly.

The strength of anomaly constantly grew in strength. Strange cries continued to ring in the ears of every clansmen while other phenomena such as strange chills and grey hallucinations started to become increasingly more unsettling.

If the anomaly kept ramping like this, then Ves and the other Larkinsons trapped inside might buckle under the pressure!

In fact, Ves had already been forced to retract his efforts to channel Lufa's glow. Though powerful, he had completely drained every P-stone of the energy he accumulated.

"HOLD TOGETHER, BROTHERS AND SISTERS! WE WILL MAKE IT THROUGH ALIVE!"

Fortunately, the only defensive expert candidate in the Larkinson Clan took over his burden at the crucial moment.

Jannzi Larkinson shone brighter than ever as her Shield of Samar took over sole responsibility of keeping the darkness at bay!

Her willpower almost became tangible to Ves as her customized Aurora Titan mech took up a central position over the Scarlet Rose and radiated an immense aura.

With every other mech losing its glow due to the powerful dampening effect of the artificial anomaly, Jannzi's mech stood out as an exceptional pillar of hope with its mere presence alone.

Out of all of the expert candidates, no one dazzled the frayed survivors more than her! Each and every Larkinson recognized that they would have remained isolated and under much greater pressure if Jannzi did not elect to take over this heavy burden.

As Ves recovered from his mentally strenuous act, he stared at the projection depicting the Shield of Samar with increasing wonder and puzzlement.

He designed the Aurora Titan. He modified Jannzi's personal mech until it turned into a formidable defensive bulwark.

However, he always designed the super-medium space knight to defend against material threats. Aside from instilling Qilanxo as its design spirit, the Aurora Titan model wasn't supposed to perform like his upcoming Sanctuary model!

The oddest part of all of this is that due to the strong spiritual dampening effect of the anomaly, Qilanxo wasn't able to extend her presence to the Shield of Samar.

Yet somehow, this mech outputted a protective field that encompassed enough space to give hundreds of friendly machines enough room to fight and exert their strength!

Having tried to fend off the dark fog with the help of Lufa, Ves personally experienced how much effort it took to maintain a safe zone under these circumstances.

With the dark sphere increasing in strength, someone who was much more spiritually weak such as Jannzi shouldn't have been able to keep up this expenditure!

Yet somehow she was pulling a huge amount of energy from seemingly nowhere. It made no sense to him at all! No matter how freaky spirituality behaved, as far as he knew it still abided by the law of conservation of energy!

"Nothing comes for free! Not even energy!"

Planets remained livable and warm due to the stars shining over their surfaces.

Stars derived their energy from the immense thermonuclear reactions taking place in their cores.

The particles that enable these immensely powerful reactions originated from other processes.

The point was that energy did not just 'show up' from nowhere. Ves refused to believe that Jannzi had turned herself into a perpetual motion machine!

As he probed Jannzi and her mech further with his spiritual senses, he slowly discovered where the energy came from. The source surprised Ves quite a lot, because it turned out that the Shield of Samar itself actively supported its mech pilot and supplied it with an abundant amount of energy!

Where did this energy come from? Why hadn't he noticed that the Shield of Samar accumulated so much spiritual juice? How come Jannzi's personal mech felt more alive than ever despite the absence of its design spirit?

Ves thought he understood mechs quite a lot. Now, it turned out that he missed a hidden aspect!

The Shield of Samar started off as the first production model of the Aurora Titan. He gifted it to Jannzi after she unexpectedly broke through to expert candidate at the space knight's reveal event.

Years passed as Jannzi piloted the mech through the Sand War and many of the battles involving the Larkinson Clan.

Each time, Jannzi bonded with her mech to a degree that exceeded the love and attention that other Larkinson mech pilots invested in their own machines.

Not even Joshua had vowed to dedicate his remaining piloting career to the Quint! He still held to a more conventional philosophy where switching to piloting other mechs was inevitable.

For some reason, Jannzi's extreme dedication towards her Shield of Samar caused the two to form a special bond with each other. The Shield of Samar became more than just a personal mech to her. It became her main weapon and her lifelong partner.

This must have caused the Shield of Samar to develop differently from every other Aurora Titan mech in existence. It gained individuality as it tailored itself more and more to its sole mech pilot.

This wasn't enough to explain where all of its energy came from, but it explained some of its unusual traits, such as the high degree of resonance that Jannzi achieved with her chosen mech!

The protective field that Jannzi projection was just as strong if not stronger than the tranquility field that Ves had maintained at great cost.

The difference was that while Ves amplified Lufa's glow by force through expending huge amounts of energy, Jannzi was able to achieve a similar result at a much lower cost!

"Is this the benefit of merging willpower with mechs?"

Ves sensed something special between the synergy that Jannzi and the Shield of Samar achieved. He also gained a much greater appreciation of spiritually-infused willpower.

It was no wonder that high-ranking mech pilots were regarded as gods in the making. Their ability to warp reality with the power of their wills was much stronger than Ves could ever accomplish!

Above all else, Ves finally recognized what his design philosophy could have achieved if he didn't obsess over utilizing design spirits.

For all these years, he unintentionally lost sight of one of the original purposes of his design philosophy.

"Individuality!"

Every mech was different! Every mech was unique! Even if they were derived from the same set of designs, each of them followed a different trajectory once they were made.

The Shield of Samar was one of the best examples of a mech that successfully diverged from the mold of its original design.

The mech that suited their pilots the best were those that achieved the highest fit with their partners!

This was one of Gloriana's original principles. Ves had long assumed that customization was primarily her territory, but it turned out that he was mistaken.

"I've been chasing the wrong goal all along! Instead of imposing greater uniformity in my products, I should have been aiming to expand their individuality!"

Each mech should be unique, just as each life form was different from each other!

Chapter 2306: Abomination

Though the power of individuality was strong, it was not unlimited. Jannzi and her Shield of Samar may have managed to shield the Larkinsons trapped inside the anomaly from a lot of dangers, but it wasn't enough to bring them out!

"The abyss is hungry." James quietly remarked to Ves as the latter was still preoccupied with his latest realization. "When you cross past the event horizon of a black hole, you have reached the point of no return. No matter how much you try to travel out of the hungry maw at the center, the extreme gravitational curving has grown to such a point that not even light can make it out. Unless we can surpass this light, there is no possibility of escaping this trap!"

Ves threw a skeptical look at him. "Since you opted to stay on my ship, does that mean you have foreseen our eventual victory?"

"Not at all." James shook his head. "I am blinded, remember? I merely believe in your ability and the ability of our clan. No specific proof or prediction has guided my decision to bet on you. I'm not alone in this. Many other Larkinsons are also willing to put complete trust in you. This is the true meaning of faith, patriarch."

Faith! Ves hated that word! To him, it described an awful pattern of behavior where people switched off the logical parts of their brain, thereby causing them to develop a rational belief in something no matter if it was right or wrong!

While Ves personally thought that it was always a good choice for people to put their trust in him, he preferred to do so honestly.

As far as he was concerned, the Larkinsons followed him and supported him as the leader of their clan due to the unspoken contract he formed with them. Through the mutual exchange of interests, both Ves and his clansmen benefited considerably from their cooperation.

This was one of the underlying motivations behind venturing into the Nyxian Gap. It was in his best interests to train his mech forces through the crucible of combat. The clansmen themselves were attracted by gains as well. Not only would they be able to strengthen themselves, Ves had also promised them a massive reward once they returned to civilized space!

The problem was that suffering too many losses might destabilize his contract with his clansmen. How could the latter possibly benefit from having Ves as their leader when he just drove the majority of their mech pilots to their deaths?

No Larkinson would harvest any benefits when they died!

This was why he constantly worried about the outcome of this battle. Roughly half of the Larkinson mech pilots that took part in the attack had already died or disappeared. This was the maximum amount of losses that the clan was able to tolerate. If he lost a hundred more Larkinson mech pilots, then it became questionable whether he would be allowed to cling to his current authority!

Yet with faith, those rules went out the window. Ves noticed from the behavior of many fanatics that they were more than willing to die in order to advance some abstract cause!

Even when the cult leaders openly exploited their sheep, the latter gladly gave up everything due to the faith instilled into them. Such behavior seemed completely stupid to Ves!

While Ves was mulling over faith, the battle outside became more and more strenuous. Despite the efforts of Joshua, Orfan and Dise, the powerful grey mechs still appeared at a faster rate.

Despite the huge amount of effort required to sustain the anomaly, it showed no signs of receding at all. Instead, it continued to strengthen up until the point another mutation occurred.

The grey mechs were merging together!

Instead of mindlessly charging at the Larkinson mechs as soon as the darkness spawned them into existence, they instead crashed against each other. The grey fog that made up their corporeal forms seamlessly blended into each other.

When more than a dozen ghost mechs fused into each other, the resulting mass of grey boiled and convulsed. This process went on for a decent amount of time.

Worried at what might result from this new process, some of the ranged mechs started shooting it, only for all of their laser beams and projectiles to go through the boiling grey mass as if it was nothing but fog!

"Something is coming out!"

The fusion process finally ended, and every Larkinson observing the result shook in fear.

A huge supermech came into existence! Adhering to no proper design principle, the huge grey abomination combined the mass as well as the limbs and weapons of all of the grey mechs that had sacrificed themselves to produce this abomination.

Ves visibly winced at the sight of such an awful mech!

Nonetheless, no matter how ugly it looked, the moment this abominable mech began to fight, it immediately demonstrated its strength by smashing apart a group of four unsuspecting mechs!

"Damnit, its strength has increased! Don't let your mech get hit!"

Each limb was capable of outputting the combined force of multiple mechs!

As attacks landed on its grey surface, many laser beams and projectiles bounced off as if they struck a second-class mech.

"This mech's durability is as strong as multiple mechs as well!"

What was even more frightening was the warped ranged weapons wielded by one of the abomination's multiple limbs. Each shot either tore apart a Larkinson mech or inflicted heavy damage to them. Even the Bright Warriors began to exhibit some damage as their Breyer alloy armor plating no longer turned them impervious.

"It's heading to the Scarlet Rose!"

"Stop it! Don't let it reach our ship! Our clan patriarch and hundreds of rescued mech pilots are inside!"

"Watch out! Another bunch of grey mechs are merging together! Shoot them down before they collide against each other!"

As the crisis facing the Scarlet Rose and every functional Larkinson mech left inside slowly began to overwhelm the surviving Larkinsons, the situation inside Ulimo Citadel had momentarily entered a period of calm.

After Qwasma Ineron introduced herself to Ketis and her band, the pirate defector brought the Larkinsons to a large passenger shuttle.

Around sixty Xona Stalkers armed and armored with a variety of gear greeted the newcomers.

The sight of so many fighting forces that were ostensibly on the side of the Larkinsons relieved Ketis.

At this moment, she had largely expended her strength. The integrity of her Rising Red Dragon suit had dropped and she hardly had any energy left to employ her superpower again.

Lucky was in an even worse state. His heavily-damaged Misfortune Harness hardly offered any advantages and his heavily-damaged surface prevented him from using all of the abilities that made him so tricky and elusive.

As for the remaining Mirror Raiders, they were still in reasonable shape to fight, but only because those who failed to measure up had already died in the firefight against the Hydra Battalion!

If the two could rely on the Xona Stalkers to fight the remaining battles, then that would be best!

As soon as the large passenger shuttle took in the Larkinsons, one of the Xona Stalker specialists transmitted a secret code that caused the floor that was supposed to hold the shrine to retract to the sides.

A large, square tunnel that led straight below came into view. The passenger shuttle briskly flew through the opening and began to navigate the surprisingly expansive tunnel complex built underneath the public marketplace.

In the meantime, grey ghosts continued to form around them, but because the shuttle was constantly moving, those ghosts were immediately left far behind.

"We'll soon be arriving at the site of the nutrient processing plant." Lieutenant Ineron told Ketis. "The shrine had dropped into the heart of the plant. There are signs of some defenses, but not as heavily as we feared. With the troops we have currently gathered, we should be able to overrun the plant."

"Meow.."

Lucky squirmed on Ketis' armored lap as she gently tore off some of the useless parts of the Misfortune Harness from his body.

"Will you Xona Stalkers really go against the Dry Snakes?"

"Only a part of us will, but that is enough." Qwasma ruefully smiled. "We never wanted to live a damned and forsaken life. While it is possible for us to fake our identities and return to civilized space with our expertise, we cannot accept abandoning our original identities. Each of us want to return to the families we have left behind in Majestic Teal and reunite with them without fear of bringing dishonor to them. We are willing to do much to gain this chance."

"I see."

Personally, Ketis possessed a different view of pirate life. While there were many pirates who lived awful lives, civilized space wasn't so different in that regard.

What she truly valued was the freedom she enjoyed in the frontier. Venturing through the Nyxian Gap reminded her of the freedoms she surrendered when she gained a new identity.

When the shuttle arrived at the perimeter of the nutrient processing plant, other groups of Xona Stalkers were already engaged in fighting the Dry Snakes assigned to defend it. The sudden arrival of reinforcements emboldened the attackers!

"Traitors!" A Dry Snake captain yelled over the sounds weapon discharges. "We'll gut you all once we have gotten rid of the Larkinsons. The Grand Protector will never let you live!"

The defecting Xona Stalker fighters didn't respond. They had already made their choice.

Ketis and Lucky stayed out the fighting. They saw how the Xona Stalkers proficiently dismantled the defenses by employing stealthed saboteurs. The defectors also sabotaged some of the large machines around them in order to prevent the shrine from moving away.

The Xona Stalker defectors knew that if they wished to make it out and return to civilized space, they needed to end the crisis besetting the Larkinson Clan!

After losing a third of their lives, the defecting fighting troops finally managed to overwhelm the defenders. While the remainder of the Dry Snake soldiers retreated inwards, their disorganization allowed the Xona Stalkers to easily hunt down the stragglers.

"Let's head inside." Lieutenant Qwasma told Ketis. "This plant was never built to repel an assault. The Dry Snakes haven't posted a lot of guards here either. It is just

supposed to be a place to produce some food, after all. With the communications blockade, the rest of our enemy probably isn't aware of the true importance of this site."

Under the lead of the lieutenant, they slowly strode through the main entrance. They passed by some administrative departments before entering the industrial chemical and nutrient processing areas.

Large tubes and small tubes snaked over everyone's heads. Water, ingredients and waste material continued to flow through them as the largely-automated plant still ran by itself. The pirates had already shoved the plant workers into a room and locked them all inside.

Occasional sounds of fighting echoed through the tunnel-filled halls and corridors as internal defenses as well as the remnants of their opponents put up a last stand.

Strangely enough, the ghost pirates no longer appeared. The darkness and all of the strange phenomena that accompanied it may have intensified a bit as the attackers drew closer, but no more hostile apparitions emerged after passing a certain point.

"Don't let down your guard. The cultists might be gathering them all up before unleashing them at once."

Eventually, the small group reached a center hall where a large, high-vaulted shrine rested in the center of the processing plant.

Pipes disgorged water and brown sludge into large large tanks. Dry powder dropped from a pipe in the ceiling and spread into one of the tanks. Some waste material got separated from another process and flowed away.

Large packaging machines took in portions of dried nutrient matter and enveloped them in disposable wrapping before shoveling them inside containers to be taken elsewhere!

A growing group of Xona Stalkers gathered to make their final assault.

Yet before they managed to do so, the gates of the shrine suddenly slid open on their own. The entrance resembled a hungry maw.

Chapter 2307: The Dark Shrine

In the distance, the opening of the gates of the shrine seemingly served as an invitation for the attackers to step inside.

Darkness swirled behind the entrance, though the specks of grey hinted at danger. After fighting back against so many grey ghosts, no one associated this shade with anything good!

For a moment, the officers of the defecting pirates conferred amongst themselves. Their original plan wasn't to enter the shrine at all. Instead, a number of them already brought some small cargo platforms that carried a large payload of explosives.

Ketis widened her eyes behind her helmet as she spotted some distinctive warning signs to some of the big bombs.

"Are those nuclear mines?! Are you crazy?!"

Lieutenant Qwasma Ineron grinned behind her transparent faceplate. "Yes. While we truly have no idea what is taking place inside, nothing can survive the detonation of an enriched nuclear explosion at close range. There is no need for us to follow the arrangements of our enemy."

She was right. Why enter the homeland of an enemy powerful enough to strand and grind down thousands of mechs in space? They should just bombard the shrine from a safe distance and be done with it instead of foolishly accepting the Hallowed Abyss Temple's unkind invitation!

However, just as the demolitionists and combat engineers brought their explosive payloads forward under heavy escort, the occupants of the shrine seemingly lost patience.

"Watch out! Something is coming out of the gates!"

"Damnit, forget about the bombs, just shoot the shrine!"

Everyone who held a rifle immediately followed orders and shot at the ornate building that looked completely incongruous with the industrial setting of the nutrient processing plant.

Some fired their weapons at the walls of the shrine. Others shot straight into the gates.

A variety of pistols, rifles and even heavier weapons fired straight at the shrine! No matter how sturdy its construction, the sheer weight of firepower the Xona Stalker soldiers brought to bear should have been enough to chip away at the surface of their target!

Yet frighteningly enough, none of their weapons managed to chip at the walls of the shrine! Made of unknown obsidian material, the structure of the shrine incurred no visible damage!

As for the shots that went straight through the gates, the abyss swallowed them all up without providing any feedback on whether the attacks accomplished anything.

The Xona Stalkers became dismayed as they failed to achieve the results they wanted. In the meantime, strange flows of grey and darkness began to seep from the gates and spread throughout the area. The pressure exerted onto everyone's minds increased.

"Ahh! Shoot the deck instead! No matter how strong the shrine is made of, the deck is made out of ordinary alloy!"

The defectors did so, only to discover that some kind of dark shield negated all of their attacks!

No matter how much they fired their weapons, the surprisingly fragile-looking layer of darkness absorbed everything as if it was shunting the incoming fire to another dimension!

While such a means of defense was by no means unknown to human civilization, it was an unattainable product of high technology! Something as fancy like this shouldn't be present in the Nyxian Gap.

What was worse was that this powerful shielding effect didn't appear to be driven by technology. Instead, the same sorcery that called down an anomaly over Ulimo Citadel seemed to manipulate it in a way that allowed the shrine to remain completely undamaged!

"Throw in the bombs and detonate as quickly as possible!"

"It's too late!"

Before the attackers could enact any other plan, the boiling darkness began to produce a large number of shadowy spikes. Within seconds, these spikes rapidly pierced everyone's chests, causing them to completely freeze and lose most of their motion!

Even Ketis and Lucky became impaled!

Aside from instinctual body movements such as breathing, none of them were able to move their limbs.

The fear in everyone's minds multiplied as they were rendered completely helpless against anyone who wanted to finish them off. No matter how much the frozen attackers tried to resist this highly-unusual restraint effect, the dark tentacles kept them imprisoned in a way that robbed the captives of all autonomy!

Enough time passed for everyone to realize their new predicament before a gravitic force acted on all of their bodies and brought them straight through the gates of the shrine.

Everyone's panic intensified as the darkness swallowed them all up. Even Ketis and Lucky were unceremoniously dragged inside.

It didn't matter if most of them still carried their weapons and other equipment. Without the ability to move, they could do nothing to resist what was happening!

The interior of the main hall of the shrine was hollow, but the entry of more than a hundred Xona Stalkers and other people made it a bit more crowded.

The unknown gravitic force deposited the frozen attackers onto a stone-tiled floor without regard for their posture or facing. Plenty of frozen bodies collapsed onto the ground or piled on top of each other as if they were just planks.

Ketis fortunately happened to drop with enough of a view to see the center of the hall.

A large ritual circle had been painted onto the floor with what looked to be blood. Strange, alien runes whose meaning completely escaped her were painted next to the lines.

Nothing about this seemed to be based on technology! The horrifying sight looked as if it came straight out of a fantasy drama!

Ketis managed to exert just enough control over her vision to observe other elements.

Robed bodies rested on the stone floor. She spotted the tell-tale signs of cut throats. Having cut a fair amount of throats herself, she expertly noticed that whoever had slashed the neck of these cultists did so from behind and likely with a knife.

The unfortunate cultists hadn't died too long ago as blood still poured from their wounds. The red liquid seemed to gain a life of their own and did not spill randomly over the floor. Instead, they actively sought to fuse with the ritual circle, strengthening it and causing it to glow redder!

Only two figures remained alive and fully in control.

First was the grey-bearded person known as Grey Watcher Xarnus. The old figure carried a blood-stained ritual dagger but didn't face the newcomers.

Instead, mysterious alien whispers escaped from his mouth as he knelt in front of a large statue that was as tall as a mech.

Made out of some mysterious dark metal, the statue bore the marks of age in a way that made it seem as if it had existed for eons. Corrosion, pitted surfaces and other marks marred its surface, but despite these flaws there was evidently more to this statue than met the eye.

The appearance of this statue was a significant source of distress to the immobilized captives! The statue depicted some sort of sort of aquatic menace. Depicted in an upright form, the clearly alien creature resembled a whale due to its streamlined body shape and enormous maw.

What caused it to look far more ominous than other alien depictions was the tentacles extending throughout the alien's body! These tentacles seemed to cast the alien in a terrifying light as they seemed numerous enough to envelop any prey in range!

In fact, the dark, opaque spikes that impaled and immobilized every captive actually extended from the statue's stone tentacles!

Not only that, but darkness continually spewed from the orifices of the aquatic alien statue. The newly-generated darkness supplemented the surrounding dark fog, causing the anomaly to grow stronger and become an even greater threat to those who aimed to take Ulimo Citadel down.

Hardly anyone inside and outside Ulimo ever expected that it held such a powerful form of defense. This unscientific alien ritual completely broke many people's conceptions of what was possible!

Even Ketis had difficulty trying to process what she saw. The statue seemed alive in a way that reminded her of LMC mechs, but this was clearly different!

While the grey-robed priest ignored the presence of the captives and continued to sustain the ritual with his heretical-sounding whispers.

The other person was different. Ketis became shocked as she recognized the familiar form of Grand Protector Roshaw!

Depictions of this old, grand leader were everywhere in Ulimo Citadel. Usually, the visuals depicted the head of the Dry Snakes in his resplendent pirate lord uniform.

Now, the man appeared in the form of blood-splattered combat armor. Trophies, gems and markings decorated his armor in a resplendent way. Combined with the green-and-yellow cape draped across the back, the Grand Protector made an imposing impression on the captives!

Many Xona Stalkers were wondering why Roshaw was here of all places. Shouldn't he be in the command center situated in the most defensible section of the pirate stronghold?

"Welcome to our shrine." The old man spoke as his faceplate turned transparent. "While I did not wish for the Larkinson Clan to attack my fine citadel, I am pleasantly surprised that traitors like you have exposed yourselves."

The pirate lord stepped forward, his armored boots clanking across the floor. The man stepped in front of the nearest frozen body.

"Since you have decided to approach this shrine, your bodies shall make for a fine supplement."

The pirate lord bent down to grab onto the armor and began to do something that seemed completely incongruous.

Roshaw began to tear pieces of armor off the frozen Xona Stalker's body! Whether it was his own body or the powerful servos of his combat armor, the pirate lord demonstrated enough strength to rip metal with his bare hands!

Due to the automated safety features of his victim's suit, the torn combat armor eventually detached various modules that had sustained significant damage. This hastened Roshaw's attempt at stripping the Xona Stalker's body from his cumbersome protection.

"Ah, that's better. There is no life in your armor. It's completely useless to us. We only want your body. More precisely, we want life that is intrinsically locked inside your biological tissue!"

To Ketis and everyone else's horror, the powerful pirate lord held the body with one arm and punched through his captive's chest with his other hand!

After ripping out the heart, the pirate lord grinned and began to throw it towards the ritual circle.

The still-beating heart did not land on the floor in a bloody mess. Instead, the statue projected some dark fog that enveloped the bloody organ, causing it to turn into a sphere of blood that seamlessly merged with the ritual circle shortly afterwards!

"The Unending One is pleased with your sacrifice!" Roshaw grinned as he swept his bloodied arm at the tentacles alien statue. "Though the heart is the strongest life-bearing organ, the remainder of your body has some value as well. Let me sacrifice what life you have left in order to please our greatest patron! Know that your body shall serve a great cause!"

The tentacle that kept the dying Xona Stalker immobilized suddenly pulsed. The body suddenly began to deflate as the dark tentacle drained moisture and some other energies.

It took only seconds for the Grand Protector to hold a mummified corpse!

The pirate lord then proceeded to recycle the waste. He tossed the dried and lifeless over his head. Some gravitic modules caught the falling mummy and automatically moved it to a hole in the floor.

The dry body dropped through the hole. It plunged straight into a tank that contained semi-processed ingredients!

Everyone who witnessed the pirate lord's actions increased their resistance against the strange restraints that kept them immobilized!

No one wanted to die in such a horrifying way!

No one wanted to turn into a mummy!

No one wanted their remains to be used as ingredients for nutrient packs!

Unfortunately, no matter how hard the captive defectors and Larkinsons tried to resist their unnatural bonds, they could not stop the cruel pirate lord from killing them one by one in order to fuel a completely incomprehensible and unscientific ritual!

Chapter 2308: Higher-Order Life

"Every human is made of matter. The same goes for many animals and aliens." Grand Protector Roshaw voiced as he picked up another immobilized Xona Stalker. His strong armored form quickly ripped his next victim's armor apart. "Each of us are made of atoms and molecules, the building blocks of the material dimensions."

What the hell was this madman talking about? Over a hundred frightened Xona Stalkers tried their best to fight against the bonds that held them captive.

None of their efforts yielded any results!

It was one thing if they were locked into place after being bound by alloy collars or gravitic manipulation. However, the only reason why they weren't able to move was because of the strange dark transparent tentacles extending from the statue of the 'The Unending One'!

Ketis had no idea how the Hallowed Abyss Temple managed to get this alien statue to come to life and use it as a crowd control tool. All she wanted was to shake herself loose from this unnatural restriction so she could fight for her life!

"I will not be bound!" She roared in her mind!

Yet no matter how much she willed herself to be free, the mechanism which stopped her from moving was considerably stronger. The dark tentacle that stabbed her through the stomach looked like a projection, something that was fake and insubstantial.

Yet this tentacle was more than a clever technological manipulation of light. This seemingly-fake appendage extended from the tentacled whale statue exerted real influence that left them completely at the mercy of the Grand Protector!

As Roshaw became accustomed to peeling off the armor of the immobilized Xona Stalkers, he accelerated his pace. It only took a dozen seconds for him to peel off all of the armor of a victim. After that, it only took moments to pull out the heart to empower the ritual and let the statue of the Unending One drain the rest of the body!

This was an awful way to die. It was one thing to die in an honorable battle. It was another thing to allow your death to further the enemy's scheme!

If that wasn't enough, the Grand Protector tossed every drained body through the hole in the floor. The nutrient processing plant made no distinctions in biological matter. No matter whether they came from plants, animals, humans or through artificial synthesis, as long as they were nutritious, the automated plant wasted none of it and stuffed them all into the next batch of nutrient packs!

More and more helpless Xona Stalkers fell victim to the Grand Protector's cruel handling of their bodies. It was as if the pirate lord solely regarded them as cattle to be butchered.

"Have you ever wondered what makes us living beings different from lifeless objects such as rocks?"

A terrified immobilized defector quickly lost consciousness as the massive hole in his chest leaked out huge spurts of blood. The pirate lord's gauntlet gripped a beating heart, its torn veins still dripping some scarlet liquid.

"Why can't rocks live like organic life?" Roshaw asked. "What does this heart possess that a synthetically-grown organ lacks? Have you ever asked yourselves this question?"

Who the hell would wonder about the meaning of life at this dangerous junction?! Ketis was more than glad to debate the meaning of life in a calmer setting. In fact, she occasionally discussed this very topic with Ves, who possessed very strong opinions on this subject!

"Did you know that the typical baseline human body consists almost entirely of six elements? From most to least abundant, 99 percent of our bodies consists of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus. Doesn't that list sound awfully short? Even though nature has shaped these elements in many wondrous combinations to produce functional molecules and cells, at the heart of our existence, we are not so different from ordinary rocks."

As Roshaw continued to sacrifice Xona Stalker after Xona Stalker, every captive experienced more and more despair at their eventual fate. They were unwilling to have their hopes and dreams end in such a cruel and horrifying manner.

Yet as the sacrifices grew, the darkness grew a little bit stronger. It became even more difficult to shake themselves loose over time!

As Roshaw came to his twentieth body, he still continued to talk about something that no one ever expected to hear from a pirate lord..

"There is something different about organisms like us that makes us more than animated objects." He rambled on. "In my younger years, I was ignorant to this fact. I thought that reality worked exactly as I perceive it with my senses. If something can't be seen, felt or heard, it wasn't worth thinking about. How wrong I was. This universe is so much greater than what we are able to perceive with our shallow senses. After becoming exposed to just an inkling to the mysteries of life, I understood how small and limited we are. Our flesh and bodies are weak, unimaginably so! Even in the hierarchy of alien races in our galaxy, the human physique ranks at the bottom!"

Though his mechanical butchery fed large amounts of lifeblood to the ritual circle and the idol of the Unending One, his green-and-yellow snake-patterned armor became more and more dyed with red.

Some of the remaining captives had the mistaken impression that Roshaw was actually a monster who fed off the fright and suffered his words and actions induced!

In truth, this guess wasn't far off the truth. Those who were more distressed tended to make for greater sacrifices than those whose hearts were numbed. The degree of life they exhibited differed as much as an order of magnitude!

The Grand Protector became more enthused as he processed a third of the captures! "My benefactors enlightened me to several important truths that have changed my life. The first truth is that life is special, immaterial and incomparably precious! Possessing this single quality separates us from objects that have no life. Not even artificially-cultivated clones of ourselves can come close to matching our potential due to lacking this essential quality."

Just like Ketis, Lucky struggled vigorously against the tentacle impaled through his metallic body. His damaged and depleted state had weakened him enormously. If his body and his Misfortune Harness weren't in such an awful state, the gem cat may have been able to resist the bonds!

As it was, he fell in a similar predicament as Ketis and the rest. While Lucky didn't know yet whether this insane pirate leader could even sacrifice a mechanical lifeform to a dark god, the injured cat did his utmost to regain his phasing abilities!

"The second truth I've learned is that this unique quality of life is not fixed!" Roshaw grinned behind his transparent faceplate as he ran through half of the bodies of the traitorous Xona Stalkers. "Everyone is born unequal. We humans are exceptionally weak in flesh, and cannot bear much life. However, exceptions always exist, and there are a few lucky ones among you who possess the opportunity to bear more of this exceptional quality."

Ketis strained herself even more as she continued to try and figure out ways to shake herself loose.

"Life is special. Life is exceptional. Do you know the third truth I've learned? Life doesn't have to stay fixed. It can be cultivated!"

The pirate lord tossed another drained and mummified body through the hole in the floor. This was the sixtieth body he threw in the nutrient processing plant!

"Our flesh is weak, but we can make it stronger. Through manipulating the code of life that is locked within each of our cells, we can upgrade our bodies into something greater than our baseline DNA is capable of producing. Since we have spread to the stars, we have taken evolution in our own hands!"

The buffer of Xona Stalker captives grew less and less. Since Ketis and Lucky did not take part in the attempted assault on the shrine, their bodies along with the body of Lieutenant Ineron happened to be dropped in the rear of the pile.

Their turns came last, but that was not that much of a consolation as none of the Larkinsons in the pile managed to overcome the restraint imposed by the tentacles!

"Many of you ignorant people believe that the latter days of the Age of Conquest was a time of unprecedented disaster. Fools! Don't you realize how great it was to live in that time? The pursuit of greater life is always accompanied with sacrifice! How I sorely wish to be among the enlightened who understood this profound truth. One of my greatest regrets is to be born in the Age of Mechs. Worshipping lifeless machines like mechs is an exercise in futility! Life is the true miracle that we should be chasing after!"

The Grand Protector became increasingly more unhinged. His movements became rougher as he always damaged the captive he held as he crudely ripped off their armor.

The major downside of Roshaw's growing intensity was that he was working his way through the crowd of captives even faster!

"Do you know that life comes in different qualities? Low-order life such as you are inferior to those that have actively taken steps to control their evolution. Yet even I am inferior to the dark gods that reign over the Nyxian Gap! Their order of life is so magnificent that we are but specks of dust to these ancient, immortal deities! They have outlived the extinction of their races!"

Less than twenty bodies were left between the pirate captain and Ketis.

"And do you know what makes them stronger than us?" The Grand Protector tapped the side of his helmet with his armored finger. "The power of sentient thought. This is the source of life! Life is thought, and thought is life. The mysteries behind these truths are so unfathomable to me that I barely know why this is so. Yet that does not stop me from understanding that to evolve into a higher order, we must develop our minds! We cannot lose our ability to think as we transform ourselves."

Ketis, who only paid cursory attention to Roshaw's ramblings, suddenly paused in thought.

"This is my ultimate goal. Evolving my flesh is a means to an end. No matter how much I change my body, it is all for the purpose of enhancing the quality of life I bear. My ultimate goal is to transcend the mortal limitations of my body! Only then will I be able to live forever!"

Lieutenant Qwasma Ineron died an ignoble death. She had already resigned herself to her fate as the pirate lord used up her life and recycled her dry remains.

Roshaw paused a bit as he stepped in front of Ketis and the handful of paralyzed Mirror Raiders.

"Ah, so you must be the Larkinsons who thought to sneak into my castle. Foolish."

The artificial gravity underneath Ketis switched off, allowing the pirate lord to easily pick up her armored bulk!

Her heart beat faster and faster as Ketis' barely controllable eyes stared straight into Roshaw's eyes!

"You Larkinsons almost ruined my mission." The Grand Protector hissed. "I shall take great pleasure in sacrificing each and every one of you to the Unending One, starting with you!"

The pirate lord tried to rip apart the Rising Red Dragon suit. However, the tough Breyer alloy resisted his efforts!

"Oh? You Larkinsons are surely rich, but if you think this will stop me, then think again!"

Before Grand Protector Roshaw could grasp a weapon, Ketis finally made her move!

Inspired by Ves' theories on life as well as Roshaw's ramblings on the power of thought, she ignored her fears and every other distraction in order to concentrate her mind!

She thought of nothing else than her greatest obsession and poured all of it into her sword intent!

Her living mind sword exulted in her efforts. In this intense moment of imminent death, she burst out a greater degree of potential, all of which she used to feed her closest partner!

"SHARPIE, CUT!"

For the first time in its short existence, Sharpie escaped the confines of her mind!

It emerged in her head and flowed down to her stomach. The intangible sword cut the immaterial tentacle that had embedded itself in her body!

The tentacle was no match for Sharpie's cutting power!

Before Roshaw could react, Sharpie had already exited Ketis' body and quickly cut the tentacles attached to the remaining Mirror Raiders!

An instant later, all hell broke loose!

Chapter 2309: Plop

None of the captives should have been able to move.

The only exception was Sharpie. As an intangible living sword that possessed no material body, its existence completely fell out of the scope of the restriction effect.

No matter how Roshaw or Grey Watcher Xarnus instructed the statue of the Unending One to lock the bodies of their enemies, neither of the two could have imagined that Ketis actually bore an extra form of life!

As soon as she realized that the pet gifted to her by Ves remained unbound, Ketis secretly plotted to extricate herself from this predicament.

Though Ves probably never intended to make Sharpie exit her body, she thought differently.

Since Sharpie was a sword, why should it remain sheathed in her mind?

Swords were made to be used! A sword that never cut something had no meaning in her

eyes!

Therefore, Ketis mustered all of her concentration and forcefully tried to infuse Sharpie with the capacity to exit her body in order to cut the strange tentacles that kept her and the surviving locked in place!

Fortunately, Sharpie didn't disappoint!

The moment the surviving Mirror Raider soldiers regained their ability, they began to fire their weapons at the Grand Protector, the Grey Watcher, the ritual circle and the giant tentacled whale statue!

The attacks failed to make an impact!

The same grey shield that prevented the Xona Stalkers from damaging the shrine also protected the vulnerable blood red ritual circle painted on the floor.

Grey Watcher Xarnus also enjoyed the same protection. The dark shield that flickered into vision blocked every attack that attempted to pierce his aged and frail body.

The old man didn't even interrupt his alien mantra or raise his head from the floor. He continually prostrated before the idol of his dark god no matter how much chaos spread to the rest of the shrine!

As for the statue of the Unending One, its aged metallic construction had survived for eons against environmental decay while incurring only superficial surface damage. How could a bunch of laser beams and projectiles possibly destroy the source of the darkness that engulfed Ulimo Citadel and its surroundings?

The only target that sustained actual damage was Grand Protector Roshaw! Though his armor was extremely well-made, its armor plating was not as impervious as Breyer alloy.

"Impossible! How could you escape the grip of the Unending One!?"

"I'll tell you after you die!"

The pirate lord still held Ketis in the air, but that meant that he was within striking distance!

Ketis didn't hesitate and slashed her cutlass against Roshaw's faceplate! A shallow crack and other marks of damage appeared after she had vigorously attacked!

"Ahhh! You insolent wench!"

Roshaw withdrew a large hand cannon from his holster and fired into the abdomen portion of her Rising Red Dragon!

BOOM!

A surprisingly powerful impact struck her armor, causing her body to be flung from the pirate lord's grip! As her armored bulk soared backwards, artificial gravity reasserted itself, causing her damaged armor to bounce and drag across the floor.

"Watch out for that hand cannon! It's more powerful than you think!" She shouted.

It was too late! Though Grand Protector Roshaw looked surprised that Ketis survived the attack, the experienced pirate leader immediately brought his weapon to bear against the head of a Mirror Raider soldier.

BOOM!

The powerful round that Roshaw fired was no regular projectile! This extremely potent round exploded against the helmet of the Mirror Raider. As the unfortunate fellow's combat armor wasn't as resilient as the Rising Red Dragon suit, the helmet failed to withstand the incredible power of the shot and broke apart.

Roshaw whipped out a laser pistol with his other hand and quickly fired at the exposed head of his target.

The beam instantly burned the Mirror Raider's exposed head!

"No!"

"Come on, keep attacking!"

The frenetic battle continued as both sides incurred damage. Roshaw carefully fired his hand cannon at the helmets of his remaining attackers. Though his excellent armor accumulated a steady amount of damage, as protection that was fit for a pirate lord, its quality and resilience ranked among the top in Ulimo Citadel.

"This isn't working!"

Everyone knew this, but their loadout was limited. Ketis knew that if she didn't join the fight, all of her comrades would die without achieving any result!

However, her armor sustained severe damage after being hit by Roshaw's hand cannon at close range. Cracked armor plating and failing components marred her Rising Red Dragon's abdomen. Combined with all of the other damage her suit had already incurred, her mobility and protection was no longer as good as before.

"I have no choice but to fight!"

Though she eagerly wanted to charge forward to assail the Grand Protector with her sword, she eventually settled for pulling out her compact laser pistol and firing it at the pirate lord at its highest power setting!

The second-class laser pistol immediately attracted Roshaw's attention as a powerful laser beam vaporized a portion of his chest armor!

"Insolent!" He roared and ignored the remaining survivors in order to take out Ketis!

BOOM!

Before he fired, Ketis turned her damaged bulk to the side in order to let her side armor take the brunt of the blow. Plating shattered and delicate components blew up under the force of the attack!

"Ahh!" Ketis shrieked in pain. Though the inner layer of her armor managed to protect her arm, the impact still pushed her backwards.

She fired back with another full-powered shot. This time, she managed to hit the pirate lord's already-damaged faceplate.

The attack was so alarming to Roshaw that he quickly aborted his attack and switched his helmet to full-combat mode. Only a vague snake-headed visage faced the Mirror Raiders which looked ready to sink its fangs into their flesh!

The gear owned by the pirate leader of a great pirate group was not comparable to the Mirror Raiders! As the now-exposed Larkinson clansmen spread around Roshaw and tried to attack him from multiple angles, the great enemy ignored their attacks and focused solely on killing the greatest threat, which was Ketis!

BOOM!

Ketis knew that she couldn't afford to let any section of her combat armor get hit twice! The incredible power of Roshaw's hand cannon would certainly inflict serious bodily damage to her as long as there wasn't enough Breyer alloy in the way to absorb the damage in her stead.

For this reason, she continued to fling and roll her armored bulk around the floor so that Roshaw continually hit the remaining armored portions.

"Annoying woman! Stand still so that I can end you already!"

In the meantime, Ketis tried her best to shoot at Roshaw with her laser pistol, only to inflict moderate to superficial damage to the power leader's armor.

As a pirate who led an increasingly more wealthy pirate group, he had to survive against all sorts of enemies. For this reason, the Grand Protector invested heavily in his own protection.

However, the powerful laser pistol Ketis made sure to protect from any attacks packed a very powerful punch for its size. Though her aim wasn't the best, the integrity of Roshaw's armor quickly worsened as it endured a lot of laser attacks.

Unfortunately, the constant impacts kept spoiling her aim, causing her to delay too much in firing her pistol!

BOOM!

Her chest plating finally succumbed. As the most crucial component of her combat armor, its loss and the loss of a lot of essential systems immediately shut down many of the other systems of her Rising Red Dragon! The heavy armor plating and structural components that covered her head and limbs turned into a hindrance that severely weighed her down and exposed her to Roshaw's next attack.

Ketis had run out of options! Sharpie had already exhausted itself and she really didn't have any mental energy to empower it again.

Though she hastily tried to remove herself from her broken gear, it only took a single pull of the trigger for the Grand Protector to take her life!

However, just as Roshaw ended her life, the darkness and pressure in the hall abruptly destabilized!

Ketis, Roshaw, the Mirror Raiders and even Grey Watcher Xarnus were being pressed to the ground by huge and mind-numbing pressure that had suddenly spread from the hall!

"What.. our idol! What have you done?!"

The statue of the Unending One began to sway and topple as it somehow incurred a lot of damage!

To everyone's surprise, the bottom half of the statue that supported it had been chewed through. The culprit turned out to be a cat whose presence the pirate lord had overlooked!

"Meow.."

The increasing pressure along with the indigestion he felt from consuming the incredibly hardy metal caused Lucky to feel incredibly bad!

"This cat!"

Not even the prostrating Grey Watcher had noticed anything amiss as he constantly kept his eyes facing the ground. Never in his life could he have imagined that a mechanical cat of all things could have chewed through the incredibly tough metal structure of the statue!

The lack of support eventually caused the statue to topple over and collapse onto the blood-red ritual circle!

A powerful pulse of destabilized energy exploded from the damaged ritual circle. At the same time, the Grey Watcher's body became squished as well, removing any control over the ritual!

A large amount of black fog exploded from the toppled statue. The ritual circle dimmed, but the pressure on everyone's minds grew exponentially greater!

It was as if the broken statue's floodgates had opened! What used to be a smooth, controlled flow transformed into a raging tide that affected both sides.

Roshaw wasn't able to fire his last shot!

Lucky wasn't able to lift his body from the floor!

The Mirror Raiders weren't able to move, let alone think!

"You.. you ruined everything! Ahhh!" Roshaw screamed as his damaged armor form strained to resist the incredible amount of suppression released by the destabilized ritual.

There was one exception.

With great effort, Ketis managed to resist the suppression and strip herself from her broken armor. She stripped herself down to her underlayer vacsuit and the helmet that was key to her ability to resist the suppression!

"How can you move?" Roshaw asked with astonishment.

His greater strength may have allowed him to speak, but he was barely able to do anything else!

Ketis picked up her cutlass and laser pistol and strenuously walked over to the pirate lord's prone body.

"My gear is better than yours." She grinned. "Now die!"

She fired her laser pistol at Roshaw's damaged helmet at full power. She had no idea how long this suppression would last, so she didn't want to delay in taking out the greatest threat in the shrine.

It was incredibly easy for her to fire her weapon at a prone target. It only took a couple of shots for Roshaw's helmet melt!

Ahhh!

The protection lasted just long enough to spare the pirate lord's face from being melted! Unfortunately, the residual heat burned his face and inflicted an immense amount of pain to the leader of the Dry Snakes.

"Next time, don't talk so much."

Ketis stabbed the tip of her cutlass straight through Roshaw's exposed skull. The powerful pirate lord and one of the principal people responsible for killing a lot of Larkinsons died.

She felt no pride or accomplishment for this kill. If not for Lucky's help, she would have died along with the rest of the Xona Stalker defectors!

Her cutlass hacked at the neck of the pirate lord. After separating the head, Ketis lifted it up and tossed it into the hole on the ground.

The decapitated head of Grand Protector Roshaw plopped into the vat of ingredients. Without any fanfare.

"Here's your transcendence, bastard."

Something shifted underneath the fallen statue.

"You..." A different voice called. "Blasphemer!"

The Grey Watcher that should have been crushed by the weight of the giant statue amazingly managed to worm his way from underneath!

Not only that, but his convulsing body underneath his grey robe seemed to grow stronger and stronger.

A huge vortex emerged from the cultist's body. A substantial amount of darkness blasting from the broken statue began to enter into the vortex.

As this process continued, the pressure on everyone lightened up, but the Grey Watcher's body changed as certain abnormal growths grew larger!

Monstrous alien arms poked out of the Grey Watcher's robes! They grew larger and more vicious even as the cultist's body grew in volume as well!

Grey Watcher Xarnus was mutating!

"Shoot!"

Ketis fired her laser pistol at the Grey Watcher, and so did the two Mirror Raiders who managed to regain their ability to move.

Unfortunately, the Grey Watcher's increasingly monstrous form regenerated most of the damage!

Once the Grey Watcher's ballooned to the size of an elephant, an abnormally deep voice rang in everyone's ears!

"YOU SHALL PAY FOR YOUR BLASPHEMY!"

The Grey Watcher had turned into a quadruped lizard-like monstrosity with naked flesh. Though it looked wrong and flawed, the strength the body contained was very real!

Chapter 2310: Blessed Mutation

After absorbing a copious amount of dark fog released by the topped alien statue, Grey Watcher Xarnus completely lost his human form!

Somehow, his implanted organs and altered genes all mutated into a huge monster that massed many times more than his previous form.

Where did all of this mass come from?! How come this priest became so strong?!

"He's too fast!"

The just-recovered Mirror Raiders tried to shoot their sole remaining enemy down, but the fleshy monster didn't even flinch as his fleshy body incurred some damage.

The blackened and bleeding wounds regenerated in seconds, making it seem as if none of the damage was able to stick!

The monster let out a deep-throated roar as it barreled straight towards one of the surviving Mirror Raiders!

"YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR BLASPHEMY!"

With a huge, clawed hand, the monster grabbed hold of the Larkinson's armored form and lifted it up. The Grey Watcher lifted his captive even as the soldier kept firing his rifle in vain.

CRUNCH!

A sudden bite was all it took to crush the soldier's in half! The huge monster's sharp teeth crunched the upper body of the Larkinson apart, uncaring of the fact that he was chewing through a portion of armor as well. With a loud gulp, the Grey Watcher swallowed his crunchy meal!

With the remaining Mirror Raider firing lasers in the monster's back, the mutated Grey Watcher appeared disinterested in eating the lower body of his victim. The monster swiveled around and threw the bloodied remains at the other soldier!

Unprepared for such a move, the surviving Mirror Raider crashed onto his back from the force of the impact. Just as his armored form lifted himself up from his prone position, the thunderous stomping of the monster had already closed the distance.

A claw grabbed hold of the remaining soldier!

With a cruel grin, the monstified Grey Watcher repeated his earlier act and bit off the upper half of the Larkinson's armored body!

With another series of crunching, the huge mutant swallowed the broken contents of his mouth. As for the bloody lower body, the monster turned to Ketis and immediately performed another throw.

This time, he missed!

"That trick won't work on me, buddy!"

Ketis had liberated herself from every piece of equipment that weighed herself down. Left with only a thin layer of advanced material, her underlayer vacsuit hardly afforded her any protection against attacks.

What was worse was that she had removed the helmet that had allowed her to ignore the suppression up to this point!

She no longer needed its protection. The broken statue of the Unending One had leaked out all of the darkness it previously held. The darkness still lingered, but was slowly starting to clear up. Ketis was able to maintain her focus a lot better now that the pressure that cloyed in her mind started to weaken.

Against a monster like this, Ketis needed all the mobility she could get. With her Rising Red Dragon shattered into pieces, the helmet that she retained would only do more harm than good.

In this crucial final struggle, the last thing she needed was a burden of several kilograms weighing down her head!

The only weapon she needed was a sword. She held her trusty cutlass, which held out remarkably well despite the battles she had lived through.

As for the laser pistol, she had already overheated it due to all of the full-powered shots she fired. Even if she was still able to fire a couple more laser beams, she had already seen that none of the damage stuck.

This monster's regeneration ability was too abnormal!

"YOU..." The mutated Grey Watcher uttered with his deep, beastly voice. His huge eyes looked down at Ketis with disdain. "PUNY GIRL. YOUR TOOTHPICK CAN DO NOTHING AGAINST ME. WHERE IS THE CAT? IT MUST PAY FOR BLASPHEMING THE DARK GOD!"

The monster looked around and soon managed to spot Lucky crawling away.

"Lucky! Run!"

"Meow!"

Though the mutant cultist was able to traverse a lot of distance very quickly with his four powerful limbs, Lucky ignored all of his injuries and managed to squeeze out just enough speed to jump through the hole in the floor!

"YOU DETESTABLE CAT!" The monster roared with anger as his huge forelimbs reached into the hole, only to come up with nothing!

"Meow meow!"

Lucky strenuously used his claws to grip against the surfaces of the tunnel to arrest his fall. He managed to reach the other side of the small tunnel and grip onto the ceiling of the industrial processing hall situated underneath the shrine.

He managed to escape!

The furious monster pounded the floor of the shrine, causing some of the tiles to crack and the surface to crater.

However, the obsidian structure of the shrine resisted his attacks! While his huge fleshy physique granted him incredible strength, he didn't gain the ability to fly!

"Heh." Ketis smirked as she held her cutlass with a two-handed grip. Despite its modest reach compared to her favored weapon, she knew that she needed to use both of her arms if she wanted to have any hopes of inflicting damage on this monster. "You're dead, freak. Lucky will call for backup. I admit that you're powerful enough to crush anyone on foot, but we have mechs! If that's not enough, there are still some nuclear mines outside that we can use to blow your new body up! I wonder, will you be able to piece yourself together after suffering so much damage."

The monster released a wordless roar that rang Ketis' ears like a bell!

It seemed the monster was not as impervious as she feared.

She grinned. As long as her opponent could be killed, she still stood a chance!

"Come then! Fight me to the end!"

The monster released another angry cry and stormed over to Ketis, who looked incredibly frail with just a single suit and sword to her person.

Yet the moment the monster came close enough to grab her body, she nimbly rolled away at the exact right timing!

Surprised at the fact he missed, the Grey Watcher froze.

A sharp cutlass sliced the monster's flank, inflicting a wide wound that cut as deep as a finger's length!

The mutated body rapidly regenerated the wound within seconds, but the pain that Xarnus felt was very real!

The Grey Watcher grew even more furious! The huge four-limbed monster began to thrash around as he chaotically attacked Ketis with successive swipes!

None of his attacks managed to harm Ketis!

Though the fleshy monster was much bigger than a puny human, the Grey Watcher's agility was not as good!

Even though the mutated cultist was able to sprint much faster, that was only when he needed to traverse a straight line.

In closer ranges, his huge bulk and enormous muscle mass limited his agility. As long as Ketis successfully predicted her opponents attacks, she was able to evade the monster's clumsy attacks, if only barely.

This was not the first time she fought a huge beast!

In her Swordmaiden graduation ceremony, she hunted down a huge exobeast under similar conditions!

No woman could call herself a qualified Swordmaiden if she didn't slay an exobeast while armed with just a single sword!

Ketis continually brushed with death as she cleverly evaded the Grey Watcher's attacks with ingenious, trained evasive movements.

Whenever the grey monster had overreached, she brilliantly took advantage of the opening that presented itself and cut into her opponent's fleshy body without mercy!

The monster released another pained cry as a portion of his wrist suffered a deep cut. Ketis had managed to inflict a wound that went straight to the bone!

Ketis scowled as she rapidly drew back. She had put considerable momentum behind the blow, but her cutlass abruptly stopped when it collided against the monster's bone.

The deep cut regenerated within a dozen seconds. All of her efforts had gone to nothing!

"YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT, WOMAN!"

The Grey Watcher lost his temper even more! His attacks accelerated! Even if he exposed more openings, Ketis found much less opportunities to inflict her return blows.

Even so, she continued to maintain her calm. The floor shook over and over again as the monster continually swiped and slammed his limbs.

"You stupid priest! Is this what your evolution has resulted in? You've degenerated into a beast!"

"SHUT UP!"

Though the monster exerted a huge amount of threat to Ketis, her confidence only grew as she sensed the rhythm of the battle was within her tolerance.

Her opponent was strong. There was no doubt about that. However, his sudden transformation hadn't increased his combat sense!

He was still the aged priest who spent most of his time in supplication to his dark gods. Just because he gained a body blessed by the Unending One didn't mean he became a trained warrior!

The mutated Grey Watcher fought worse than an actual exobeast.

The latter grew up step by step in a dangerous alien biosphere and climbed its way up to the top of an untamed planet's food chain after honing his natural battle skills!

As for the fleshy monster that continually tried but failed to kill her, his clumsy movements and his mindless rage lacked any semblance of strategy or tactics!

Even so, the old cultist's horribly transformed body was horribly durable!

While Ketis managed to exploit the monster's untrained movement, any deep cuts she inflicted never lasted for long!

"HAHAHA!" The monster roared even as his powerful strikes only managed to whip up some wind. "MY BLESSED BODY IS IMMORTAL, JUST LIKE THE DARK GOD THAT HAS GIFTED ME THIS STRENGTH! SO LONG AS MY HEART STILL BEATS, I SHALL NEVER FALTER!"

The powerful Grey Watcher's heart just happened to be protected by an abnormally large ribcage. The bone had grown to such an extent that it had turned into an internal breastplate!

Ketis missed her CFA greatsword. She believed her main weapon was sharp enough to cut through the bone!

The longer the battle dragged on, the more she began to experience the shortcomings of her weapon.

While her cutlass wasn't the shortest of bladed weapons, its lack of reach meant that she was forced to let many potential opportunities go. Her current weapon had never been designed to fight against opponents of this scale. How could she possibly know that she would end up fighting a transformed monster in the middle of a shrine of all places?

"GIVE UP, WOMAN." The monster roared as he continued, letting his rage fuel his impotent attacks. "I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO HIT YOU ONCE, BUT HOW LONG CAN YOU KEEP JUMPING AROUND? MY BLESSED BODY IS INEXHAUSTIBLE!"

Even though Ketis had undergone a couple of CFA gene optimization treatments, her genetically-modified body could never match the endurance of her freakish opponent!

In a battle of attrition, Ketis knew that she would definitely grow tired first.

Already, her strained body began to slow at some points. Xarnus became more energetic as he sensed his adversary's weakness.

"YOUR END IS INEVITABLE!"

Ketis didn't give up! She continued to exert herself and she kept launching exhausting attacks despite their apparent futility.

She would not go down without a fight!

As the two opponents danced across the hall, they fought past the toppled statue as Ketis continually had to retreat against the monster's furious offensive.

At one point, her foot stepped onto a broken armor piece. Ketis widened her eyes as her footing slipped.

She started to trip!

"HAHAHA! YOU ARE NO MATCH AGAINST MY BLESSED BODY!"

The monster exultingly charged forward with both of his claws.

However, just as his limbs pierced through Ketis' body, she stopped trying to remain upright. Instead, she purposefully fell and rolled through the huge monster's limbs!

Though Xarnus missed, his cruel eyes glinted as he attempted to push himself around. With his prey this close, he might easily be able to slay his elusive enemy!

Yet to his surprise, his clawed limbs failed to push against the floor.

Without his notice, his duel against the woman had actually moved him all the way to the hole in the floor!

"YOU TRICKED ME!" The mutated monster roared as his remaining forward momentum had not yet abated.

Crash!

The monster's clumsy forward attack had caused the front half of his body to land right over the edge of the large square hole!

Ketis wasn't done yet. After barely managing to roll from beneath the Grey Watcher's bulk, she rapidly turned and climbed to her footing before launching one final attack with all of her remaining strength.

She stabbed her cutlass forward in the most vulnerable rear end of her monstrous opponent!

One of the lessons her fellow Swordmaidens had taught was that no matter how strong of an exobeast she faced, targeting their orifices was always effective!

As she sunk her cutlass deep into the soft flesh of her formidable foe, the mutated Grey Watcher released a pained cry unlike another!

At the same time, a reflex caused the monster to kick his hind limbs, causing him to inadvertently push the rest of his body through the hole!

"NOOOOOOOOO!" The mutated monstrosity roared as the artificial gravity dragged his immense bulk through the tunnel!

The transformed cultist fell all the way down until he landed in a sea of half-processed nutrients!

He fell into the same huge vat that had already welcomed all of the other bodies that had fallen through the hole.

The monster may be strong, but he was not a swimmer! Soon enough, the Grey Watcher's mutated body became submerged under a complicated soup of ingredients.

Ketis pulled her head from the hole after confirming that the monster wasn't able to climb or fly his way out.

Even if the nutrient processing plant failed to kill the Grey Watcher, at least he was no longer able to threaten her life!

"Blessed body, huh?" She muttered as she distanced herself from the hole. "How many nutrient packs can you fill?"