

Mech 2321

Chapter 2321: Life Research Association

The tour continued without Ves. Unlike his Braves, he did not have the time to explore the entire breadth and depth of Ulimo Citadel.

No matter what great and impressive sights this fallen pirate base offered, the Larkinson Clan was not on a sightseeing tour. The Larkinsons needed to tally and take away as many valuables as possible within a week.

After that, the task force finally began its long journey back to civilized space.

Though it would have been better if the fleet lingered at Ulimo for another week, Ves did not wish to take too many chances. Even if Calabast was correct that most existing pirate groups just wanted to wait until the Larkinson Clan left on its own, who knew if the Allidus Alliance secretly dispatched a punitive fleet to take revenge for Lord Drogen death.

In the few months that Ves and his clansmen spent in the Nyxian Gap, they recklessly killed many groups while provoking many more!

Ves wasn't ignorant to the cycle of hatred he perpetuated. Aside from provoking the mighty Allidus Alliance, he probably attracted the undying hatred of other powerful pirate organizations who supported some of the Larkinson Clan's victims in the shadows.

He was very much aware that his task force couldn't act as unscrupulously as before. With the loss of hundreds of mech pilots and the even larger amount of mechs taken out of commission, the clan and the Penitent Sisters no longer possessed the strength to conquer another Ulimo Citadel.

As Ves spent more and more time in the Nyxian Gap, he realized that its poor population density and industrial development did not mean that the local pirates were pushovers.

Anyone brave enough to hunt down Task Force Predator would certainly bring enough firepower to wipe it out when it was still in its prime!

Ves quickly wanted to process every matter that required his attention at Ulimo Citadel.

He met with various Larkinson officers and managers to discuss various issues.

He inspected various warehouses and secret vaults in order to judge which valuable materials to plunder and which ones to leave behind.

He visited the holding facilities which held the surviving members of the Dry Snakes and its allies to pick out the pirates with spiritual potential.

Even though he hadn't spent any time on his experiments lately, he still kept them in mind. Witnessing Jannzi's breakthrough and exaggerated demonstration of power gave him a couple of new ideas, all of which required testing. Ves therefore spent a considerable amount of time on inspecting every pirate captive with his spiritual senses in order to obtain more test subjects.

While a lot of pirates had died during the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, many thousands of them still remained alive. Ves found it rather fortunate that he picked up more than a couple of dozen useful test subjects from their ranks.

As for the rest, Ves couldn't care less. A quick execution was the best they could hope for. After losing a lot of mech pilots and surviving an artificial anomaly, many clansmen weren't in the mood to grant any leniency towards the Dry Snakes and the other pirates.

During his visit, Ves also met with the Xona Stalker defectors. Before and during the battle, they provided invaluable aid to the Larkinson Clan. The traitors not only supplied a lot of information, but also risked their lives to sabotage a lot of essential systems and even turned their weapons against their own comrades.

The defectors sacrificed a lot of their men and women as a consequence. Even so, when Ves met Captain Reina Ember, she did not look particularly depressed.

"We all knew the risks when we turned against our own side." The surviving highest-ranking leader of the defector spoke. "My fellow conspirators and I are all members of the original Xona Stalkers when we were exiled from Majestic Teal over two decades ago. We did not choose to become pirates. We were forced to do so. That has always troubled us inside, but..."

"Not everyone insisted on staying true to their original selves." Ves guessed.

The old woman nodded. "Life is harsh in the Nyxian Gap. I don't deny that we had to resort to desperate measures in order to survive. Years of living under these circumstances has converted more and more of us to the pirate way of life. The problem became more and more severe when we started to recruit local Nyxian pirates in order to replace our losses and expand our strength."

That sounded like a surefire way to transform a former civilized intelligence outfit into a ruthless pirate organization. As long as a couple more decades past, most of the original old guard would likely die and make way for the new generation of pirates who were crooked from birth.

The captain's explanation helped Ves understand the defector mindset. No matter how much time they spent in the Nyxian Gap, they still remained true to their original values.

He admired them for that. He wasn't sure if he would make the same choice if he was in their shoes.

Of course, the Xona Stalker defectors paid a heavy price for their decision. The defectors willing to join the side of the Larkinsons only consisted of a minority within the ranks of their group. The ensuing battle caused many of them to perish, thereby dwindling their numbers to a shadow of their original strength.

Even so, the survivors all consisted of older but very competent second-class intelligence operatives! It was no wonder that Calabast lusted over them like Lucky lusted after valuable exotics.

"You know the deal, right?" Ves posed. "Aside from those of you who are too old or injured to be of use, the rest of you will become a part of the Larkinson Clan."

"We know. Many of us have studied your clan and like what we see. We can find no better home for us once we have obtained our pardons." Captain Ember replied.

"Don't worry. We haven't forgotten about our promise to stop by the Life Research Association in Majestic Teal. I'm not sure how long our fleet will linger there, but you'll have plenty of time to reunite with your families and possibly invite them to become a part of the clan as well."

The defector leader smiled in relief. "That is all we want. We are not ungrateful. We are willing to commit to you and the clan. Anything is better than to see ourselves and our fellow comrades degenerate more and more. The Nyxian Gap is a great corrupting influence. You can't imagine what it is like to be confronted with harsh choices over and over again. Each time, there is a voice on your shoulders that urge you to opt for expediency rather than maintain your conscience."

"That truly does sound difficult." Ves lied. "Anyway, one of the reasons I agreed to bring you to our former state is because I already considered putting it on my list of future destinations. Our clan is very lacking when it comes to biotech-related services and it sounds like visiting a second-rate state that specializes in this area is a good way to remedy this shortcoming. Can you tell me more about the place you used to call home?"

"We have been gone for over two decades, sir. While we have tried to keep up with the latest machinations and developments, I'm sure the political situation has changed. Don't underestimate the importance of that. The way the LRA is run means that the policies and interests of its highest leaders can lead to significant swings."

"You Majestic Tealers try to complicate everything related to politics."

Reina Ember apologetically shrugged. "It's not that puzzling once you realize that everyone is constantly pushing their own interests. As long as you figure out their

agenda, you can already figure out whether you can work with them or whether they'll betray you at the first opportunity."

"Considering your history, it seems you Xona Stalkers haven't been vigilant enough."

"That's.. fair. Don't follow our example. When you enter Majestic Teal, please keep in mind to remain on guard against anyone you meet. No matter who they are, as long as they are powerful or wealthy enough, they are inevitably masters of deception."

"Is the stereotype really true?"

"For people at our level? Not necessarily." The Xona Stalker ruefully smiled. "However, it seems that there is a universal rule that anyone at a senior position is inevitably selfish. That doesn't necessarily mean that they will betray you, but you can't afford to expose any vulnerabilities to them. Don't think that being a foreigner will protect you. In fact, that might make them even more unscrupulous."

"It must be pleasant to live in this star sector." Ves mildly said.

"We all took it for granted. It wasn't until we were forced into the Nyxian Gap that we started to see Majestic Teal from an outsider's perspective."

If scheming was one of the most prevailing customs at Majestic Teal, perhaps Ves might be able to find an excellent diplomat to partner with or absorb into the clan. He could use such a person to help him navigate the complex web of interests in the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy.

The Xona Stalker Captain began to reveal more about her former state.

"The Life Research Association started off as a genuine research organization." She began. "Back then, it was merely called the Life Research Institute. Due to its valuable research and commercial success, it constantly earned more money. The Institute invested most of its earnings on acquiring more and more territory and power. With more territory and production facilities, it began to earn even more money, which fueled even greater expansion."

"At some point, it began to buy planets, right?"

"Correct. Planets, star systems and entire space regions gradually fell under its sway. When the Supreme Sage of the time suggested the Life Research Institute to change its name to the Life Research Association, its transformation into an actual state was set in stone. The LRA is much more than a biotech research institution these days, though it is still the market leader in many related fields to this day."

The LRA was a technocracy. Its highest leaders and government officials consisted almost entirely of researchers and scientists. Not only that, but many of them actually specialized in genetics, exobiology and many other biotech-related disciplines!

With so many researchers obsessed with biotech in charge, it was a given that the LRA was set up to facilitate their research as much as possible!

While there were many defects associated with this system of government, to outsiders the LRA was a regional holy land for biotech goods and services.

There were multiple reasons why Ves wanted to bring his fleet to the LRA.

Considering his promise to provide every survivor of the excursion into the Nyxian Gap a basic set of second-class implants and gene mod templates, Ranya Wodin needed a lot of reinforcements to tackle this enormous workload. Bolstering the Larkinson Biotech Institute was one of his highest priorities.

Aside from that, Ves also had a more personal reason to stop by the LRA.

The state literally had the word 'life' in its name. How could he refuse to explore the research-oriented state and debate the philosophy of life with its famed biotech researchers?

Ves had a feeling that he might be able to advance his design philosophy considerably as long as he explored the meaning of life with some of the foremost experts on this subject!

In addition, he also had a professional reason to visit the LRA. The state was one of the few in the Yeina Star Cluster that utilized biomechs on a large scale.

Their mechs were alive in a very different way. Whereas his LMC mechs were merely conceptually alive, the famous and sometimes horrifying biomechs of the LRA were literally living organisms!

How could he not explore this fascinating subset of mechs? Ves couldn't wait to visit the Life Research Association!

Chapter 2322: Xona Crystals

After chatting with Captain Reina Ember, Ves grew more comfortable with the Xona Stalker defectors.

Certainly, he had no doubt that the former intelligence officer of the Life Research Association presented a very deliberate image to him. His experience with spooks like Calabast and Leland taught him that each of them were very adept at social

engineering. They consciously molded their behavior to appeal to whoever they spoke to and employed several techniques to increase their favorability.

That said, Ves didn't need to worry about the former Xona Stalkers doing anything detrimental to the clan. First, they needed to pass Goldie's loyalty test. Afterwards, their connection to the Larkinson Network made sure they developed a sense of belonging in the clan.

If that wasn't enough, he was pretty sure that Calabast would monitor them as well once they became a part of her Black Cats.

After hearing what the Life Research Association was like from the perspective of a former citizen, he asked the defector leader to show him to one of its most valuable assets.

"Please follow me, sir."

They moved to a guarded vault. When they stepped inside, Ves immediately noticed the two large objects placed in the center.

Two large, irregularly-cut crystals loomed over him. Both of them were half the size of mechs and carved with mysterious alien swirling patterns.

They reminded him of luminar race technology, though the style was considerably different. The luminar aliens were diminutive and most of their crystal creations were small.

The alien crystals the Xona Stalkers possessed were opposite.

"These are our Xona Communication Crystals." Captain Ember announced with a touch of pride in her voice. "We own five of them in total. Three are spread in outposts and other pirate bases spread throughout the inner and outer periphery. It's a bit unfortunate that the Xona Stalkers in charge of managing those crystals are loyalists. They wouldn't have been sent to other places if they were more inclined to support our cause."

"That's.. a pity. Is there any way to retrieve those additional crystal?" Ves asked with a touch of hope in his voice.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, sir, but unless you are willing to take large detours and attack several more pirate bases, it's not possible to get our hands on them again. When the people in charge of the other crystals hear about Ulimo Citadel's fall, they must have already applied to join another pirate group."

His face fell. This was a massive pity to Ves! Oh, to be sure, getting his hands on two of these so-called Xona Communication Crystals was already nice. He didn't feel

disappointed at all. It was just that this unexpected prize would have been much more helpful if he got his hands on additional crystals.

As it was, his task force truly couldn't afford to attack those other pirate bases. Aside from the risks involved, his fleet would have to stay in the Nyxian Gap for several years to collect all three crystals.

And that was assuming they would stay in place! If someone secretly took the Xona Communication Crystals away, it was extremely difficult for the Larkinsons to track them down.

How was he supposed to return to his wedding in time if he wanted to chase after those additional crystals?

"Can we try them out?"

"Yes, sir." Captain Ember nodded and began to pass on some quick instructions to some Xona Stalkers manning some instruments. "The loyalists originally attempted to activate them during the battle, but we made sure to take out their men here first."

Ves observed the technicians preparing to activate the crystals. The setup looked pretty crude to him. The Xona Stalkers mounted a lot of data transmission connections to the surface of the crystals. Not only that, but whoever developed this setup also saw the need to supply a lot of power in the form of several ship-grade power reactors!

"This is a very energy-consuming process." He noted. "These power reactors can supply enough energy to satisfy a combat carrier!"

"This isn't the only restriction." His guide shrugged.

Once the preparation phase finally passed, the crystals were ready to transfer information. Ves supplied the operators with a simple but fairly large electronic document.

Though the crystals didn't pulse or glow any interesting lights or anything, Ves faintly felt the huge amount of power being pumped into them. This went on for several minutes until the power flow suddenly cut off on its own.

Ves approached the consoles connected to the crystal that was supposed to receive the transmission and inspected the received file.

"The document isn't complete. It got cut off at the end." He remarked with a bit of disappointment.

Captain Ember did not look ashamed. "The limitations are severe, but the benefits are still undeniable. We have owned these crystals for a long time. It's really a coincidence

we managed to stumble upon some alien ruins in the Nyxian Gap and uncovered these large crystals. It took years for us to decipher how to operate them, and as far as we know we are only scratching the surface of what they are capable of. While I can't say whether they pose a threat to us, nothing bad has happened with the Xona Crystals over the years."

Any piece of alien technology came with this caveat. You never knew what aliens stuffed in seemingly normal objects. Applying human common sense to alien inventions was a big mistake.

Even so, Ves still felt reassured to hear that the Xona Crystals hadn't exploded or anything after two decades of regular use.

"Don't judge the operation of these crystals by their close proximity. In fact, as far as we know, the range of this crystal is unlimited."

"Truly?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Well.. theoretically." Captain Ember said. "Our resident expert on these crystals theorized that their principle of operation is completely unaffected by distance. Even if you bring a crystal to the ends of this universe, you can still transmit the same document to it with no time lag!"

That was truly amazing.. if it was true. Though quantum communication nodes also operated in this fashion, Ves was not ready to bet all of his chips on this assumption.

"Does it work through heavy spatial warping and other interference."

"Ordinary jamming and interference is completely useless." The Xona Stalker confidently stated. "We have tried to employ as much jamming as we could squeeze in a single space, and the crystals shrugged it off. These crystals are also quite tough. Even if they fall or suffer a few bumps, they'll still work as normal."

"That sounds good. What about the limitations? Tell me the most important parameters."

"Well, each Xona Crystal can connect to another Xona Crystal for a maximum duration of 2 minutes and 34 seconds. While active, the bandwidth is extremely limited, so we advise against transmitting any projections or huge files. It's best to stick to text or simple data files. After that, whether the active crystals are sending or receiving data, they will turn inert for 86 hours, 29 minutes and 11 seconds before they can be activated again."

This was the reason why the Xona Stalkers stored two crystals at Ulimo instead of one. In case two different detachments wanted to send an urgent message to the main

group, at least an additional crystal would still be available to receive a message if the primary one had already entered its lengthy cooldown cycle.

Ves studied the setup around the crystals in greater detail. To him, it didn't seem as if the Xona Stalkers mastered these alien crystals at all. They were like children using rifles as clubs.

"Can the bandwidth, duration or cooldown time be improved?"

"We haven't managed to do so up to this point. Our head scientist can tell you more, but.. we killed him when we took over this facility."

"A pity." Ves grimaced.

He knew how painful it was to lose such a key figure. The head scientist must possess a wealth of knowledge surrounding the properties, operation and additional secrets of the Xona Crystals.

Now that he and his team were gone, the remaining Xona Stalkers only had some encrypted notes to go on! The worst part about it was that the encryption was so good that it was extremely unlikely for the clan's resident hackers to unlock them in a reasonable amount of time.

If the Larkinson Clan wanted to utilize these Xona Crystals to a greater degree, then Ves needed to start up a separate research team and get them to study these alien relics from the beginning.

"Well, even if we can't improve them, they are still incredibly helpful to the clan in their current state." Ves concluded.

The Xona Stalker nodded. "There are many more effective methods of communication in existence. However, there are few that can work regardless of distance and resist an incredible amount of jamming."

"Have you ever figured out if these crystals work in the core region of the Nyxian Gap?"

"No. We don't dare to step foot there." Ember quickly replied. "We aren't sure whether these crystals will still be able to transmit any data under such abnormal circumstances."

The clan would have to test that, Ves supposed.

"Final question, have you tested how secure the data transmissions are. Has anyone intercepted them or accessed them in any way?"

"While we can't say for sure, we have tried our best to do so. We failed. As you have seen, despite the huge amount of power they expend when they are active, they don't actually grow hotter or flash any interesting lights. They don't transmit any radio signals or release any gravitic ripples. The only possible way to eavesdrop a transmission is to bug or keep the auxiliary equipment under heavy observation."

In other words, while the crystals themselves couldn't be hacked, the setup surrounding them were not as robust!

"Okay. Carefully dismantle this setup and move the gear along with the Crystals to our fleet as carefully as possible."

"We will make sure the transfer will proceed as smoothly as possible."

Ves left the vault with a satisfied expression on his face.

The Xona Crystals reminded him of the Tzianti Crystals he once used in the frontier. Those were different crystals from the super-sized ones he had just witnessed.

Even so, Ves faintly suspected that both of them might share some relations from each other.

Just like the Xona Crystals, the Tzianti Crystals were forgotten pieces of alien technology that the pirates had dug up from some dusty alien ruins and repurposed them for their own use. Compared to communicating over the galactic net, resorting these strange crystals at least ensured the Big Two and every other powerful authority wouldn't be able to snoop in their conversations!

After spending a few months with the Darkbreak module on his ship, Ves was beginning to get a little paranoid about its continued presence.

When he finally obtained his factory ship, he didn't plan to install the Darkbreak module there at all. The same went for those alien Xona Crystals. No matter how many assurances the Xona Stalker defectors provided, as long as his clan failed to master the working principles behind these alien crystals, there was still a chance that something might go wrong!

After boarding a small shuttle, Ves traveled to his next destination. After descending downwards for a time, his vehicle finally arrived at a site where a critical battle supposedly took place.

When he stepped out, he immediately smelled the nutrient processing plant at work. He looked up at the large, automated structure and its dizzying amount of pipes.

"Yo." Ketis greeted as she pushed herself off one of the pipes at ground level. "You're finally here. You sure took your time."

Ves smiled and hugged her. "You look better than I thought. You didn't get hurt, did you?"

She shook her head. Her poofy beret shook with her movements. "Nah, but I can't say the same for Lucky. He.. doesn't look so good."

His smile dropped. "Bring me to him. Let me see what he ate as well. Anything that can give him a stomach ache must be exceptional!"

Chapter 2323: Digestible

Ves stood in the center of the shrine hall as he viewed a recording of Ketis' battle against the Grand Protector and the Grey Watcher.

In order to vividly observe the battle and capture the most details, he overlaid the actual terrain with projections taken from every surviving footage of the hectic battle.

Ketis had already taken the time to rip every scrap of data from broken armor pieces. Even when Grand Protector Roshaw ripped apart the combat armor of every paralyzed victim, some of them still possessed intact sensors that faithfully recorded what they observed and stored them in backup data chips.

The fidelity and quality of the footage varied wildly, especially due to the large amount of interference thrown up by the dark fog. Ketis only managed to obtain decent results by combining many sources of footage.

Tentacles piercing through bodies. Helpless victims laying paralyzed on the ground. The Grand Protector sacrificing their bodies while ranting about life of all topics. The huge idol of a dark god falling over.

Unfortunately, what happened next got cut off when the fallen statue of the tentacled whale suddenly spewed out all of the darkness without restraint!

The interference thrown from such a huge movement of energy at close ranges overwhelmed many sensors.

That was a pity. Ketis described a vivid, desperate struggle while she was eating lunch.

"Lucky and I never expected the Grey Watcher to survive having a statue fall on him. The way he managed to absorb some of the dark fog is quite abnormal." She spoke while eating the contents of a freshly-produced nutrient pack.

"So this fellow turned into a quadruped flesh monster as big as an elephant, but failed to land an attack on you even after several minutes of high-intensity fighting?" Ves raised his eyebrow as he watched the intact footage for the third time while he chewed.

He held a spoon with one hand and an opened nutrient pack with his other hand. He already added some hot water in the opened packet to hydrate and heat up the contents. He scooped up another spoonful of nutrient slurry and shoveled it into his mouth. A spicy, subtle taste spread through his tongue.

"I already told you, Ves. I'm a Swordmaiden. Just because I'm not a mech pilot doesn't mean I'm any less deadly up close. To be honest, the Grey Watcher would have been better off shooting me with a gun than transforming into a giant mutant. The Grand Protector wrecked my armor. If that Xarnus fellow just bided his time and shot me with a pistol without my notice, he would have been able to take me down."

"Cultists. They never make the most logical decisions. What can you expect?" Ves shrugged while he swallowed his latest mouthful. "I hope you don't follow in that stupid guy's footsteps. I know you prefer to fight with swords, but I gave you that compact laser pistol for a reason."

"That gun is quite useful, if a bit on the small size. It overheated during the battle, though."

The two continued to chat about her battles while they quickly finished the contents of their nutrient packs. They couldn't help it. While the flavor wasn't the best, Ves never tasted anything so spicy, savory and with some unique notes that he had never experienced before.

Due to his altered physique and metabolism, his taste buds were quite dulled. It took a lot of flavor for him to taste something enjoyable. The products of the nutrient processing plant just happened to exceed a certain threshold that made him feel as if he was eating something meaty.

"This is surprisingly good." Ves looked appreciatively at the empty wrapper. "Are all the nutrient packs from this plant as packed with flavor?"

Ketis shook her head. "Not exactly. The output is rather.. variable. Quality control here isn't too strict, especially when it comes to the selection of ingredients. The input changes day by day, which means that each nutrient pack comes out just a bit differently every time. That's one of the appeals of pirate-produced food. For many local Nyxian residents, nutrient packs are all they will ever eat in their lives. Tasting different flavors from the same brand helps keep their meals more varied."

That made sense to Ves. In a barren region like the Nyxian Gap, it wasn't as if there were large, fertile planets and landmasses lit by suns. Cultivating natural foodstuffs required a lot of space, so cultivating plants or cattle in indoor farms was fairly trouble.

While the Larkinsons already encountered a fair amount of sophisticated vertical farms at Ulimo, the energy, resources and manpower put into them was fairly onerous. In the

skewed economy of the Nyxian Gap, regular people could never afford to eat organic food on a daily basis.

For this reason, most people simply grew up eating nutrient packs instead. All it took to produce them was to process and mix a large amount of organic matter together. This could be anything from sewage, compost or even industrially-synthesized compounds.

There was nothing wrong with eating such food. It was simply a way to produce food that was nutritious enough for humans to live on at the highest possible efficiency and the least amount of waste.

In the most ideal circumstances, food produced and consumed in an isolated settlement or space station could be maintained in a closed loop.

The meals that the local residents ate were eventually discharged into sewage. That sewage flowed back to a treatment plant which broke it all down. The resulting output would then be brought to a nutrient processing plant much like this one and be made into freshly-produced nutrient packs.

This was simply a human method to shorten the natural cycle of consumption. A more natural cycle involved tedious, wasteful and time-consuming steps such as cultivating crops, feeding some of them to cattle, butchering them for meat and so on. With space and resources in places like the Nyxian Gap at a premium, how could the pirates ever have the patience to go through all of that trouble?

Even so, pirates could be quite creative when it came to varying the flavor profiles of their nutrient packs. Since they depended so much on them for sustenance in their daily lives, Ves discovered that they had become quite skilled at providing them with interesting flavors!

"I made sure to reserve a couple of crates of nutrient packs from this plant that you might find interesting." Ketis smiled knowingly at Ves. "I know you'd love them. They're quite unique."

"Mmmhmm. It's too bad that Lucky isn't doing so well. The local cuisine seems to trouble him quite a bit."

They turned their attention to a mechanical cat that was splayed flat on the floor.

"Meoww..." Lucky weakly meowed.

His cat looked like he had eaten something abominable and suffered the consequences of it. When Ves initially heard about Lucky's digestion problems, he reacted with worry.

However, now that he saw his cat, he felt his cat deserved what he had brought on himself. Who told him it was a good idea to eat portions of an ancient alien statue?

Ves couldn't actually tell whether Lucky would recover from inspecting his mechanical body. Examining his damaged and repairing body was pointless due to the sheer complexity of his construction. Scans couldn't even penetrate into his internals!

The true reason why Ves put down his worries was because he observed that Lucky was fine from a spiritual angle. Sure, it was showing signs of instability due to the great amount of discomfort Lucky experienced. Yet it was also growing stronger, signifying that the gem cat ultimately benefited considerably from what he had eaten!

In other words, the problem wasn't that Lucky had eaten something bad. In fact, the chunks of metal he ingested were both potent but very difficult to digest, thereby forcing him to direct most of his energy towards processing his difficult meal!

"Meow.. meow.."

Ves bent down to pet Lucky's exterior plating. He closely looked at the glowing rents that were growing smaller day by day. Even without his stomach ache, Lucky wasn't in a shape to play commando cat for at least several weeks.

"So the Misfortune Harness broke?"

"Yes." Ketis said. "The Rising Red Dragon suit you upgraded for me broke as well."

"Did you preserve your helmet?"

"I did. Our clansmen already picked up all of the debris and set them aside."

"That's good. I used very special material to line the Misfortune Harness and your helmet. I don't want to waste any of it. I'll build you a new suit of combat armor when I have time."

"You don't have to worry about that. I know you're busy. I can build my own or settle for one of the standard suits." Ketis brushed the issue aside.

Though she had a point, this battle proved that normal protection didn't cut it anymore for someone as important as her. Not every problem could be solved with mechs.

The Battle of Ulimo Citadel revealed the importance of a strong infantry force to him. Right now, they were something of an afterthought to him, though Major Verle and the various officers under his command already covered this necessity.

As a mech designer, Ves often exhibited a blind spot for combat forces that weren't mechs. Back in the Sand War, he adopted a dismissive attitude towards starfighters, even though they contributed significantly in the defense of the Bright Republic and other states.

In many wars, the confrontations between mechs decided the outcome of a campaign. The infantry battles that ensued mostly consisted of cleanup operations.

That said, the Larkinson Clan was different from a state. Infantry played an elevated role to them. Ves increasingly felt the need to invest specifically in a strong and distinct infantry force. He even felt tempted to design some exclusive infantry gear for his clansmen.

The reason for that was due to another shortcoming exposed by the previous battle.

The Larkinson Clan and especially the Penitent Sisters both possessed a lot of strength against material foes. Yet as soon as his enemies resorted to more esoteric methods such as calling down an artificial anomaly, much of the tech couldn't cope with the spiritual attacks that ensued!

The ghosts the dark sphere summoned were definitely manifestations of spirituality, at least partially. It took his own spiritual efforts as well as the help of the transcendent mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan to defeat the Hallowed Abyss Temple's efforts at Ulimo Citadel!

The rather heavy losses suffered by the Penitent Sisters illustrated the dangerous result of ignoring threats from this angle.

For this reason, Ves contemplated whether he should set up an additional mech troop dedicated to fighting spiritual threats. With the birth of Lufa, the Angel of Tranquility, Ves had the perfect design spirit to pair with the mechs fielded by this new mech force!

Still, setting up yet another new mech force from scratch wasn't easy. The Larkinson Clan already had its hands full with trying to integrate the Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers, Vandals and Swordmaidens.

He also doubted the utility of such a force. Most enemies weren't like the Nyxian pirates, who eagerly consorted with strange cultists who possessed shadowy ties with the Five Scrolls Compact.

Once he returned to civilized space, Ves shouldn't encounter too many weirdos, though he couldn't rule out the possibility entirely.

He decided to set this matter aside and revisit it when he returned to civilized space. Many matters couldn't be done when he was still in the Nyxian Gap.

Ves turned his attention back to the present. After caressing Lucky's tired head one last time, he turned around and approached the fallen statue.

The Larkinsons that came to clean up the site refused to disturb it. The fact that it looked awfully close to the giant alien monster that had almost threatened to wipe

everyone out was the biggest reason why no one wanted to touch it. They didn't even have the guts to poke it with a bot!

"Hmm. So this is the source." Ves spoke with an interested expression. "I wonder what it's made of. If it is potent enough to give stomach indigestion, then it's probably valuable!"

Chapter 2324: Unending Alloy

The statue was tall but quite narrow. It depicted the Unending One in an upright posture with its maw opening up as if to swallow the heavens. Its numerous tentacles stretched out from across his length and curled up in random directions in a chaotic pattern.

The only exception was the base of the statue. Due to the awkward nature of making a statue of a whale-like creature in a vertical posture, the bottom needed some support.

The solution chosen by its original crafters was to cleverly curl some of the tentacles of the dark god into a somewhat flat base. Enough tentacles pooled downwards to provide sufficient support for the statue in any environment subjected to gravity.

Of course, a more elegant way to keep the dark metal statue upright was to cancel gravity entirely in its presence. In fact, the aliens could have integrated such tech in the statue itself.

There must be a reason why it was built in such a primitive fashion. Though he knew nothing about the alien race who originally spawned this work, Ves was sure that they had access to a considerable amount of tech, enough for them to cross the stars.

Yet despite their suspected mastery of advanced technology, they built a statue dedicated to a dark but incredible spiritual entity using nothing but some unknown alloy.

The exact material quickly attracted his attention. Ves studied the scanning results produced when the Larkinsons came and inspected the shrine. Though there was only so much the scanners could figure out at a distance, he already became impressed by some of its physical properties.

The alloy was very dense but also very hard.

"If these scans are correct, we might be looking at a material that rivals first-class alloys!"

First-class! Ves truly wasn't kidding about the material's remarkable defensive properties. Whatever the statue was made of, it could probably shrug off attacks from the Penitent Sister mechs with ease! Not even the Judgement Lasers made by the Allidus Alliance should be able to cause it to melt unless they fired at it for an extended period of time!

Ves became so fascinated by the exceptional properties of this great material that he approached the fallen statue and touched the surface of one of its tentacles.

"Hey, wait, Ves!" Ketis cried in alarm. "That thing is dangerous! It's the source of everything that went wrong during the battle!"

"It's fine. This statue is completely devoid of energy." He spoke without any hint of concern in his voice. "Whatever energy or entity it used to contain is no longer there. Didn't you describe it releasing a lot of darkness at once? There shouldn't be any trace of the so-called Unending One left."

While Ketis and other people found the statue to be spooky and developed a taboo around it, Ves was different.

With his spiritual senses, he already confirmed that there weren't any traces of darkness or dark gods left inside the statue. Aside from matching the appearance of the giant avatar of the Unending One, there was nothing lurking within its depths anymore.

It was completely inert!

"Hmmm.. since it used to store a lot of energy responsible for producing the artificial anomaly, then..."

He decided to act on a hunch and inserted a small amount of his spiritual energy inside.

It worked!

The energy smoothly entered the statue as if Ves had thrown a drop of water in a bathtub. The fallen statue was not only a repository for spiritual energy, but apparently its capacity is far greater than he had imagined!

"This!" Ves became so shocked that he pressed his hand against the cold and dense metal even harder. "It has the same properties as a P-stone!"

Unlike the varied rocks he collected over a couple of years, the statue of the Unending One was different! It was made out of a single, uniform metallic alloy.

One of the biggest shortcomings of P-stones was that it was just as easy to damage and break as regular rocks. This was why he never thought about incorporating them into any mechs or other gear.

This was different. As long as he could repurpose the material of this alien statue into other shapes, he could build all kinds of powerful machines and devices with it! Breyer alloy was simply trash compared to this Unending alloy!

He completely ignored the taboo of affronting a dark god as he lovingly caressed the disturbingly-cold surface of the dark tentacles of the statue.

To him, this despoiled statue was not a frightening representation of an ancient eldritch horror that lurked in the depths of the Nyxian Gap. Instead, he viewed it as an exceptionally valuable block of materials that he could use to create some of the gear and machines of his dreams!

If he could cut off a few of the dark tentacles and shape them into armor plating, he could build some exceptional suits of combat armor for Nita, Ketis and himself. He could even use some of the scraps to build a tougher and more versatile version of the Misfortune Harness for Lucky!

Ves took a few steps back and observed the grand size of the statue. Its size was similar to that of the statue of the Superior Mother. However, due to its aquatic shape, its thickness and overall volume was actually larger.

According to the data derived from the scans, the statue was completely solid from top to bottom. This meant that the whale and all of its tentacles actually provided enough material to build an entire mech as well as plenty of infantry gear to spare!

The utility of all this Unending alloy was two-fold. It resisted a lot of damage, and it was capable of storing an enormous amount of spiritual energy.

If a material possessed just one of these properties, Ves would already be pleased. Yet to stumble upon so much Unending alloy that carried both properties at once was a massive, unexpected windfall to Ves!

Gaining this enormous statue was worth every single loss the Larkinson Clan sustained during the Battle of Ulimo Citadel!

As long as he processed the Unending alloy into powerful new works, the clan had the potential to rise to greater heights with greater ease than before.

"This is the perfect material to build an expert mech with!" He grinned!

What if he used the bulk of the Unending alloy in the expert mech revision of the Shield of Samar? Such a mech would turn into a true defensive bulwark!

Though Ves wasn't quite sure yet how to integrate the spiritual energy storage property with the resonance abilities of expert mechs, he had a hunch that it might be able to amplify Venerable Jannzi's barrier generation abilities.

One of the strengths of Jannzi's abilities that the defensive barriers she could project could cover more than just her mech. During her breakthrough, she already displayed

the potential to project a barrier that was large enough to cover the Scarlet Rose and several mech companies!

Yet the downside to covering such a vast area was that the energy expenditure was immense! No matter how potent force of will could be, it was still finite!

If Jannzi piloted a Shield of Samar that incorporated a lot of Unending alloy, then she might be able to store a lot of energy into it. It was similar to how Ves dumped the excess spiritual energy produced by his Grand Dynamo into his P-stones.

An even better possibility would be if Qilanxo could store her spiritual energy into the mech!

Since a mech made out of Unending alloy was basically a giant, damage-resistant P-stone, either Jannzi or Qilanxo or both could slowly insert their energy into it. The longer they deposited their energy savings into the Shield of Samar, the greater the protection it could offer in any battle!

With these formidable capabilities, such an expert mech would definitely rival or exceed the top expert mechs developed by the Masters of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony!

In fact, this was just one of the potential uses that Ves had cooked up in his mind.

Another option that sounded just as compelling was to reserve the Unending alloy to build Joshua's future expert mech!

Though Ves had made no choices at all on the vision and design concept of Joshua's expert mech, the importance of this machine was greater than any other expert mech, the Shield of Samar included.

This was because Joshua's force of will centered around life, and happened to match his own spiritual attributes with perfect compatibility!

Joshua was perhaps the most ideal mech pilot that could ever pilot his mechs. With such exceptional compatibility and synergy between the mech pilot and the mech designer, how could Ves not exploit this favorable condition to the fullest?

Whatever resonance abilities Joshua eventually developed, Ves was pretty sure that he could design and fabricate an expert mech that contained much more life than any of the mechs he designed before. Not even his Devil Tiger, which was arguably his greatest design to date, would be able to equal the machine he eventually intended to pair with his most compatible mech pilot!

Ves heaved more and more as a lot of great and promising design ideas flitted through his mind. The Unending alloy was practically made to realize his expert mech design ambitions!

For a moment, he became exceptionally greedy for more of these ancient statues. How many of them did the Hallowed Abyss Temple excavate from the alien ruins of the Nyxian Gap?

Considering that this exceptionally valuable statue was casually placed in a mere shrine in the inner periphery of the Nyxian Gap, it shouldn't be rare or valuable to the cultists.

What if the Hallowed Abyss Temple possessed hundreds of statues? What if they were spread in numerous other pirate bases?

Ves felt tempted to cancel all of his current plans and keep hitting pirate bases that hosted similar shrines. Even if he lost a couple of hundred more mech pilots, obtaining yet another statue of a dark god was worth the tradeoff!

"I can't!" He suddenly reminded himself.

His logic asserted itself. It was all well and good to make such a tradeoff, but Task Force Predator couldn't sustain so many losses. Their current strength had already dipped below a level he felt comfortable with. Attacking formidable pirate bases such as Frostbite Fortress would likely doom the entire task force entirely, especially when the Grey Watchers stationed at those shrines conducted destructive rituals!

Aside from this risk, Ves had an even greater reason why he couldn't afford to chase after more statues of the dark gods.

He needed to return in time to catch his own wedding!

This reason alone was enough for him to shelve his ambitious plans to collect enough Unending alloy to build a mech company's worth of expert mechs.

"I'm being too greedy." He shook his head.

It pained him quite a bit to let go of this opportunity to obtain more of this fantastic material. With its two vital properties, Unending alloy was perhaps the best and most suitable material for him to build his mechs with. The mech designer within him raged at the enormous opportunity he was missing, but the other parts of him feared how badly Gloriana would react if he casually asked to postpone their wedding for a couple of years.

To Ves, pissing off Gloriana was a far more frightening outcome than pissing off all of the dark gods in the Nyxian Gap!

"Okay, forget about it. I should be happy with what I've gotten."

After he calmed himself down, he ordered the statue to be taken away. Its size and density made it rather difficult to take it away. The extensive problems the transportation crew experienced reminded Ves of a very important detail.

"Wait, if all of this Unending alloy is so resistant to damage, how can I extract it from the statue?"

He doubted that any of the industrial machines in his fleet could process such a hardy material. Perhaps not even the formidable production equipment of his upcoming factory ship was capable of working with such a powerful first-class alloy!

"Do I have to get Lucky to bite the statue into pieces in order to work with the material?"

"Meoww...."

Chapter 2325: Shortcomings

The jubilation he felt at obtaining a huge amount of newly-discovered Unending alloy didn't last long. After he picked up Lucky and left the shrine, Ves visited a vault that presumably stored the Grand Protector's most valuable possessions.

The old man collected a lot of trophies and interesting materials over the years. Much of the random scraps of medium and high-grade exotics could be used to build higher-performing mechs, though their low individual quantities made it difficult to do so. If nothing else, Ves could trade them for other strategic materials that weren't easily available.

Yet of all of the valuables contained in the small vault, Ves hadn't seen hide or hair of any B-stones!

"Where did the Grand Protector store all of his B-stone?! I thought that Ulimo Citadel was supposed to sit on top of an entire deposit of this material!"

"Uhm, sir, we found the material you were looking for in the Grand Protector's personal estate. The properties match the parameters that you have specified."

"Take me there!"

They moved to a small palace built closer to the center of Ulimo Citadel. A lot of effort had been put into planting gardens and adding opulent decorations.

Ves wasn't interested in these useless aesthetics. He stormed through the front gates and followed his guide to the master bedroom of the mansion.

He soon came face to face with the biggest concentration of B-stone he had ever seen.

"It's.. a bed?"

The king-sized bed certainly looked comfortable. The thick, soft pillows and smooth, gentle fabric didn't appear to be made in a rotten place like the Nyxian Gap. Ves was sure that the Grand Protector managed to import it from civilized space.

"Tear it all out."

Some of his bodyguards stepped forward to rip away the soft pillows, the exquisitely bouncy mattress and other useless frills. Only the structure remained after a few seconds.

Ves approached and touched the surface of the bare bed frame. He experimentally channeled some of his spiritual energy, only to encounter strong resistance.

"Finally!"

Though his men hadn't found any B-stone mines or containers filled with the spiritually-reactive material, at least he still obtained some.

He felt a bit disappointed at the quantity. Though he should ordinarily celebrate obtaining this much B-stone, after encountering the mech-sized statue of the Unending One, a mere bed frame's worth of B-stone looked inconsequential.

"Then again, I didn't necessarily set out to build a mech out of B-stone." He reminded himself.

Unending alloy was as hard and tough as the materials used to build first-class mechs. It might not rank among the top, but it was definitely within that range.

As for B-stone.. Ketis could probably chop the bed in half swing a single swing of her cutlass.

The sorry remains of Lucky's Misfortune Harness was a clear example of how little physical protection B-stone offered.

Therefore, B-stone could never be used as the main material for a mech or protective gear. He needed to layer it with another material with stronger protective properties.

Fortunately, he had just gotten his hands on a material that was even better than Breyer alloy!

Yet.. Ves didn't think it was so simple to layer B-stone and Unending alloy together. Each of them provided him with different advantages, but the problem was that their effects might not be compatible with each other!

B-stone blocked and interfered with the operation of spiritual energy. Ves was forced to apply a very thin layer of this material to the Misfortune Harness because Lucky wouldn't be able to turn intangible with too much interference.

Unending alloy possessed different properties. It was not only capable of storing spiritual energy, but was also able to channel it! As long as Ves experimented further with this material, he might be able to create more sophisticated applications with this wondrous alloy.

How could he make any half-mechanical, half-spiritual device he created with Unending alloy retain its power in the presence of B-stone?

Ves feared the two conflicting materials might cancel each other out! This was anti-synergy and something he least wanted to see!

"Maybe I can't have my cake and eat it too." He thoughtfully muttered.

On one hand, Ves wanted to build a suit of armor for himself that could protect him against spiritual attacks and other shenanigans of this nature.

On the other hand, Ves wanted to build a suit of armor that protected him from lots of physical damage and allowed him to channel his spiritual tricks and abilities with greater effectiveness!

It would have been great if he could combine both desires into a single piece of equipment. He didn't think it would work, though. He intuitively guessed that combining both materials in a single piece of equipment couldn't be done unless he processed the materials to a much more extensive degree.

Ves didn't specialize in materials science and metallurgy, but he possessed a lot of knowledge about it. Yet despite obtaining all of that System-exchanged know-how, he was completely stumped when it came to figuring the essence of spiritually-reactive materials.

Whether it was P-stones, B-stones or the newly-discovered Unending alloy, Ves didn't have a single clue why these materials interacted with spirituality. They didn't seem to share anything in common.

"There has to be an underlying reason why they are different."

He realized that his understanding of spiritually-reactive materials was quite shallow compared to his knowledge of regular exotics.

It couldn't be helped. He was a mech designer first and foremost. Without any prior instruction, he was only able to blunder his way through spiritual sorcery.

While it was easy for him to figure out some simple properties, he was unable to go any deeper due to his insufficient theoretical foundation.

This was not something he was good at or particularly interested in studying. It would have been best if he could set up a materials research group that solely put all of its energy into researching P-stones, B-stones and so on. Ves shouldn't do anything but reap the fruits of its accomplishments.

Still, setting up such a remarkable research group was very difficult. The main reason for that was that at least some of the researchers had to be spiritually adept!

Where was he supposed to hire such people? Of course, he could do it, but that would take away valuable time he could have spent on designing mechs.

Perhaps the only people who were eligible to join this research group were the members of the Five Scrolls Compact!

As far as he knew, many powerful members of the Compact were passionate researchers, and many of them dabbled in spirituality.

The thought of poaching some of the Compact's researchers instantly caused his heart to freeze.

Those mad scientists were dangerous! Each and every Compact researcher he had met were completely obsessed with their work to the point where they disregarded every ethical boundary!

There was no way Ves could hire or work alongside those extremists!

"Why can't these people be more normal like me?" He lamented.

Considering the extreme danger of hiring those kinds of people to staff a potential materials research group, Ves firmly shelved this plan in the depths of his mind. It joined the pile of thousands of other abandoned and neglected ideas.

"Why am I forming so many expansion ideas lately?" He frowned.

While some bots entered to carefully box in and transport the B-stone bed frame back to the Scarlet Rose, Ves began to take stock of himself.

He thought back on all of his recent thoughts. Aside from feeling happy about his material gains, he also experienced several significant shortcomings that hampered his ability to achieve his goals.

Whether it was lacking a mech force that was equipped to fight against spiritual threats or being unable to make better use of spiritually-reactive materials, Ves was awfully short in help in many areas.

"The Larkinson Clan is too small." He sighed.

In truth, it had grown astronomically in just a year. It was just that most of its growth was biased towards the mech forces and other essential services. Not even the Larkinson Biotech Institute was sufficiently staffed. He wouldn't have been so eager to travel to the Life Research Association if that wasn't the case.

It used to be that Ves was already happy if his clan was able to field mechs and keep the LMC profitable.

Over time, Ves gradually desired more. He wanted to acquire more biotech researchers. He wanted to hire more materials scientists. What was next? Ship builders? Mech component developers?

It felt as if he gradually wanted to expand the scope of the Larkinson Clan.

In the beginning, it made sense to focus solely on selling mechs and piloting mechs. The original Larkinsons were good at piloting mechs, while Ves took care of the clan's main source of revenue by designing mechs that the LMC could sell for a tidy profit.

The justification to set up the branches wasn't as clear. The Larkinsons didn't possess a foundation in anything else. While adopting talented outsiders into the clan partially addressed this shortcoming, it still didn't change the fact that his clan wasn't set up to undergo so many activities.

Ves believed in the strength of specialization. It was why the Life Research Association could grow into a formidable second-rate state in Majestic Teal. Its research and applications into biotech conveyed the institute-turned-state a powerful competitive advantage which it leveraged to trade for other essentials.

He faintly felt that his Larkinson Clan might be following the growth trajectory of the LRA.

"Are we evolving into a state?"

He felt a bit mixed about this direction. While he wanted his clan to become self-sufficient, he didn't want his clan to get bogged down by too many responsibilities. The problem was that adding more responsibilities was inevitable if he wanted to grow stronger.

"Well, this is not an immediate issue." He shrugged.

Ves checked his itinerary and found that he had seen all there was to see at Ulimo. He quietly departed the pirate base and returned to Scarlet Rose.

Once he reached his ship, he headed straight to the isolated chamber and activated the Darkbreak module. He decided to call Master Willix.

"Hello, Ves." The Master Mech Designer's physical projection appeared as soon as she accepted the call. "I have been waiting to hear more details about your successful assault."

"Ah, my people have just finished sorting out what happened during the near-disaster. A lot of confusing stuff happened and much of our logs and data don't make any sense. Forgive us for not providing you with clear recordings and telemetry during the latter half of the battle."

He waved his hand, transferring one of the files he had just obtained from Major Verle.

The Darkbreak module almost instantly transferred the large data package to Master Willix at Centerpoint. She rapidly opened the package and rapidly skimmed over some of the documents and footage with her implant.

She quickly frowned and threw a disapproving stare at him. "I see what you mean."

Ves spread his hands. "These Nyxian pirates have become more and more outrageous with each passing day. Not only did the Dry Snakes employ a lot of taboo weapons, they also manipulated the unstable fabric of spacetime of the Nyxian Gap."

He expressly avoided any mention of gods, spirituality, psionic power or anything else outside the norm. He even brushed aside Venerable Jannzi's amazing breakthrough.

The sanitized footage, reports and logs he sent to Master Willix and the MTA shouldn't possess any incriminating material!

He didn't even want to put on his stupid hat to rant about gods. Talking about the Unending One was very dangerous due to the dark god's apparent connection to the Five Scrolls Compact.

There was something very dangerous about the Hallowed Abyss Temple! How were the Grey Watchers able to evoke great rituals and even absorb some of the dark energy themselves?

Random people could never accomplish these mind-boggling feats! The Five Scrolls Compact definitely had a hand in these developments.

Ves didn't want to get involved in this huge conspiracy at this time!

Chapter 2326: The Power of Love

The data you have sent is quite.. illuminating." Master Willix slowly drawled as half of her concentration was probably focused on reviewing the footage and documents through her high-performance cranial implant. "It is frustratingly incomplete. The footage of the most interesting parts of the battle are quite conspicuously absent. The interviews and written after-action reports of the mech pilots involved in the battle provide no actual clarity either."

Ves innocently shrugged. "I'm just a mech designer, and our task force is occupied entirely by mech pilots, ship crew and other related personnel. What do you expect from us? Our chief engineers barely know how FTL drives. We can't even begin to decipher how pirates messed with strange higher-dimensional physics. We searched the pirate base extensively after it has fallen and none of the pirate tech we've stumbled upon possesses the capability to warp the material dimensions to this extent."

Master Willix did not look amused. Her white lab coat shifted as she tapped her forearm while staring at him as if she wanted to peer into his soul.

It was too bad that Ves truly told her truth. Nothing he said was a lie.

"Can you explain in your own words your interpretation of the events that ensued after Ulimo Citadel became surrounded by this artificially-induced anomaly?"

"Well, we all felt really bad. Everyone could sense that there was something fundamentally wrong about it. The dark fog has a strong isolating effect so none of us knew what was going on. It took a lot of trouble to beat it back."

"Hmmm... there is an interesting detail in your data. You and your Larkinsons state that you have eventually beaten back these abnormal phenomena by relying on your expert candidates and newly-gained expert pilot. While your Larkinson Clan is blessed with the presence of exceptional mech pilots, I note that your ship, the Scarlet Rose, did not carry any of the sort when venturing into the anomaly. What gave you the confidence that your ship and the mechs you have brought with you would resist the anomaly?"

Oh, damn. Master Willix wasn't willing to let this interesting detail pass without further comment. It seemed that Ves couldn't avoid putting on his crazy hat after all. Here goes another session of spewing nonsense.

"Faith."

"..Pardon?"

"Faith." Ves offered Willix's physical projection a mild but confident smile. "As you are no doubt aware of, our clan has adopted many interesting people with remarkable abilities. James Ylvaine, the Living Prophet, has been my guide and counselor in all

matters regarding faith. As the founder of a faith and a reborn prophet, he is intimately more qualified to tackle the unknowable and unfathomable. He has been of remarkable assistance in advising us how to rely on our faith to shield us from the horrors of the Nyxian Gap. Though we are small in comparison to the anomaly, we managed to hold it off for a time."

"That sounds.. remarkable."

"If you wish, I can request the Living Prophet to detail his own experiences." Ves magnanimous offered. "I highly advise you to hear him out via a recording, though I'm sure he can write down his thoughts if you prefer that instead. If you would rather interview him directly, I can call him over to the Scarlet Rose immediately. It will probably take thirty minutes or so for him to arrive."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Larkinson. We prefer to work with solid data rather than subjective interpretation. It is a pity that your ships aren't better equipped."

"We are in the process of obtaining some better ships, but even if we had some, it isn't a good idea to bring capital ships into the Nyxian Gaps. Navigating around the asteroids is hellish and such a huge ship is too slow and cumbersome to get anywhere in a reasonable amount of time."

The Master lifted a finger, causing some projections of some very strange-looking ships to appear into view. Ves immediately noticed that many of these starships were medium-sized but boasted a lot of advanced sensor arrays across their hulls.

"I am aware that you are in the process of building up your fleet." She spoke. "I highly advise you to invest in a serious science or exploration vessel. These types of ships are specialized in studying unknown phenomena and unknown satellites. If you had such a vessel in your fleet, you wouldn't have ended up with so little usable data."

"These ships don't seem to fit my budget, ma'am. We are looking to acquire other important vessels first. Buying a fleet carrier and an ark ship doesn't come cheap, especially if they have to be robust and durable enough to survive the Red Ocean. Aside from that, our clan must invest in the design and production of one or several expert mechs."

The Master Mech Designer shook her head at him in disappointment.

"A good science vessel can save your life in a way a fleet carrier can never achieve. Don't underestimate the importance of investing in good sensors and scanners and the hardware required to interpret their data. There are spatial anomalies and other natural or induced phenomena in space. Being able to peer through the fog and comprehend the truth of what is taking place will allow you to save your entire fleet one day. If that is not enough, the powerful scanners of a dedicated science ship are also extremely effective at detecting hostile stealth units."

Ves perked up a bit when he heard that last sentence. Guarding against stealthed vehicles and mechs had always been one of his persistent fears. He had suffered several times at the hands of undetectable enemies.

Even so, that still didn't cause him to change his list of priorities. The chances of encountering stealthed opponents and strange phenomena in space were fairly low, especially if his expeditionary fleet kept a low profile and solely traveled along normal trade routes.

What happened during the previous battle was an exception because Ves wouldn't normally bring a fleet to a place as dangerous as the Nyxian Gap.

This was definitely going to be his last adventure for a while. He witnessed so much excitement and collected so many new insights that he was ready to return to a calmer, more regular life. The inspiration he gained was so much that he could spend years on applying it all on his upcoming mech designs.

"Our clan will consider acquiring such a ship when our more immediate necessities have been met." Ves vaguely promised.

"Be sure to obtain it before or shortly after you enter the Red Ocean." She advised him. "You have not traveled to a lot of areas where there are high concentrations of energetic exotics. Some of what you have experienced in the Nyxian Gap also applies to normal space. I can tell you that the Red Ocean is not entirely safe, especially when it comes to FTL travel. Phasewater is a material that intrinsically affects FTL drives, so when a star system has a large quantity of deposits, you can encounter some very abnormal conditions."

She had a good point. While it would doubtlessly take a lot of time to reach the Red Ocean, he did not want to be caught with his pants down later on. Ves knew that the Red Ocean not only contained a lot of phasewater, but plenty of other high-grade exotics.

The two continued their discussion on some other matters. Master Willix eventually mentioned the other topic that Ves was least willing to talk about.

"Venerable Jannzi Larkinson's breakthrough is by all accounts exceptional. As you are someone who has grown up in a military family, you are doubtlessly aware of what happens when expert candidates exceed their limits."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "Compared to how Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Ark of my family has advanced to their current rank, Venerable Jannzi's breakthrough was a lot more dramatic."

"Unity of Man and Machine." Master Willix sighed as her eyes softened up a little. "Do you know how rare it is to witness such a grand spectacle related to mechs? I truly

wished I would have been there with you when it happened. The footage and dreadful descriptions of your mech pilots do not do justice of the majesty of perfect resonance. In fact, it should have been incredibly unlikely for this to occur. Much better mech designers and mech pilots have tried to reach this legendary state, but failed."

If Master Willix wanted to expose a flaw in his story, then sorry, Ves had already prepared his response.

"Those mech designers and mech pilots are different from us." He stated. "My mechs are alive. They are not soulless machines that act as tools or extensions of their mech pilots. They are living partners to mech pilots, and they can make their own choices! From the moment Jannzi first advanced to expert candidate, she has completely dedicated herself to piloting the Shield of Samar. She has forged a bond with her with her personal mech, and her mech is completely tuned to her presence. Don't forget that the Shield of Samar is still the same mech she piloted when she broke through the first time. By remaining loyal to her mech, her mech has progressed as well!"

Though Ves mainly spoke all of this in order to get Master Willix off his back, he truly believed what he said. The experiences that mech pilots shared with their mechs did not enrich just one of them. Instead, Ves boldly believed that mechs could advance as well!

The Ouroboros piloted by General Axelar Streon already provided him with a hint of what Venerable Jannzi might attain in the future. She followed the same path as the Terran ace pilot!

Master Willix asked some more questions, and Ves did his best to answer with his true views while at the same time coming across as obtuse as possible.

Even though a Master Mech Designer possessed a much greater understanding of mechs than Ves, there were areas where even she became stumped!

By bringing up vague concepts such as emotional bonds, intangible progression and mechs with life, Ves ensured that he conveyed the least amount of usable information!

Ves grinned inwardly as he eagerly relegated his eclectic views on mech pilots and mechs.

"The definition of perfect resonance is when a mech pilot achieves total alignment with their mechs. Doesn't that mean it is a given that Jannzi was able to achieve this state? Even if it was just a moment, her incredible accomplishment proves that my design philosophy has a compelling advantage in this area! Mechs are alive, and they have feelings. They are able to love and hate their mech pilots as well as any other life."

"Are you being literal?"

"Of course!" Ves spread his arms. "Don't you realize it? Unity between Man and Machine isn't as mysterious as you think. As long as you consider the 'Machine' portion as alive, sentient and capable of feeling emotions, then the relationship becomes much more simpler. The two of them are in love! Love is one of the strongest emotions in existence, and it is through the power of love that Venerable Jannzi and the Shield of Samar has achieved the greatest possible resonance!"

"The power of love." Master Willix flat repeated. "This is not an action drama, Ves. We are talking about real events."

"You don't get it, Master! The power of love is real, and it is one of the greatest ways to empower mechs. How can mech designers possibly design the strongest mechs when they never impart the capacity to feel love to their work? It's a travesty! They are crippling their products, depriving both the mechs and their mech pilots the opportunity to develop a power that transcends what is possible!"

It was safe to say that Master Willix did not pursue this topic much further. Love was very subjective and couldn't be quantified at all!

Chapter 2327: Happy Gains

Ves felt as if he was becoming more and more adept at misdirection.

Each time he had to explain himself to Master Willix, he resorted to increasingly more foolproof methods of distorting the truth.

Before, he might have resorted a lot more to outright lying. However, doing so always exposed some loopholes. Perhaps the known facts might contradict his statements. Perhaps other people claimed the opposite. Whatever the case, Ves gradually realized that lying about the truth was actually the worst form of misdirection.

Ves was fairly confident that he could cheat most forms of lie detection by donning a mask. However, he always felt that Master Willix never quite bought his bold-faced lies. No matter how much he controlled his intonation, passion and micro-expressions, he couldn't close all of the loopholes by adjusting his own behavior.

Lying through omission was the next level of misdirection. By simply avoiding mention of what he didn't want to say, he conveniently escaped the need to say anything sensitive that he would rather keep under wraps.

Of course, the challenge with this more effective method was that he had to distract his audience.

In this, Ves discovered that emulating James was the best way to confound the likes of Master Willix!

There was an art to saying the truth but avoiding anything relevant. Ves gradually realized that the key to pulling it off was by presenting certain statements that inevitably led to a dead end!

No matter how much his audience wanted to follow through, the topic that Ves had steered towards ended straight into a wall!

Ves shamelessly copied the Living Prophet's verbal methods. He hoped that Master Willix experienced the same kind of frustration and lack of clarity that he often felt when he talked to the clone!

It worked.

He laughed himself stupid inside his mind as he confounded the incredibly intelligent and experienced Master Mech Designer.

The best part of it all was that Ves truly spoke from his heart! Though he deliberately exaggerated his views, he really did believe in the power of love!

As a passionate mech designer, Ves deeply valued emotion. Philosophically, he believed that sentient life distinguished itself from non-sentient life by feeling emotions.

Could AIs feel love? Everyone agreed that they did not, because no authority figure in this field believed that AIs could 'feel' anything.

Sure, they were able to simulate the behavior of someone who felt emotions. Yet no matter how closely these AIs passed themselves off as the genuine products, in the end they lacked the most essential quality that turned falsehood into reality.

This was what made his design philosophy so perplexing and infuriating to rational mech designers such as Master Willix.

Ves very much explicitly designed his mechs with the premise that they were alive. Not only that, they were also sentient.

As a result, they could feel emotions.

A few months ago, he actually possessed slightly different views on this topic. He emphasized his design spirits so much in his latter mech designs that he unconsciously began to equate them as the 'life' of his mech designs!

This was the wrong interpretation. What happened during the Battle of Ulimo Citadel opened his eyes to the factors he had gradually neglected.

When the artificial anomaly dampened the presence of Qilanxo, Jannzi and the Shield of Samar were able to break through on their own. The former expert candidate did not rely on any external help other than her mech to undergo apotheosis!

Her breakthrough revealed to him that the most important life in mechs was not their design spirit, but their intrinsic individuality!

This was a quality that could not be taken from mechs unless they died. Though it wasn't as strong and flashy as a design spirit, the intrinsic life of mechs bonded to their mech pilots to a much more personal degree.

Aside from a few noticeable exceptions, most of his design spirits were connected to many mech pilots. How could the Solemn Guardian ever develop an intimate personal relationship with any mech pilot when there were millions of Desolate Soldiers in use? Any design spirit that ended up in such a situation would inevitably adopt a more uniform approach.

This was what made his design spirit-empowered mechs so potent. Their strong and identical auras were perfect for aligning the thoughts of many mech pilots. The glows effectively forced other mech pilots in their influence to become more aligned.

Such an effect was of great value in large conflicts.

In the Sand War, his Desolate Soldier encouraged many mech pilots and starfighter pilots to do their duty.

He never put that much emphasis on developing the customers of his Soldier product line. Who cared about maximizing the potential of individual mech pilots when the sandmen were slaughtering trillions of innocent people?

In those dark and desperate days, many states already experienced a lot of trouble in keeping as many of their mech pilots involved as possible. Though his Soldier product line robbed many mech pilots of their own thoughts, they at least persisted longer in battle!

As for the Komodo War, the Blessed Squire already showed amazing potential at energizing the Hex Army.

One of the traits that most mech militaries emphasized was esprit de corps. The Hex Army heavily emphasized uniformity in the mechs and gear its soldiers utilized. That same focus also extended to its martial culture.

Therefore, the introduction of a mech that effectively strengthened the esprit de corps fell exactly in line with what the Hexers wanted! The greater their unity, the higher their morale in battle!

Arguably, uniformity was also a boon to the Larkinson Clan. The existence of the Golden Cat played a central role in uniting tens of thousands of adopted Larkinsons to a common cause. Brighters, Ylvainans, Reinaldans, Sentinel commoners and many more people all united under the influence of the Larkinson Network and the Bright Warriors.

This was why he did not believe he had made a mistake in venturing too much in this direction. The innovations he realized and the applications he developed would remain relevant and useful throughout the remainder of his career.

He just thought that the essence of his design philosophy lay in a different direction.

It was never his intention to design a mech that forced everyone to think and feel the same way. That was a distortion of life, not a celebration of life. It did not entirely fall in line with his dreams and ambitions.

Even though the Bright Warrior was superior to the Shield of Samar in almost any way, Ves viewed the latter as a greater success.

The Shield of Samar caused him to move closer to accomplishing his goals.

Recognizing this essential truth was the key to breaking his obsession with design spirits. No matter how much he tried to develop them, they did not actually bring more life to his mechs. This must also be the reason why the System never gave him any higher marks on the X-Factor of his mechs.

In any case, Ves felt more and more impatient to return to his ongoing mech projects. He wanted to correct his mistake and reorient his ongoing mech designs as much as possible!

He became increasingly more impatient to end his discussion with Master Willix. While many other mech designers in his shoes would have scolded him for disrespecting a great authority in mech design, Ves was a firm believer in himself.

"Let's move to the reward that you are entitled to receive from us." Master Willix eventually spoke, immediately causing Ves to snap to full attention. "During this time, we have extensively analyzed and processed all of the evidence you have supplied about the prohibited weapons you have encountered at Ulimo Citadel. We have confirmed that all of it is authentic, though lacking in detail in many cases. You need to invest in better sensors, Mr. Larkinsons."

"It's on the list."

Willix eyed him with a stern expression. "Regardless, we have already calculated the bounties for destroying these reprehensible weapons and applied a multiplier to the final figure as promised. Your final reward amounts to 9,431,564 MTA merits."

9,431,564 MTA merits.

Not credits. Merits.

Ves let out a deep breath.

A huge amount of elation burst from his body!

"Thank you, ma'am! It is a pleasure to be of service to the great Mech Trade Association! Though we have made a painful sacrifice to remove a blight from existence, our mech pilots have not died in vain!"

His excitement only dropped a bit when he realized he still needed to subtract 2,250,000 MTA merits from his gains. He paid 2 million MTA merits to receive a temporary dispensation to make use of taboo weapons and he also gave up 250,000 MTA merits to provide amnesty to the Xona Stalkers.

In ordinary times, giving away so much merits was unthinkable! If Ves wasn't so confident that he would be able to gain a lot more merits after paying this hefty price, he wouldn't have resorted to such extremes!

Ves was very much aware that this was just a one-time deal. The latest developments in the Nyxian Gap truly infuriated the MTA, and Ves just happened to be in a position to enact the Association's will.

There was no way that Ves would be able to gain permission to use superweapons in subsequent battles! Let alone 2 million MTA merits, not even 100 million MTA merits was worth it for the Association to look the other way! This was because making such weapons in ordinary conflicts would definitely impact the stability of human space!

In any case, now that the MTA finally lived up to its promise and awarded him a spectacular amount of merits, Ves let down all of his worries.

"Is there anything else, ma'am?" He impatiently asked.

"Before you go, I would like to address one more topic with you. Now that your Larkinson Clan has welcomed its first expert pilot, you will have to obtain an expert mech. This is a machine that neither you nor Miss Wodin can deliver by yourselves. Have you considered how to solve this problem?"

"My partner should be in the process of soliciting others to collaborate on an expert mech design project." Ves perfunctory answered.

"I am aware of her efforts. It is not so easy to gain the cooperation of a Master, especially with the conditions that she has raised."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Are you..."

"Don't think about it. I am not at your beck and call." She immediately replied. "That said, it may be possible to invite other Masters to help the two of you design a proper expert mech. Your new gains can play a major role in attracting their attention."

"This.. I'm not sure. The merits we've earned are very precious."

"Different Masters demand different remuneration." She said. "Their time and expertise are very precious. It is up to you and your partner to determine how much or how little assistance you require. I advise you not to cling too tightly to your merits. Their worth is great and hardly any Master Mech Designer will say no to an opportunity to earn them in exchange for being open for consultation. The best benefit is that you don't have to restrict yourself to Hexers. Masters throughout the entire galaxy are willing to assist or mentor you as long as you pay the right price."

Ves widened his eyes. She was right! He had forgotten the fact that while many lesser mech designers were limited to operating in a limited galactic region, Masters did not suffer from this limitation.

There was no real reason from stopping them getting involved in design projects on the other side of the galaxy or in a different one entirely!

While the number of Masters in the Komodo Star Sector was rather respectable, how many of them were compatible with the Shield of Samar?

If he expanded his search to every Master Mech Designer in the galaxy, he would surely be able to find someone with a fantastic complimentary design philosophy that was willing to contribute to the next evolution of the Shield of Samar!

Chapter 2328: Growth or Legacy

MTA merits were incredibly valuable. Just because Ves earned around 7 million MTA merits after extracting his costs did not mean they were easy to earn.

In fact, Ulimo Citadel possessed the power to wipe out much stronger fleets. The main reason why the Larkinson Clan escaped calamity was because of two reasons.

First, the Larkinsons that infiltrated Ulimo Citadel interrupted the ritual from within.

Second, Jannzi broke through to expert pilot to such a violent degree that she was able to punch vastly above her weight!

How many other forces could replicate these exceptional circumstances? Almost none! Perhaps only a fleet presided over by an ace pilot might have a decent shot, but why would anyone venture into a forbidden place like the Nyxian Gap?

Therefore, even if the Big Two promised to double the merit rewards for certain actions in the Nyxian Gap, anyone who thought they could replicate the Larkinson Clan's feats would be in for a rude surprise!

Well, it was none of his business what other people hungry for merits chose to do. Ves wouldn't go out of his way to publicize all of the dangers of these doom seekers might encounter.

After ending his call with Master Willix, Ves returned to his office and thought about whether he should do as she suggested.

It wasn't unusual for mech designers to request the assistance of someone more experienced or capable. Sometimes, they needed to design a mech but lacked the capabilities to do it on their own. There was nothing shameful about asking for help, and there were even ways to keep that a secret.

Even so, neither Ves nor Gloriana possessed sufficient good relations with any Masters to get them to move out of friendship or generosity. Only cold, hard benefits would convince them to set aside a portion of their very busy schedules to assist some young and inexperienced juniors.

"How many merits does it cost?" He wondered.

He activated his desk terminal and performed some quick searches through the galactic net. It turned out that the price heavily depended on the extent of help and the reputation of the specific Master.

The old monsters who were born in the first centuries of the Age of Mechs rarely paid attention to this activity. It was usually the younger and fresher Masters who engaged in this kind of trade.

Apparently, when mech designers broke through to Master, they needed to expand their scope and knowledge quickly. Acquiring all of this was very costly, especially when they wanted to learn from their fellow Masters.

Spending a portion of their time on helping some younger mech designers in their design projects was a very convenient way to earn a lot of merits. These Masters hardly needed to spend much time and effort to line their pockets.

"What a great deal!" Ves sighed with envy.

A good Master could easily earn millions of MTA merits in just a month by spending just one hour a week on consulting!

The reason why they were able to command such ridiculous prices was because their depth of knowledge and design ability was truly precious. Even if they refused to invest

their full attention on any project, their vision was so high that just a couple of casual remarks was enough to increase the quality of a mech design by as much as ten percent!

This was the first time that Ves realized that teaching or guiding other mech designers could actually be profitable!

"When will I reach the point where cute young mech designers are willing to throw a million MTA merits at me for an hour of my time?"

Not soon, that was for sure! Even if he was the creator of glows and the male half of the Miracle Couple, the benefits he provided weren't worth an extreme amount of merits.

He set aside his unrealistic fantasies of earning his beyonder ticket by offering his glows to other mech designers.

His quick searches gave him a general idea on what he could obtain for a given amount of merits. The biggest problem he encountered was that Masters charged substantially higher prices when it came to any projects related to expert mechs!

"Damnit!"

It made sense. Expert mechs not only incorporated very advanced materials and tech, but also had to be molded to specific expert pilots. Making sure that the mech played to the expert pilot's strength demanded a bit more involvement.

"Consultants are all scammers!"

After insulting a group of people he deeply envied and wished to join, he turned his attention to other matters.

For example, his listless cat.

Usually, Lucky was filled with boundless energy and curiosity. He never remained in a single place for long. Many times, the cat wandered off to explore other locations.

None of that was the case this time.

"How are you, Lucky?"

"Meowww...."

Lucky sprawled his dull, damaged body on his desk. He possessed so little energy that his tail didn't flick or curl!

"When will you get back to normal?"

"Meowww.. Meowww..."

"Don't take too long. We're still in the Nyxian Gap, so who knows whether you need to reprise your role as commando cat."

"Meeoww..."

Ves paid no more attention to Lucky. At his current state, the gem cat could only rely on himself to get back to normal.

He spent some time on reading some reports and exercising some of his responsibilities. After almost a week at Ulimo, the Larkinson Clan were already beginning to pack up their loot and leave.

Due to all of the valuables his clan wanted to bring back, his clan planned to convert a couple of captured pirate vessels as cargo ships.

There weren't as many ships as the Larkinsons would have liked. One of the most important requirements was the presence of FTL drives.

How could Task Force Predator bring all of its plunder to the Sentinel Kingdom if a couple of cargo vessels stopped right outside the Nyxian Gap?

It was incredibly excruciating to bring so much riches away, only to abandon some of it halfway!

Combined with the fact that pirates were rarely able to take good care of their starships, the amount of ships that were intact enough to be of use was limited.

One of the complications was that the value of the loot wasn't exceptional. Sure, some of them were quite unique and difficult to obtain, but the market price for them wasn't so hot, especially for the bulkier exotics.

What interested him more was some of the more unusual loot, such as the statue of the Unending One.

So far, his people dumped the alien relic in the mech workshop of the Scarlet Rose. Ves didn't want to store it on another ship due to its extremely high value. Keeping it on his own ship meant that it was extremely unlikely that Ves would lose access to so much Unending alloy!

He wasn't close to making use of the Unending alloy, and there wasn't much he could glean from it by studying it. Right now, he could only set the statue aside and allow it to take space in his mech workshop.

"What else can I do?"

He decided to explore one of his highest design priorities.

"I need to rediscover how to introduce individuality to my mech designs."

Ves thought for a while before calling up his Chiron design from his desk terminal. He studied the incomplete design.

On the surface, there was hardly any individuality to be seen. The mech frame was rather generic in that it didn't possess any pronounced strengths in any areas.

Of course, that was just the Chiron in its neutral state. When configured for melee or ranged combat, the training mech was able to perform considerably more effectively.

In fact, there was more to the Chiron than being able to switch to different mech types. Its limbs, torso and finer structures were all adjustable.

Gloriana had done a very fine job designing the mechanisms to make this possible. She had to include a wide range of variability while at the same time keeping the Chiron design as robust as possible. This wasn't easy and she had to make many compromises in order to maintain a high degree of reliability while still offering plenty of changing.

The transformability of the Chiron was key to its identity as a training mech. The premise of this exclusive Larkinson Clan machine was that it could grow and adjust to the mech cadet over the years.

The Chiron already expressed his growth ideals!

This was what made the mech design so suitable to implement his new ideas.

The Valkyrie Redeemer was a much more powerful mech design, but it was a mech that would likely be used en masse by the Hex Army. Individuality had to make way for more important priorities such as attaining higher technical performance and making sure that its offensive glow was able to act upon distant enemy mech pilots.

"Can uniformity be achieved at the same time as individuality?" Ves wondered.

In his perspective, it should have been possible to reach an optimal balance. Ideally, the glow of a mech put the mech pilot in question into the correct mindset.

However, Ves wanted the mech to adapt to the growth of its mech cadet over time. This meant that he had to ask himself whether he needed to preserve the original glow of a design.

"I don't need to worry about this for the Chiron."

The mech was made to alter its shape. Why not alter its character as well? While it was easy to change its physical proportions and configuration, Ves was a bit less clear about altering its spiritual aspects.

"The key to this is life. If I can draw out the life that is inherent in any mech, I can turn it into a machine that actively develops a relationship with its pilot!"

There was an important requirement to make this work.

The mech cadet had to be assigned to the same Chiron mech for the duration of his academy days. Once the mech cadet graduated, the Chiron he paired up with essentially became irrelevant.

While it was possible to assign the used Chiron mech to a fresh cadet, Ves wasn't sure whether this was a good idea.

On one hand, the more cadets the mech grew up with, the greater its wisdom and ability to offer help.

On the other hand, a mech that was molded to other mech cadets would never develop a close intimacy with a mech cadet. The first time was always special.

"This is a difficult choice. Both have their pros and cons." Ves furrowed his brows.

One option emphasized maximum compatibility. The other option prioritized building a legacy.

Which one would benefit the clan's future mech pilots the best?

"Maybe we can do.. both?"

Regardless of what he and his clan eventually chose, the Chiron needed to have the capability to grow with their mech cadets.

He didn't have any solid ways to facilitate this phenomenon. Creating images and blending it with the spiritual foundation of his mech was only somewhat effective. He needed a more drastic way to accomplish these changes.

Spiritual constructs weren't helpful in this case. They were most useful in affecting a broad change in the character of the spiritual foundation. They were also vehicles which Ves could use to impart triggered abilities to his mech designs.

However, doing something as detailed and sophisticated as making the mech more alive, more proactive and more responsible to the mech designer was different.

He needed to develop a different spiritual technique to effect such a huge change.

"How am I supposed to do this?" Ves pressed his fingers against his brow.

Wait. The Shield of Samar and probably some other Larkinson mechs had already developed a close bond with their mechs. Why not study them to figure out how they developed and became more aligned with their mech pilots?

Chapter 2329: Shiny Badge

Calabast overlooked a small mining operation.

While most of the Larkinsons busied themselves with sweeping the settled parts of Ulimo Citadel, a team of Black Cats spent their time elsewhere.

After inconspicuously taking away a mining vehicle, the Black Cats began to dig deep into the moon-sized asteroid.

Ulimo Citadel was built on a very large asteroid that largely consisted of hardy rock material. The cylindrical mining vehicle slowly drilled through the hardy core until it finally emerged in a cavern.

After inspecting the large, cold airless space for any threats, a handful of Black Cats in reinforced infiltrator suits and hazard suits emerged from the mining vehicle. Lights switched on from their suits, causing their immediate surroundings to light up and allow the people to observe their surroundings in greater detail.

This was no natural cavern. The smooth surfaces, straight angles and other signs proved that someone clearly excavated this space.

The Black Cats flew around. Due to the low gravity of the asteroid, their suits did not have to expend too much energy to keep them aloft.

A couple of the personnel held large handheld scanners and meticulously searched the cavern's surface grid by grid. Calabast hovered in the center while waiting patiently for her mind to find something unusual.

"We have detected an unknown metal cube buried beneath these coordinates!"

"Dig it out." Calabast ordered. "Take it slow and be careful. Watch out for boobytraps or other triggers."

Nothing went wrong as the Black Cats slowly dug their way half a meter downwards. Once they encountered a black metal box, they carefully expanded the space around it. Some other Black Cats meticulously scanned and studied the box.

"It's a standard small container that was in popular use over three-and-a-half centuries ago." A tech concluded. "It's not a product of the galactic rim."

"Is it made of first-class alloys?"

"Yes." The man in a hazard suit replied. "The alloy formula is outdated by modern standards, but it is still incredibly strong to us. The container should be locked and very secure against forceful breaches. We would have to employ a mech to crack it open, but applying so much force to a container of this size is ill-advised."

"The container can be unlocked via an electronic code, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. I do have to warn you that this model of container only allows for three attempts to input the code before it locks out forever. While it is unlikely for this box to contain a self-destruct module, we will have to resort to improper means to crack it open."

That risked damaging the contents, which was exactly what Calabast didn't want to see.

"We don't have to go through so much trouble. Step back and secure the mining vehicle and keep an eye on the perimeter. Make sure that no one has planted any traps."

"Yes, ma'am."

The other Black Cats knew that Calabast wanted them gone. They immediately moved out of the hole and began to fly further away.

Calabast patiently waited for the rest to go. When she perceived that no one was in the vicinity, she activated a command on her infiltrator suit that caused it to deploy a powerful interference field.

Not content with this measure, she activated another command that caused a compartment in her backpack module to open up. A small bot flew higher and deployed a large sensor-blocking canvas that covered everything below in a sensor-dampening tent.

Once Calabast was satisfied with the security measures she deployed, she began to pull out another device belt pocket.

This time, she retrieved a comm, one with a special nature.

Unlike the comm she used in her daily life, this one looked a bit plainer but packed a lot more technology inside.

This was one of the souvenirs she kept from the Starlight Megalodon.

She smiled inside her helmet and she inputted the command to hack the container's locking mechanism.

Less than a millisecond later, a small light indicator on the box shone green, indicating that the box's security system disengaged the lock!

This outcome had fallen within her expectation. The container may have been made out of very expensive materials, but it was merely used to store some general items at the time. A true lockbox would have included at least one non-electric locking mechanism to deter easy hacks like she had just performed.

She carefully deactivated her CFA officer-grade comm and stowed it away before carefully opening the box.

A shiny chrome-like badge rested on a soft velvet cushion. Its surface depicted a blazing battleship soaring through space like a comet!

Calabast carefully studied the badge. Her eyes lit up in glee behind her helmet as she studied every unique marking and confirmed the badge was genuine!

The depiction of a blazing battleship used to convey supreme honor in the past. It was only after the Age of Conquest that battleships turned from symbols of strength to symbols of terror.

Badges like these weren't made anymore. The emblem it depicted had turned into a taboo.

Even so, the value of this badge was inestimable. Of all the gains she made from the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, none of them exceeded the value of this relic!

She was happy with absorbing the defectors of the Xona Stalkers. Acquiring their remarkable if unwieldy Xona Communication Crystals also pleased her a lot. Yet obtaining them both wasn't worth the threats that she and the rest of the clan faced in the previous battle.

The pirates could have easily wiped out Task Force Predator if Venerable Jannzi hadn't broken through! At the very least, the Larkinson Clan would have suffered much heavier losses!

Was it worth it to encourage Ves to attack Ulimo Citadel? She didn't know. Though the outcome of the battle ultimately meant she won her bet, she didn't think she would make such a gamble again.

"I'm not Ves. I don't like to live by putting my life on the line." She muttered.

The badge lustered from the light of her infiltrator suit. After picking it up and turning it around, she read the series of codes and letters engraved on the back.

Her concerns faded once she interpreted the codes. "This time, it was worth it. I still can't believe that someone took something so valuable all the way to the Nyxian Gap."

The early history of the Komodo Star Sector was filled with excitement and endless struggle. When the Big Two opened it up for colonization, a large number of refugees, outcasts and exiles fled from the more populated parts of the galaxy.

It wasn't easy for these people to travel all the way out here. They had to spend decades to travel this far, and various perils slowed or stalled their progress during their lengthy journey.

In truth, not a lot of fleets sought to flee all the way out to the frontier. Many of them simply sought safe harbor and wanted to leave the troubles of their home star sector behind. As long as they flew far enough, they could settle down in any foreign state or star sector.

There were generally two reasons why refugee and settler fleets traversed all the way to the outer border of human space.

The first reason was because the colonizers wanted a new start. Many older star sectors were already dominated by old, established states that exerted a heavy influence to the rest of their star sectors.

It wasn't easy for newcomers to develop and grow into a large and accomplished power. There simply wasn't enough room for development, and with their strength they were incapable of dislodging existing states.

Therefore, even if the journey was long, settling a newly-opened star sector conveyed many benefits. Though the competition was intense, those who succeeded were destined to form foundations that eventually led to the formation of powerful second-rate states such as the Hexadric Hegemony.

Those that lost out had options as well. With so much unclaimed real estate, even the losers and weaklings were able to found states such as the Bright Republic and the Sentinel Kingdom.

All of these colonizers voluntarily chose to take part in this game. While a frontier star sector was situated in the most remote parts of human space, the chance to make a new start and mold a state in their own image attracted many people such as the Hexers.

There were also those who traveled to the edge of human civilization on a less-than-voluntary basis.

This was the second reason why someone traveled all the way out here. Perhaps they made some very powerful enemies. Fleeing across a couple of star clusters didn't cut as

long as the enemies were powerful enough. The only way to escape their extensive reach was to flee much further away, thereby making it impractical for anyone to take revenge!

In the more central and developed parts of human space, punishment through exile actually happened quite a lot. Those who lost in power plays and those whose identities became awkward because they were rivals to a throne had to be removed from the picture.

Killing these threatening individuals was the most convenient way to get rid of them. Yet slaughtering the losers of a political struggle was not always proper.

Hence, exiling people was the next preferred people. Even if the galactic net allowed humans to communicate instantly across the galaxy, sheer geographic distance made it impossible to realize any substantial plots!

Whenever a ruler or other powerful figure issued a decree to exile their enemies, they often specified that their victims had to be driven to the edge of the galaxy or the furthest reaches of human space.

This was why the Komodo Star Sector used to be visited by some powerful figures. Of course, by the time they reached this place, most of their wealth, power and influence had evaporated.

"That doesn't mean they lost everything. Some possessions still hold value after many centuries of neglect." Calabast grinned.

This badge still held an immense amount of value. This wasn't due to its materials, or its subtle but exquisite craftsmanship.

Instead, the badge was merely a proxy to something greater. Calabast carefully stowed in an inside pocket of her infiltrator suit. She resolved to store it more securely so that no one, not even a curious mechanical cat with a penchant for snooping could discover what she gained!

She eventually deactivated her security measures and flew out of the hole. She recalled all of her Black Cats and returned to the mining vehicle, which slowly reversed through the tunnel it had dug.

Ten minutes later, a large explosion engulfed the cavern, destroying and collapsing much of the interior!

The Black Cats hadn't noticed a thing. All of them sat silently in their assigned seats as they waited to return to the surface.

Various plans flitted through Calabast's mind. Several new options opened up after she obtained the badge. While it was largely useless in the Komodo Star Sector, the relic could still play a very large role if she brought it to the issuer.

Normally, she needed to travel all the way to the galactic center to reach one of the most powerful states in human space.

However, times were changing and humanity had begun to conquer another galaxy, if only a satellite to their native galaxy.

The Red Ocean was a melting pot of human cultures. People who emerged throughout the Milky Way all entered a dwarf galaxy that was just a fraction of the size.

The representatives of every first-rate state had already entered the Red Ocean. Calabast just had to approach one of their new colonies and bring the badge to the right institution in order to change everything.

However, as soon as she began to think certain thoughts, a faint pressure weighed on her mind. She grimaced.

"I'm.. a Larkinson now."

This incident reminded her that she had already committed herself to the Larkinson Clan. No matter how valuable the badge appeared, it couldn't beat partnering up with Ves. That said, the badge was still immensely useful in the right circumstances.

"I'll see what I can do with it once I reach the Red Ocean."

Chapter 2330: Unique Identity

The Larkinson Clan wrapped up its business at Ulimo Citadel. After pacifying it, executing their pirate captives, repairing some of their damaged mechs and searching the entire place for loot, the Larkinsons no longer needed to linger.

A week after the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, Ves commanded his task force to travel to the edge of the Nyxian Gap.

They were finally ready to end this excursion.

A lot of cheers rang throughout the fleet as Ves made this announcement. Though everyone already expected this result, they fully put down most of their fears now that the clan patriarch made it official.

No one wanted to fight pirates anymore! The smaller pirate gangs were so weak that the Larkinsons hardly gained any meaningful lessons from crushing them. The larger

pirate groups on the other hand always employed forbidden or unusual means of retaliation which dealt a disproportionate amount of damage.

The Larkinsons were tired of fighting against those that played dirty!

The old war veterans within the clan already longed to return to civilized space. At least the enemies there fought with normal mechs armed with normal weapons.

Joining the large fleet as it slowly left was the addition of ten captured pirate ships. Each of them were still being swept by various crews, but that did not stop the Larkinsons from employing them as makeshift transport ships to bring home all of the loot from Ulimo.

In addition to that, a lot of carriers boasted a lot of free space after the conclusion of the battle. Some of their spaces were occupied with broken mechs that could still be restored. Other spaces held broken parts or packed containers.

During this quiet journey, Ves brought his students and assistant mech designers to the Redfeather. The crowd of mech designers attracted a lot of attention as they approached the Shield of Samar.

The heavily-customized Aurora Titan mech conveyed a powerful impression on everybody. Its gold-coated Breyer alloy exterior conveyed a sense of mass and density. The sheer thickness of its armor plating and tower shield made any human standing next to it feel small!

"Wow!" Maikel gasped. "Even though we're surrounded by the glows of different Bright Warriors, this one still manages to retain its own presence!"

The Shield of Samar's glow was stronger and more enduring than any other Aurora Titan. Ves sensed considerably more life from the mech. He eagerly studied its feel and carefully observed its spiritual foundation.

Visiting Jannzi's personal mech was the right choice. Now that he was looking for it, he observed several developments that already caused the mech to stand out from other LMC mechs!

While Ves studied the mech in his own way, his assistants admired the mech from their own perspectives. Even if they knew little about the spiritual aspects of mech design, they still sensed something unique from the Shield of Samar.

"Just look at this mech." Rina Orion uttered with an uncharacteristically gentle tone of voice. "This is more than a machine. There is a beating heart that is in tune with its mech pilot."

"What are you talking about?" Someone else scratched her head. "I admit the mech is fantastic, but it is a stretch to say it has a beating heart."

"You wouldn't understand."

If Ves heard Rina's words, he would have paid a lot more attention to her. If the former citizen of the Coman Federation managed to sense more from one of his works, then that meant she might be more compatible with his design philosophy than others!

She already chose her own path, though. She was still committed to specializing in targeting systems.

"This mech should have been heavier." Catherine Evenson thoughtfully remarked. "Its mobility is almost as bad as a heavy mech while its defensive properties could have been significantly stronger. The super-medium weight class is hardly ever used for good reason."

Dukan French nodded in agreement. "It's slow and unwieldy. It's a de-facto heavy mech. It just lacks the mass and some distinctive elements. It's a bit of a pity that its attack capabilities are limited. There is still a lot of extra room for a rifle or a cannon module."

The Shield of Samar may be the famed mech of an honorable expert pilot, but the people who approached the mech were mech designers. It was in their nature to study different mechs and decipher their distinctive strengths and weaknesses. Hardly any mechs were sacred in their eyes!

Overall, the Braves did not have much good to say about the mech. Certainly, its defensive capabilities were formidable, especially after its latest overhaul replaced its older armor plating with Breyer alloy.

However, this upgrade pretty much negated the utility of its weak polarizing module. The defense it offers was very paltry compared to the sheer resilience offered by its armor plating!

The Aurora Titan design was one of Ves' more radical mech designs. It pursued extreme defense and sacrificed almost everything to achieve this goal.

That didn't make it a popular seller. If not for the discovery that its glow was somewhat effective in shielding against other glows, it would have been relegated to the LMC's archives.

The Aurora Titan's utility hardly increased even with this discovery. While more and more battlefields featured LMC mechs, they were still far from ubiquitous. The smaller outfits were especially leery of buying an oversized space knight with hardly any mobility or flexibility.

"Hm." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "The Aurora Titan design sorely needs an update."

He wasn't in a hurry to do so, though. He already had a lot of projects on his plate. Right now, he didn't believe he could design a substantially better iteration of the Aurora Titan with the same budget and other constraints.

The Shield of Samar was different. As a custom mech, its budget vastly exceeded that of its regular counterparts. Now that Jannzi advanced to expert pilot, Ves had to raise the limits of the mech even further.

The budget of an expert mech was huge! A typical second-class expert mech could cost between several billion hex credits to a hundred billion hex credits!

Since Ves wasn't short on money or resources these days, he wanted to aim a bit higher for the first expert mech iteration of the Shield of Samar. Even if he decided not to use Unending alloy to strengthen its structure, he was still willing to spend up to 50 billion hex credits to supplement or replace its Breyer alloy exterior!

"Breyer alloy is good, but it's far from the most resilient second-class material out there. The best Fridayman and Hexer mechs actually enjoy considerably better protection."

It was a bit premature for him now to consider these design choices. Gloriana and him hadn't even decided who they wanted to pull in to assist their expert mech design project!

He focused on his primary goal for this visit, which was to figure out a means to instill more individuality in his future works.

As Ves spent more time on observing the Shield of Samar with his spiritual senses, he finally realized how it expressed its individuality.

His eyes widened as he realized that the Shield of Samar's spiritual foundation wasn't as bland as he was used to! It had actually changed as a whole!

"This.."

It was as if Jannzi's extensive use of the Shield of Samar slowly altered its spiritual foundation.

Compared to regular Aurora Titans, the Shield of Samar not only possessed a stronger spiritual foundation, but also showed greater signs of identity!

What Ves previously likened to an empty plot of land on which he could build a house was actually more animated than he thought.

It was the soul of a mech!

While every properly-fabricated mech derived its spiritual foundation from the design, once it took shape, it was able to develop further into a unique direction.

This growth and development mainly affected the spiritual foundation. Therefore, the key to increasing the individual expression of a mech lay in facilitating this natural process!

"Why is the Shield of Samar so much further along this transformation than my other mechs?" He frowned.

There were many LMC mechs in his clan. Just this hangar alone was filled with Bright Warriors!

Due to one of his policies, the Avatars of Myth tried to reassign as little mech pilots as possible. Ves hoped that every mech pilot developed a close and personal bond with their mech just like Jannzi had accomplished with her Shield of Samar.

Yet despite piloting their mechs for many months, Ves hardly observed any meaningful changes yet to the Bright Warriors around him. Their individual character remained largely uniform, which showcased how difficult it was for a mech pilot to truly grow their mechs.

"It will probably take years of dedicated use for anyone to notice a substantial difference!"

That was too long! Not every mech pilot was like Venerable Jannzi or General Axelar Streon. Both of them possessed the willingness and means to stick to a single mech for the rest of their lives.

That did not mean that his other customers were able to adopt this model. Developing a strong dependence on a single mech was good as long as the mech existed. Yet a lot could change over the years.

It could end up destroyed in battle.

It could turn into an obsolete mech design as its original designer no longer published any revisions.

Another possible problem was that most mech pilots did not own the mechs they piloted. They could be reassigned or kicked out of their outfits at any time.

Finally, it was very costly to customize and upgrade a mech. No ordinary outfit would waste money on such an expensive and inefficient endeavor.

All of these reasons meant that Ves shouldn't view Venerable Jannzi's development trajectory as an example. What he truly needed to do was to come up with a different development trajectory that was much more suitable for the mass market.

He felt like he was missing something. He turned his attention back to the Shield of Samar.

"What makes you different?"

Out of all of his mechs, the Shield of Samar was the only mech that had experienced two consecutive breakthroughs of its pilot. This was probably the reason why it had advanced so much.

Ves knew that every breakthrough released a lot of spirituality in the form of force of will. The mech pilot in question burst through a bottleneck, causing their force of will to temporarily reach a very high level of strength.

It couldn't last, though. Over time, the mech pilot in question lost control of the excess energy.

What happened to this excess energy?

Most of it should have dissipated and drifted off into the imaginary realm.

But.. what if some of that stuck around? What if the mech, which possessed an intimate and active bond with the mech pilot through the man-machine connection, absorbed some of these byproducts?

"Does the Shield of Samar.. possess Jannzi's essence?"

A radical theory popped up in his mind. What if the Shield of Samar 'advanced' to a higher state by absorbing Jannzi's spiritual emissions?

Though it was just a guess, it made a lot of sense! Force of will was alive. If the Shield of Samar absorbed some of it, then not only would it become more in tune with the source, but also gain the vigor to develop a more unique character!

This was the key he sought to increase the individuality of his mechs!

On its own, his mechs weren't able to grow on their own. They needed to be used for a long time by their mech pilots to diverge from their original molds.

The main downside to this gradual process was that the change didn't happen fast enough. Mechs weren't humans, after all. The life they possessed was too deficient.

"If the mech is lacking something, why not take it from the mech pilot?"

As long as he was able to incorporate this process in his mech designs, then they would be able to acquire an individual character a lot faster than before!

"Still, such a process can be extremely dangerous!"

In order to increase the life of a mech, the mech pilot had to make a sacrifice.

"Nothing comes for free!"