

Mech 2401

Chapter 2401: Inexorable

The emergence of fifteen expert candidates came as a very welcome surprise to Ves. Some of the figures he had long marked out as promising had finally taken the critical and most difficult step of realizing some of their spiritual potential!

For a long time, Ves was completely clueless about what allowed regular mech pilots to become expert candidates.

Mech pilots with spiritual potential were fairly rare, but there were plenty of them in the Larkinson Clan. Part of this is due to the high recruitment standards.

After all, those with spiritual potential usually enjoyed some modest advantages in piloting mechs. Many people interpreted this as an aspect of talent. Those with talent enjoyed greater resources and attention, which also prompted them to put more effort in their training in order to meet the expectations of their peers and teachers.

In prior months, the Larkinsons recruited quite a good amount of these talented mech pilots. Yet so far, none of them had succeeded in breaking through the critical barrier to expert candidate.

As far as Ves was concerned, this hurdle was as pivotal and arduous to overcome as the jump from Apprentice Mech Designer to Journeyman Mech Designer.

It was for this reason that Ves was surprised that not only the Ingvar siblings, but plenty of other Larkinsons broke through!

He noted that a fair amount of the new expert candidates piloted the Bright Warriors he had recently enhanced. Not all of them were 100 or 75 percent saturated. In fact, the expert candidates from the other mech forces such as the Sentinels piloted commercial mechs that Ves had nothing to do with! These expert candidates broke through without the help of LMC mechs!

This caused Ves to make some guesses. Piloting spiritually-enhanced mechs clearly helped, but they were not a critical necessity. Certainly, the astounding battle that involved multiple overpowering god-like entities must have certainly pushed them over the edge, but getting fifteen new expert candidates all at once seemed a bit too exaggerated.

Ves speculated that there was another factor that eased their breakthroughs. Something that applied to all of them, not just the mech pilots of the Bright Warrior model.

His eyes snapped to the huge but opaque vortex spinning lazily throughout space. This damn vortex was an enduring mystery of the Nyxian Gap and something that might even be the cause of the spatial warping.

Could bringing the imaginary realm closer to the material realm be the primary reason why so many mech pilots advanced to expert candidate?

Was the main reason why most spiritually-active pilots never found their opportunities to advance because they weren't in the right environment?

Aside from stimulating their potential through life-and-death battles, perhaps a better and safer way to help them advance was to bring them to areas where the imaginary and the real overlapped with each other!

Of course, that was easier said than done. The Nyxian Gap was an abnormal region where the imaginary realm was already pressed to the material realm. In civilized space, the two realms were more strictly divided, as they should be. Anomalies almost never took place in normal space.

At this time, the mechs piloted by the newly-advanced expert candidates exchanged their first blows against the dark god known as the Inexorable One!

The ranged mechs had already veered away and were firing their laser rifles at the giant grey bird with coordinated attacks. Hot laser beams struck the head of the Inexorable One.

"Aim for the eyes!" Captain Casella Ingvar commanded. "It might not do anything to this huge monster, but it will give us an easy way to concentrate our firepower!"

Usual ranged attacks did nothing to the materialized spiritual body of the dark god. Not even the enriched nuclear missiles launched by the Bright Warriors inflicted any serious damage on the giant bird.

This was different! Though the laser beams fired by the handful of mechs seemed weak, each of them were empowered by resonance. This gave the attacks some bite, just enough to inflict some real wounds on the dark god.

One mech in particular caused Inexorable One a fair amount of grief. The resonance infused in the beam caused it to darken to an extent.

These less eye-catching dark red beams did not light up the surrounding space as much as the other attacks, but they pierced deeper into the dark god's spiritual body.

Not only that, the insidious attacks also contained a corrosive element, causing the wounds to grow more severe.

The eyeballs of the Inexorable One were taking quite a beating!

The Inexorable One intimidatingly spread her wings and released a sharp cry! Though the shrill spiritual waves buffeted the incoming mechs with violent oscillations, the resonance shields produced by forced resonance provided them with adequate protection!

"Cry all you want, you overgrown chicken! We Larkinsons shall never falter!" Imon Ingvar roared as his swordsman Bright Warrior was the first to arrive!

With a sweep of his mech's bright, glowing sword, his mech struck the left wing of the Inexorable One. His blade had barely cut into a giant feather before a small but intense explosion rocked the wound!

Though Imon briefly wondered where the explosion came from, he was too caught up in the struggle to pause. His Bright Warrior agilely moved back as the huge wing attempted to slap his machine aside!

Though the Inexorable One tried to distance herself from the annoying mechs, the melee mechs constantly assaulted her wings. Empowered by forced resonance, the damage output of these mechs had reached a level where the wings were steadily taking more and more damage.

The Inexorable One released another angry shriek! She flapped her wings regardless of the mechs assaulting them. At the cost of incurring some damage, she managed to free her wings long enough to flap them in a peculiar way.

A large amount of vortices emerged around her! The temporarily-empowered mechs all got caught in them. The resonance shields did their best to shield the mechs from these traps, but none of them possessed Venerable Tusa's ability to ignore them outright!

Only Imon Ingvar managed to free his mech. His bright golden resonance shield burned like a star. The spiritual vortex that trapped his Bright Warrior steadily weakened until the mech finally came free.

"Hah! Your tricks don't—URK!"

His mech got caught in yet another vortex. While his shield slowly caused it to burn, it took too long for his mech to regain its freedom!

In the meantime, the Inexorable One managed to slip away. After she finally managed to gain some distance, a rain of empowered laser beams kept hitting her eyes.

Her mounting rage caused her to direct her ire at the ranged mechs.

Perhaps sensing the challenge in the Inexorable One's stare, Casella Ingvar abruptly stopped her fire. "Careful, the big bird is targeting us! Spread out and don't get hit!"

The ranged mechs hastily split up from each other, but that did not stop the Inexorable One from flapping her wings and darting forward!

With a vengeful shriek, the Inexorable One raised her talons forward and caught an unlikely Vandal ranged mech in her grasp!

"No! Eject!"

"I can't!"

After catching her prey, the Inexorable One increased the force applied by her feet. Her sharp talons pierced through the weakening resonance shield of the trapped mech.

As soon as the resonance shield finally popped, the talons cruelly sliced through the mech, instantly slicing it into pieces!

Casella and every other expert candidate momentarily hitched their breaths.

A new expert candidate of the Larkinson Clan had died just a short time after breaking through!

The ranged mech the Vandal expert candidate piloted was just an outdated military mech. Its defensive parameters were not much different from regular third-class mechs. Such low defense was completely useless against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent.

Buoyed by her success, the Inexorable One repeated her attack. She swooped in on another ranged mech and caught it with her talons! The Living Sentinel's resonance shield lasted even shorter than the last one. With a powerful thrust of her beak, the dark impaled the cockpit of the fragile mech and instantly crushed the body of yet another valuable expert candidate!

"Damnit, we need the help of our melee mechs! Help them get rid of the vortices!"

The ranged mechs no longer focused their fire on the Inexorable One and shot at the traps keeping the melee specialists in place. The melee mechs for their part actively attacked the vortices as well, allowing them to get free a bit faster.

Imon Ingvar was the first of the batch to get free. His mech bravely flew forward like a bright golden comet.

"Your opponent is me, you damn bird!"

"Imon! Wait!" Casella called out.

Her brother did not listen to her words. To her, he was acting foolhardy again. Normally, that wasn't much of a problem if the only enemies he faced were pirates, but this time they were fighting against something greater!

The violent approach of Imon Ingvar's mech quickly attracted the big bird's attention. The Inexorable One gave up chasing after another ranged mech and instead swooped in the direction of her latest challenger!

"Help him! Shoot the bird's legs!"

Powerful laser beams raked the bird's legs, but the attacks didn't cause enough damage to dissuade the Inexorable One from going through with her attack.

As the dark god and glowing mech clashed, Imon managed to chop into one of his opponent's feet! A bright explosion exacerbated the damage and crippled the limb for a moment!

Unfortunately for him, the other talon managed to grasp and lock his mech into place. The Inexorable One already began to apply a lot of force. Imon screamed as his forced resonance rapidly faded.

"Imon!"

Casella Ingvar grew more desperate and poured more power into her attacks. Her crude methods did indeed result in greater damage to the Inexorable One's leg, but her forced resonance faded even faster!

With a cruel glint in its damaged but regenerating eyes, the Inexorable One crushed the mech she grasped with her foot!

While her talons managed to dig into the mech, they failed to slice the mech into pieces! A Bright Warrior was vastly more resilient than a third-class mech. Though the mech was slowly being compressed, the cockpit and some of the internals still remained intact.

Seeing that her grip failed to crush the golden mech, the Inexorable One reared her head back as if she was about to peck it with a single, crushing blow.

"LET MY BROTHER GO!"

In desperation, Casella exceeded the safety limits of her mech's laser rifle. She poured all of her will and urgency into the attack.

As soon as she pulled the trigger, a dark beam sliced across space and impacted the Inexorable One's damaged leg!

The powerful attack not only inflicted more damage upon impact, but also corroded and froze a modest portion of the spiritual flesh around the wound. The damage quickly grew severe enough for the limb to snap!

Even though Casella felt more tired than ever, she smiled as she saw a fellow Bright Warrior mech picking up the damaged wreck of her brother mech.

The fight wasn't over yet, though. Angry at the loss of her leg, the Inexorable One attempted to regenerate the limb, only to be stopped by the dark corrosive energy exacerbating her wound.

Seeing that these annoying mechs had dealt more damage than they ought to, the grey bird furiously flapped her wings and attacked another glowing Bright Warrior mech with her beak!

The first peck dimmed its resonance shield.

The second peck popped the resonance shield entirely.

The next pecks after that rapidly caused the chest of the mech to cave in. Just a few seconds later, the Inexorable One's pointed beak rose with a smidgen of blood marring its tip.

It had not taken long for the dark god to fell another promising expert candidate. She was truly inexorable!

Chapter 2402: Discord

The Inexorable One's slaughter underscored the might of a dark god. Regular expert pilots were not strong enough to contend against an existence of her caliber!

Ves froze in his chair as he witnessed the fall of several expert candidates in quick succession. These lucky Larkinson mech pilots had received the opportunity of their lives in this battle, yet they barely had a taste of their power before the cruel grey bird snuffed out their lives as if they were nothing but insects!

Such an outcome was intolerable to him. How could he let this malicious Nyxian entity toy his ill-prepared expert candidates to death?

The problem was that he no longer had any moves to make. The Penitent Sisters that previously swept the pirate mechs had all exhausted themselves. Once their connections to the battle network faded, the energy projection of the Superior Mother had faded away.

The same went for the Swordmaidens. Just like the other recently-advanced expert pilots, Commander Dise was no longer able to sustain her elevated state. Respa, her mind sword, shut off its battle network, causing the Swordmaiden mechs to fall out of their battle formation.

Though the mech pilots still wanted to fight, the overwhelming pressure emanated by the dark gods suppressed them to the point where many of them lost consciousness!

Both pirate mechs and Larkinson mechs drifted aimlessly in space. It was no different for most of the starships. Even the powerful pirate destroyers had gone silent despite not suffering any powerful attacks!

All of these incidents reinforced the notion that only gods were qualified to take part in this battle.

Of all the Larkinsons currently trying to defeat the dark gods, the newly ascended expert candidates were by far the weakest participants!

Their breakthroughs temporarily gave them the power of an expert pilot, but this outburst was fleeting and temporary.

In some cases, their mechs couldn't handle the increased stress and cracked after their pilots pushed them too hard.

In other cases, the attacks of the Inexorable One caused the expert candidates to rapidly deplete their shallow reserve of energy. Their force of will may be strong, but without an abundant reservoir of energy, they weren't able to sustain their state of forced resonance.

If this battle went on for a few more minutes, his clan would lose all of the expert candidates!

Ves rapidly thought. What could he do? He suddenly turned his attention to the Battle Criers.

He had largely kept them in reserve up until now. While he intended to employ them against special opponents, the suppression emanated by the dark gods had knocked all of the Battle Crier pilots out before they could even show off their new capabilities.

"WAKE UP!" He shouted through the communication channel.

It didn't work. As long as the suppression was in effect, the ordinary Kinner mech pilots were unable to shake themselves loose!

Since their minds and spirits couldn't withstand the pressure, Ves figured he should do it in their stead!

He tried out something new. He connected to the Larkinson Network. Different from last time, the network was in a bad shape. The damage the Golden Cat sustained in her duel against one of the dark gods had damaged the true core of the Larkinson Clan as well.

Fortunately, the network was still intact enough for Ves to perform his next actions. He pressed himself into the network and tried to connect to the Battle Crier mech pilots.

It took a bit of time, but he finally managed to pinpoint their cluster.

He then attempted to shield them. This was very difficult, especially when he wanted to accomplish this from a distance. He consumed his spiritual energy at a rapid rate, so much so that he was forced to draw a spare P-stone to supplement his dwindling energy reserves.

Fortunately, his efforts yielded quick results!

The temporary shields he cast over their minds caused the Battle Crier mech pilots to feel unburdened. After they slowly woke and gathered their wits, Ves quickly issued his next command.

"Activate your battle formation and assist our new expert candidates in fighting against the giant grey bird!"

Dietrich and the Kinner mech pilots haltingly obeyed the instruction.

Though the circumstances weren't ideal, the great urgency of the situation caused every Battle Crier to devote their utmost into accomplishing their task. They calmed their minds and began to commune with an entity that they had only recently learned about.

Soon, a battle network came online. Connections engaged and the Battle Crier mechs slowly adopted a dish-shaped formation. As the recently-woken mechs approached the Inexorable One, a winged energy silhouette formed above the machines!

Projectors built into the Battle Crier mechs shortly filled up the silhouette, thereby introducing an angel to the battlefield!

"Exorcise the enemy!"

The dish-shaped formation did not approach the dark god. Instead, its mech pilots kept concentrating until the giant illusion of Lufa thrust out his palms.

An invisible beam struck the dark god just as she was about to swoop onto another failing expert candidate.

The Inexorable One shook in mid-flight and let out a pained and furious bird cry!

Ves contacted the expert candidates that remained battle effective. "She's weakened! Work together with the Battle Crier battle formation to kill or cripple that big bird!"

The battle network that Ves reserved for the Battle Criers was finally making its debut. When Ves quietly conceived of it before connecting the Battle Criers to the new network, he discovered that it came with two different formations.

The Discord Formation that the Battle Criers adopted at the moment was geared towards weakening any spiritual entity or phenomena!

Though it was clear that the Inexorable One was too strong to succumb from the effects of the battle formation, her spiritual body experienced a lot of difficulties all of a sudden.

Not only did she lose a lot of speed, she also found it harder to perform her moves!

The change did not give the Larkinsons an advantage. It merely equalized it so that the remaining expert candidates weren't as weak as prey anymore.

However, Ves knew that this was only temporary. The longer-lasting expert candidates were already reaching the limits of their endurance. The Battle Criers alone weren't sufficient to take down the Inexorable One.

They needed more power!

He shifted his attention to the other duels. The reinforcements that he inadvertently called were holding their own, but the dark gods they fought against weren't taken down so easily!

At the start, the Unending One and the Blinding One both experienced significant difficulties in fighting against their respective opponents.

Ves was very impressed by how his mother fought. She summoned a continuous army of plants and animals from somewhere while hacking the dark god's tentacles from a distance by releasing energy attacks with her words.

With all of the summons entangling the large but unwieldy dark god, the Unending One could only respond in kind by releasing dark energy beams which Cynthia's monstrous energy projection easily evaded!

As for Ryncol Larkinson, his Devil Tiger was steadily dismantling the Blinding One's defenses.

Unlike the other expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan, the Dark Cleaver piloted an real expert mech. Embedded with compatible resonating exotics, the extraordinarily powerful tiger mech possessed the capital to challenge the Blinding One!

While the luminar dark god actually possessed a lot more power than Ves' father, he happened to face the wrong opponent!

Like a rifleman mech being harried by a light skirmisher, the Blinding One's huge and tall form was highly unsuited to fight against a small and agile opponent up close. His robe began to look increasingly more ragged as the Devil Tiger broke much of its crystals!

If this went on, the Blinding One would lose all of his defenses against an opponent that he should by all rights crush by virtue of his overwhelming might alone!

Faced with this awful prospect, the besieged dark god made a decision that surprised everyone who was still conscious and paying attention.

The Blinding One forcefully endured the Devil Tiger's attacks while flying closer to the Unending One!

"No! Stop them from pooling together!"

Seeing what was happening, the uncomfortable Inexorable One decided to join the party as well. She fought against the weakening effect exerted by the Battle Criers and flapped her wings towards her fellow peers.

No matter how much their opponents tried to stop them in their tracks, their momentum couldn't be stopped, especially as they were finally beginning to feel desperate.

Ves watched with a sinking heart as the three dark gods finally gathered together. Soon, they began to coordinate their efforts!

The dragonwolves and vines entangling the Unending One were wiped out in an instant after the Blinding One pelted them with a succession of powerful light beams.

The Devil Tiger attempted to stop the Blinding One from doing so, but the expert mech almost got caught by the Unending One's tentacles!

The Inexorable One stared ominously at the mechs piloted by the expert candidates. She slowly healed her wounds and accumulated her power.

The Discord Formation kept up by the Battle Criers didn't have much effect at this point. The spiritual interference induced by the battle formation was being diluted across all three entities!

The monstrous, scaled form of Cynthia Larkinson paused and frowned at the sight.

This was a tricky situation.

Just as she was about to resume her attacks, something unexpected took place.

While the Blinding One and the Inexorable One put up their guards against the humans, two powerful tentacles pierced through the center of their bodies in an instant!

The white luminar alien and the grey bird widened their eyes! Power escaped from their spiritual bodies as they attempted to blast themselves out of their predicament, but more tentacles quickly swept up to entangle them, preventing them from getting free!

While the two betrayed entities doubtlessly possessed enough power to get rid of the tentacles if they gave in their all, the Unending One did not let them do so. The tentacled whale quickly popped his prey into his endless maw and ended their lives in an instant!

"WHAT?!" Ves couldn't believe what had happened!

Different from the time he ate Nyxie, the Unending One gained a massive and immediate boost of power. His huge spiritual body expanded while a number of white and grey stripes appeared on his body. The Unending One let out pained roars as his strength grew explosively!

Though Ves and many others hoped that the whale would explode from his gluttony, it was not to be as the whale eventually managed to stabilize himself. Incredibly, the dark god radiated at least twice as much power as before!

Cynthia's giant energy projection looked even more grave this time. She waved an arm at the mechs piloted by the Battle Criers and expert candidates. A gentle but irresistible push caused the mechs to tumble away!

She stared pointedly at the Devil Tiger. The ferocious-looking masterwork expert mech that had just put up a good fight against the Blinding One meekly tucked its tail while beating a retreat.

The Unending One was not an opponent they could fight against anymore.

Ves suddenly heard his mother's voice.

"I see you've picked up something nice while I was gone. I love it when you give me presents. It's your one redeeming factor as my son."

A bad feeling swept his mind. "Oh no. Not again."

His mother's giant energy projection suddenly stretched out her arm towards the Scarlet Rose in the distance. Somehow, her arm stretched forth unnaturally across many kilometers until her index finger poked straight into the cockpit!

The tip of the finger briefly brushed against his body. His Unending Regalia offered some resistance against the giant limb, but his mother merely applied a little more force before she managed to breach the B-Stone layer!

Surprisingly, his mother didn't suck him dry this time.

Instead, she took something else from him. As her finger left his body and her arm rapidly retracted back to her giant form, Ves was dazed for a moment before he made a very alarming realization.

He checked one of the hidden storage compartments of his combat armor and carefully withdrew a very precious vial.

Different from before, the liquid inside the vial looked dull. It no longer glowed as before and Ves couldn't feel any life from it anymore.

The high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum that he had carefully hoarded all this time had lost its value. That single poke stole all of the life-attributed energy that made it special!

"MOTHER!"

Though his loss was enormous, his mother benefited enormously. Pure pleasure and bliss engulfed her face as she integrated her bounty in rapid tempo! Her monstrous body glowed as new mutations grew out of her already alien body. Her hair turned into tendrils and her legs turned into hooves.

An aura of pure life burst out of her energy projection, causing it to swell in size! The copious amounts of high-quality energy she took from Ves was exactly the tonic she needed!

Chapter 2403: Savage Nature

Unlike the Unending One's power-up, Cynthia did not show any difficulties. This was not a surprise to Ves as the life-attributed energy derived from the serum possessed a property that made it universally compatible with everything.

Even accounting for this condition, his mother took all of that energy in with remarkable ease. Her strength swelled multiple times, yet Ves did not sense any indication that she was losing control.

This was incredibly remarkable! If it was so easy to become stronger by absorbing life-attributed energy, then Ves would have already absorbed the serum's energy for himself!

From what he observed with his spiritual vision, he saw that his mother did not absorb the energy in the most direct fashion possible. Instead, she transformed it, causing it to take on different attributes that were compatible with her. She smoothly managed to absorb the abundant amount of energy.

In fact, her smooth growth made him feel a little suspicious. Was she growing to a new level of strength or was she merely regaining some of her old power?

Whatever the case, it was good that his mother regained the capital to fight against the treacherous Unending One.

The tears flowing from eyes were tears of happiness. Yep. The wry smile on his face reflected his sincere belief that his mother did not disappoint his expectations. She truly loved him if she was willing to go through extreme lengths to bail him out of his predicament.

The only price he had to pay in return was to give her a single present.

The vial held in his armored grip no longer held any life.

Losing all of its potency was but a small price to pay to safeguard his life and the lives of his remaining clansmen. From a logical point of view, this was a trade worth making!

Since his mother had already taken action, he put the vial away and resolved to forget about it. Instead, he turned his attention back to the two active combatants.

Both his mother and the Unending One had boosted themselves by drawing upon different sources of power.

The Unending One backstabbed his fellow compatriots and devoured them whole. It seemed that eating the wounded dark gods was not an easy endeavor. His swelled whale-like body was still in the process of shifting back and forth as if it was schizophrenic.

In contrast, his mother smoothly grew much stronger. Though her energy projection mutated even further, she had finally reached a level of strength that was comparable to the dark god she faced!

Ves studied her closely and paid special to her attributes this time. Though she seemed unfathomable every time he met her ghostly form, this time she wasn't hiding her domain.

She manifested it to resist the Unending One's domain!

Though it happened out of almost everyone's sight, the two powerful entities had already begun to fight against each other. Their domains grinded against each other as they tested their strength and understanding of their domains.

The Unending One's domain was like an abyss. Anything that entered its range never appeared again. Somehow, Ves sensed an unending hunger from the depths of the domain!

As for his mother, her domain was filled with vitality. Just as he guessed, her domain revolved around life. It seemed that he had his mother to thank for his exceptional aptitude for life!

Still, as Ves studied his mother's domain and attributes even further, he felt that she had developed into a very different direction than himself.

As a mech designer, Ves was attempting to fuse life with mechs. He developed the life portion of his domain in a path that enabled greater symbiosis between mech pilots and their mechs.

His focus on life was purely facilitative. Ves enjoyed creating products that helped his customers grow stronger. Fulfilling their desires and providing them with solutions that they couldn't obtain anywhere else gave him a profound sense of satisfaction.

Apparently, his mother was different.

Her life domain shared a lot of similarities with his own domain, but its interpretation was entirely different! Ves sensed something predatory from it. Her domain was much more primal and reflective of the savage side of nature.

Growth required sustenance. The weak died and the strong thrived. The former solely existed to provide substance to the latter.

Ves shivered and retracted his spiritual senses. Just looking at her domain already made him feel as if he was about to become her next prey!

Fortunately, Cynthia did not direct any hostility towards him. Instead, she focused on the Unending One.

The removal of the Blinding One and the Inexorable One had made this battle much simpler. Even though the final dark god had rapidly grown stronger, he didn't appear to be fully in control of his current self!

To his opponent, this was a crucial difference!

She slashed her sword at the Unending One, launching an energy wave that was at least ten times sharper and more powerful than before. The wave quickly crashed against the dark god's side and sliced off half-a-dozen tentacles!

The Unending One roared and began to fly towards his opponent. Rather than trade blows at a distance, the tentacled whale thought he stood a better chance if he fought the woman up close!

Due to absorbing the Inexorable One, the surviving dark god's speed and acceleration had received a major upgrade. His huge bulk soared forward at a pace more fitting for birds than whales.

"Careful, mother!"

She didn't need the warning. In fact, she did not exhibit any panic at the rapidly-approaching whale. Instead, she raised her palm and pressed the space in front of her. A large and elaborate diagram formed in space.

As soon as the Unending One crashed against the diagram, a net made out of giant vines appeared and instantly blocked his way forward!

The net soon enveloped the whale, causing the Unending One to be trapped yet again!

Though the dark god attempted to cut and remove the net from his body, the vines that squeezed his body were not so easy to remove this time! The large vines were not only tougher, but regenerated any damage that managed to get through their defenses.

With the net temporarily trapping the Unending One in place, Cynthia performed some other abilities. More diagrams showed up which she imprinted onto the body of the tentacled whale for some reason.

The Unending One's roars increased as his huge bulk violently thrashed against his bonds. Yet no matter how much power he unleashed, Cynthia remained fully in control!

"This.."

He never expected his mother to gain such absolute advance after absorbing the energy of his serum. He already thought highly of its value and potency, but it turned out that it was even more precious than he thought. His pain of losing such a valuable asset intensified!

After his mother one-sidedly placed numerous strange diagrams on the unwilling dark god, she began to fly to the giant creature's side before raising her sword in a reverse grip.

Her alien lips moved as she recited some sort of incantation, but like everything about her, Ves could not hear or record anything of what she did. Her entire existence seemed to defy every recording method!

Her sword glowed brighter as she spoke her inaudible words. When her sword had become almost blinding, she stabbed into the flank of the Unending One!

The trapped creature released a roar that rattled everyone's spirits! While the dark god had grown powerful enough to crush the remnants of Task Force Predator in a single blow, he was rendered helpless by an even more terrible opponent.

The sword that Cynthia stabbed into the whale was actively draining his energy! The side bearing the wound visibly deflated as the Unending One finally experienced what it was like to be devoured.

Cynthia's monstrous face grew uglier as she exhibited pure rapture. Raw energy of incredibly high potency poured through the sword and into her energy projection. She absorbed only a portion of it while sequestering the rest for later processing.

After all, unlike the energies donated by Ves, the Unending One's dark spiritual attribute was not very compatible with her domain!

Even so, Ves was astounded to see that she was able to convert a substantial portion of the Unending One's strength on the spot. The amount of skill and technique this required was beyond his imagination. He began to grow jealous of his mother's capabilities!

Minutes passed as the Unending One unceasingly grew weaker. The fact that it had descended onto the battlefield with his main body may have allowed him to exert greater strength, but it also opened him up to dangerous consequences.

Right now, an even scarier predator in the form of Ves' mother was eagerly draining the giant whale until his tentacles dried up and his immense bulk deflated like an old balloon.

The sight was incredibly horrifying to see for the few remaining people who remained alive and conscious. Was this powerful dark god that had lived for eons really going to die in this fashion?

The whale hadn't even fully exerted his new strength! If not for facing an opponent as perverse and monstrous as Cynthia, the Unending One would have been able to prove why he was one of the oldest and most dominant entities of the Nyxian Gap!

"It's over." Ves whispered.

Eventually, the Unending One had met his end. The vines no longer bothered to bind his bulky body tight. The dark god had lost too much strength to resist the drain. When the sword stabbed into his flank was no longer able to draw out any energy, its wielder smoothly pulled it out and let it dematerialize away from view.

Cynthia looked incredibly satisfied with her gains. She thought she would suffer a lot of losses when she went through the portal. Instead, her son had not only prepared a lot of compensation, but she managed to earn a sumptuous bonus from her latest meal!

She turned her gaze towards the Scarlet Rose. Ves could feel the glowing purple lights in her eye sockets landing straight onto his body. Despite his protective armor, he felt utterly naked and exposed in front of her transcended sight!

"You have grown so much, my son." She spoke to him on a spiritual level. "While I am distressed at many of your decisions, I still love you with all of my heart."

The Devil Tiger sedately flew towards his mother until it had reached her side. The tiger mech faced the Scarlet Rose as well.

"You have been up to a lot of mischief, Ves." His father's voice sounded as he piggy-backed on his wife's connection to their son. "What possessed you to enter the Nyxian Gap? It's danger is very real. What you have faced right now is not the extent of this region's dangers!"

"I.. I'm sorry, father!"

"...Forget it. As long as you get out as soon as possible, we'll both be happy. You aren't supposed to be here, Ves. There is an enemy in the heart of the Nyxian Gap that will hound you to the ends of the galaxy and beyond if it becomes aware of who you truly are. Your mother and I have been running interference for you, but all of our work will become for naught if you take the initiative to knock on its doors!"

"Are you talking about.. the Compact?"

His mother flared with power. "Don't say that name! In fact, don't even think about it! Just leave and never come back. This is not your fight. We can't protect you if you stay in the Nyxian Gap. Heed our warning. It's for your own good, my son."

His mother's giant projection and the Devil Tiger simultaneously moved to the Scarlet Rose. When the pair reached the ship, his mother threw something insubstantial in the direction of the ship's vault.

"Since you have gained the habit of collecting trash, here's something for you to play with. I hope it will help you protect yourself better."

Her mother and the Devil Tiger then proceeded to fly towards the unstable portal that had initially brought them to this battlefield.

"Wait! I have too many questions, mother! Can't you.. can't you stay and answer them for me?" Ves desperately asked.

"It's better if you remain ignorant." His father sorrowfully answered. "Some knowledge is too dangerous for you to hold. It's better if you stay away from our affairs."

His mother nodded. "You aren't young anymore, Ves. You're an adult now. While we both regret not being there for you when you needed us, you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. Well, as long as you don't provoke enemies like the Allidus Alliance, that is. You still need to adjust your behavior. Be a mech designer, Ves. That is all you need to do to make us proud."

His parents left for the portal. Ves wanted to plead and beg them to give him answers, but he knew that his parents were too determined to keep their mouths shut.

However, just as his mother began to cross through the portal, it suddenly discolored! Some kind of blue glow shimmered around it as Ves felt a huge amount of spiritual energy trying to change its properties!

"What? Who?!"

For some reason, Ves felt an intense threat. His entire being shook with fear as he felt the onset of a powerful presence that posed a very great threat to him and evidently his parents as well from the way they reacted to this development!

"He's here!" His mother spoke with a horrified tone!

Chapter 2404: Failed Vow

Ruination spread across a wide area of space!

Several enormous clouds of debris spread in every direction and collided against each other.

Broken wrecks of both mechs and starships floated lifelessly through space. Whether they still contained living beings was still a question, but even if the vessels still contained sparks of life, the titanic clash that had just taken place had knocked everyone unconscious!

The only ones who remained alive and conscious were those with the strongest spirits. Aside from Ves and some of the expert pilots, no one else was in a condition to fight.

Even the pirates had all fallen silent! The crippled and bleeding Gravada Knarlax floated listlessly in space.

This should have been a moment of celebration for the Larkinson Clan. Though Ves could already tell that the material and manpower losses had been tremendous, the gains more than made up for the sacrifices.

The clan welcomed four new expert pilots!

The Larkinsons also gained at least double the amount of expert candidates!

Ves could personally claim the astronomical bounties on his enemies!

The warships of the Allidus Alliance definitely contained a lot of useful salvage!

As for all of the trouble and complications that ensued from this costly battle, Ves didn't think too much about them. Any outcome was better than dying or getting captured by the vengeful pirates of the Allidus Alliance, or worse, the crazy cultists of the Hallowed Abyss Temple!

Yet just as his mother sucked the Unending One dry until she couldn't squeeze any more juice from the once-terrible dark god, an even greater enemy approached!

Though Ves felt that his mother had reached an entirely new height of power that he had never witnessed up until now, her monstrous mutated expression only exhibited pure terror.

The enemy that had hijacked the portal must be far more frightening than he could ever imagine!

Already, the portal began to transform before his eyes. Its diameter grew and various alien runes and patterns appeared around it. As long as Ves probed it a little with his spiritual senses, he experienced an immediate and acute threat of death!

Every fiber in his body, mind and spirit warned him that he would die 100 percent if he probed the hijacked portal any further! Whatever influence that managed to hijack it was so powerful that just a casual spiritual sneeze from such a giant was enough to snuff out his soul!

"Who is coming, mother?" Ves asked through his spiritual connection with the giant energy projection.

"He.. is the enemy that your father and I fear the most." His mother answered in a hollow tone. "He is older than the Age of Mechs. He has witnessed the fall of the Age of Conquest but has managed to outlast most of his peers. His strength is so

overwhelming that he can kill every human on a planet if he so chooses. You have no idea how terrible he truly is! Now that he has caught our trail, there is no escape!"

"What?!" Ves widened his eyes. "How can any human be so powerful?! Only warships have this power! Is he.. a god?"

"No. He's worse. He's immortal."

"...Immortal?" Ves shook.

There was something special about this word!

"Gods such as the Unending One are but ants in his presence." His mother solemnly said. "To be immortal is not just about possessing power. It's about mastering it. This is why he is able to take over this portal and change it to suit his needs. He is already moving towards us. As soon as the portal is powerful enough to accommodate passage, our fates are sealed!"

"Isn't there anything we can do?! This guy isn't here yet! We can still collapse the tunnel and block his way forward!"

His mother raised her sentient sword and unleashed a powerful energy wave!

Ves sensed the lethality behind the attack. He was sure it could split the Scarlet Rose in half if his mother wanted it to. He was amazed that she was able to unleash such an attack without relying on mechs or ships.

Yet as soon as the deadly energy wave crashed against the portal, it dissipated. What happened was not much different from a drop of water splattering against a solid wall. The strength disparity was too big!

His mother looked sad. "Someone this powerful can't be stopped, my son. I am as helpless before him as the Unending One was to me. Coming here was a mistake to both you and me. If you didn't come to the Nyxian Gap and entered into a feud against the pirates, your father and I wouldn't have been forced to leave the core regions. We were safe there, Ves. The unique environment there allowed us to cover up our traces. I thought it would be fine for us to leave for a short time, but I underestimated his alertness. It only took a short time for him to catch our trail!"

Though his mother didn't explicitly admonish him, Ves felt incredibly guilty! He ruined his mother's arrangements by screwing up. If he controlled his greed well enough to leave Ulimo Citadel alone, he wouldn't have turned the Hallowed Abyss Temple into an enemy!

Regret filled his mind. What about the merits? What about the B-stone? None of these gains were worth it if he, his parents and all of the surviving Larkinsons of this battle were about to die at the hands of this so-called immortal!

He clenched his teeth. A growing sense of anger and unwillingness flared up from his heart. He did not want to die like this! He did not want to drag his parents down with him either!

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed at the projection of the changing portal. This powerful person hadn't arrived yet. So long as the enemy hadn't actually emerged through the portal, they should still have a chance of making it out alive!

"Who is this immortal, exactly? You've been talking about him in circles. Just tell me who he is so we can figure out how to stop him. There is no way this fellow is inevitable!"

"He's the enemy we tried to shield from you for so long." His mother emotionally whispered. "Everything we did was to prevent him from going after you after your father has given you our legacy. In the end, our efforts were in vain."

"Don't give up yet, mother! We are better than this! Tell me the identity of this foe. Who is he and what powers does he have? Is he coming by himself or is he bringing an army?"

"He's alone. He doesn't need any help. That should tell you enough of what kind of existence is hunting us down."

His mother became so caught up by their impending doom that Ves did not sense any will to resist from her! He turned his attention to his father instead. As a trueblood Larkinson and a former military mech pilot, Ves bet that his dad should be more receptive to his intentions.

"Father, can you answer my questions? At this point, it's useless to keep secrets. I'm already involved in your troubles so you might as well give me the piece of mind of knowing what has led to this situation."

His father sighed. "Do you remember the gift that I have passed to you? It belonged to your mother. When she died.. I didn't know what to do with it. I knew it was the reason behind her early death."

"It doesn't belong to me. I merely carried it. You can't imagine how far my brothers and sisters and I fled to keep it away from the hands of our pursuers." Cynthia said. "We vowed to never let it fall into their hands again. Now, I am the only one left, and it seems I am about to fail in my most important mission."

Ves tired of all of this circling around. "Are you talking about the Compact? I know what the System really is. It's the Metal Scroll, right? It's one of the precious Sacred Scrolls that this powerful organization has used to dominate humanity, right?"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS?!"

"I have my sources. Am I right?"

His mother looked shocked! "This is deadly knowledge! Don't ever mention those words again!"

"It's too late for that." Ryncol Larkinson said. "Ves already knows. Since he is aware of some of the true nature of what we've given to him, then he might as well know more."

After a bit of hesitation, Cynthia reluctantly nodded.

"The immortal that is chasing us is one of the highest leaders of the Compact. He has been watching for our trails for a long time, and when he finally grasped one, he followed us all the way to the galactic rim."

This sounded rather familiar. Ves glanced at the frozen form of Nitaa. Her heavy combat armor kept her upright, but he knew that she was already unconscious.

"Does this leader come from the Ruined Temple?"

"You!"

That pretty much confirmed his suspicion. It turned out that the great envoy from the Compact's mythical temple had arrived sooner than he thought!

The entire reason why Ves came up with the plan to leave the star cluster and travel all the way to the Red Ocean was because he wanted this powerful dignitary!

Ves grew confused. "From what I heard, shouldn't this fellow arrive at least a decade or so later?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"That's not important. Can you just answer my question?"

"Temple Protector Aramid Dista has haunted our nightmares for decades." His father revealed. "He stands close to the top of a galactic organization that still stretches its influence throughout human space to this day. You can imagine how powerful he must be in order to reach his exalted status."

Ves finally obtained the name and title of this great foe. Though the answers barely revealed anything, at least his parents were more willing to talk!

"How come he arrived here so soon and with so little fanfare?"

He was pretty confused by this. Ves and Nitaa had already made some arrangements that could warn them should this envoy from the Ruined Temple ever reach this star cluster.

"He only just arrived, actually. As for how he arrived so quickly, well..." His mother pointed at the transforming portal. "Hasn't the Big Two been building their own gate network recently?"

Ves wanted to slap himself silly. Of course!

Before the introduction of the beyonder gates, humanity relied on slower and much more time-consuming methods to traverse the stars. It took decades for the fastest and most advanced starships to travel from the center of the galaxy to the outer borders of human space.

Even the powerful figures of the Ruined Temple were no different!

However, space travel in the galaxy was already changing drastically after the formation of the Milky Way Galactic Gate Network. The newly-formed Gate Consortium was rapidly cobbling up beyonder gates. Thousands of light-years became more accessible than ever as the portals brought many different locations together.

The gates ushered forth a revolution in trans-galactic transportation! Not just the Milky Way, but other galaxies came within reach!

Of course, the biggest downside to the portals was the prohibitive cost of activation. Regular tourists wouldn't be able to afford passage through these new-fangled portals.

Yet what Ves did not take into account was that this trivial barrier would never be able to stop one of the highest-ranking dignitaries of the Five Scrolls Compact!

As long as the Temple Protector disguised himself well enough to fool the Gate Consortium, he could conveniently reach his destination in an instant rather than a decade!

He truly comprehended at this moment why his parents behaved so morosely. Even he felt despair when he thought about confronting one of the higher ups of the Five Scrolls Compact.

As time passed, the portal looked increasingly more impressive. Strange glowing markings of demons, humans and aliens kneeling and in pain appeared around it. All of

these tortured figures seemed to be stretching out their hands towards a certain undefinable figure portrayed at the top of the portal. The slaves were begging for mercy!

Chapter 2405: Working Together

As someone who developed an appreciation for theatrics, Ves did not sense anything good from the symbolism of the changing portal. Only cult leaders and religious nuts would employ such a depraved portrayal of themselves.

Was this what the Five Scrolls Compact aimed to achieve? Were the cultists plotting to enslave the entire galaxy so that they could be worshipped as gods?

This was complete lunacy! Why hadn't the Big Two managed to wipe them out to last man? These scroll worshippers were nutcases who adhered to grossly outdated notions of how reality worked. The Big Two should never be able to coexist with Compact!

Yet not only did the Compact survive the end of its secret reign, one of its highest leaders had successfully passed through one of the Big Two's beyonder gates as if he was an ordinary traveller.

This was a complete travesty!

Resentment boiled within Ves. As much as he wanted to file a complaint to the MTA, it was useless to grumble about matters that had already happened. He needed to figure out some way of stopping or destroying this portal.

Just in the last minutes, the power radiated by it had already tripled! Even then, that was evidently not enough to allow the passage of their greatest enemy!

While Ves hadn't tried it yet, he knew that firing any weapons at it wouldn't work. While he felt tempted to take over the Scarlet Rose's helm so that he could crash his ship into the portal, the power emanated by it was simply too great for it to be shaken by such a simple attack.

None of the assets at his disposal was comparable in power to this increasingly more ominous-looking window in space. The markings and symbols became more vivid while the depictions of enslaved worshippers became more defined!

Not even running away would help! Unless he found a way to leave the Nyxian Gap in an instant, there was no way he could run away far enough to evade such a great existence!

Ves kept thinking. From the performance of the dark gods, he knew that technological solutions could only do so much against enemies of their nature. Perhaps the story might be different if he had access to a CFA battleship, but he had exhausted his entire fleet. He could only do so much by himself!

As for trying to stop the portal by trying to destabilize it with spiritual attacks, that obviously didn't have a chance of working. His mother already tried several more times, but every method she employed merely bounced off the elaborate portal as if to mock her weakness.

Ves had even left the bridge to head for the vault in order to see how the mutated spiritual construct was faring.

What he encountered was outside of his expectation. The construct had dissipated! It seemed that as soon as the Temple Protector hijacked the portal, he took over responsibility of maintaining it as well. This closed off any chance for Ves to sabotage it by destroying it from the source!

"Damn! Isn't there anything we can do to stop the portal?"

He looked around his vault. He stored all kinds of valuable exotics, relics and artifacts in here. Yet their usefulness in this situation was minimal. Their value lay elsewhere.

"Tch! What I wouldn't give for an antimatter bomb or two. Hell, I could use a hundred of them right now!"

Such weapons were too far out of his reach. Even the superweapons he prepared for his fight against the pirate armada had all been spent. Perhaps some errant enriched nuclear missiles were floating around in some wrecks, but it would take way too long for Ves to retrieve them and fire them towards the portal.

Not that it would do any good. If the missiles were incapable of splitting apart the Gravada Knarlax, then they were even less effective against a portal that appeared to be at least ten times more durable!

Ves looked listlessly at the ceiling. Was he wasting his time? Was he delaying the inevitable?

"There has to be a way!"

He began to think through all of his options again. No matter how ridiculous they sounded, Ves didn't have the luxury to be picky.

"Wait a minute. There might be someone in the clan that can provide some answers!"

Ves raised his comm and tried to contact someone who he believed should have definitely remained awake.

The projection of a tired, white-robed figure greeted Ves. James Ylvaine looked as if he already knew this conversation would happen.

"I knew you would come to me in the end." James spread his arms as if to welcome someone in need. "My arms are open to anyone who needs succor."

Ves scowled. "Do you have the answers I seek?"

"I am a prophet, Bright Martyr. It is my job to guide you. Mind you, I am not all-knowing. I cannot promise you that I have the answers you desire."

He didn't have time for this nonsense. "Just tell me what I can do to stop the arrival of You-Know-Who."

"Who?"

"You know. Who." Ves shook his head. "Just tell me how to destroy the portal!"

James smiled. "The portal is indeed very difficult to deal with. Even I am fearful of the great existence that has displayed so much power. While I genuinely do not know how to destroy the portal, I believe you can do it so long as you have faith."

"...That's it? Faith?"

This was utter nonsense! In a crisis of such great proportions, how could faith ever possibly help?

"Do you have any real answers, or are you just full of crap?"

"I'm being serious, Bright Martyr. While there may be other solutions to your problem, I truly believe that faith can resolve your problem. Believe in yourself, Ves. Do not dismiss the power of faith. Power is power no matter the source."

The call ended shortly after that. James didn't have much more to say except to resort to faith.

He frowned. What was he supposed to do now?

Ves activated a projection that displayed the situation outside. Both his mother and the Devil Tiger floated in front of the portal without doing anything. They had already tried what they could to stop it, only to waste their energy in vain.

As Ves stared at his parents while thinking back on his previous conversation, he suddenly froze when his eyes rested on his mother's form.

"The power of faith... faith!"

Didn't he recently turn an aspect of his mother into a new Hexer deity? Hadn't he set up the Superior Mother as an ancestral spirit that was harvesting the worship of billions or trillions of Hexers?

He directed his vision towards the dormant entity. She was still asleep, which was strange because his real mother was close by and fully conscious, but whatever.

The only problem was that the Superior Mother was actually weaker than his mother's main form. He doubted that merging the two somehow would give his mother enough strength to challenge the Temple Protector.

"Power! I need power! Where can I find enough power to destroy power and screw the approaching enemy?"

He kept looking around at random as if he was looking for inspiration. His head suddenly froze as he looked at something he had unconsciously dismissed.

The huge, transparent vortex that was spinning throughout the entire Nyxian Gap was one of the most powerful spiritual manifestations that Ves had ever witnessed!

Its power and reach was so ridiculously high that it had far exceeded the strength of any single god. Even the power reinforcing the portal paled in comparison to the power of an enormous spatial phenomenon!

Ves immediately shared his idea with his parents. While his mother momentarily looked startled, she soon began to frown.

"I know what you are thinking about. It sounds good in theory, but how can it be easy to channel the forces of the vortex against the portal? Mind you, if we can make it work, we can not only survive this calamity, but also doom our enemy! One of the reasons why the Temple Protector is expending so much power to expand and reinforce the portal is because he risks a great disaster if the space tunnel is cut off mid-way. At best, he will get lost in some random dimensions. At worst, he could very well die instantly when he ends up somewhere that cannot sustain his life!"

That sounded great to Ves! Ending the portal was not enough to stave off the crisis. Only by killing or at least banishing the powerful Temple Protector would Ves and his parents feel more at ease.

Even if the Ruined Temple dispatched more powerful dignitaries to retrieve the Metal Scroll, it would take a lot of time for the follow-up party to arrive, gate network or not! At that time, Ves would have long left the Komodo Star Sector while his parents were safely hiding deep inside the murky core regions of the Nyxian Gap.

With such a promising outcome dangling before his eyes, Ves became even more motivated to solve this crisis!

"What do you need to direct the vortex's power against the portal?" He eagerly asked.

"You're not listening to me, Ves! The power required to channel or even approach the vortex is too much. Besides, do you think the vortex is so easy to manipulate? Its true nature is far more complicated than you think!"

Ves dismissively waved his arm. "I'm a mech designer, mom! I learned a lot of engineering to be able to get to where I am. One of the basic principles that every engineer learns is that you don't need a lot of power to accomplish something. As long as you come up with something clever that is efficient and make use of leverage, you can do it even if you aren't strong!"

This caused his mother to take his suggestion more seriously this time.

"How?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure we can figure something out. Tell me what must be done in order to subject the portal against the forces of the vortex, and I'll figure out a way to make it happen."

His mother did what he asked without exhibiting any doubt this time. She wanted Ves to live!

"Hmm." Ves nodded as he already designed an elaborate spiritual construct in his mind. "I see what needs to be done. To get the portal to clash against the vortex, we need to move them into the same plane. The problem is that the portal is based in what I call the material realm while the vortex is a fixture of the imaginary realm. The two have already moved closer, but this isn't enough. We need to bring them close enough in the area encompassing the portal so that there is total overlap!"

This was a very difficult feat! Getting the realm to overlap at a coordinate was just the first step. They had to sustain it and make sure that enough of the power of vortex crashed against the resilient portal.

He and his mother worked intensely to cobble up a solution that blended both engineering and spiritual sorcery. Though both of them possessed very different opinions on many matters, the acute danger forced them to set aside their philosophical differences.

Soon enough, his mother skillfully employed her power to form a spiritual product that Ves had largely designed. His mother didn't appear to possess much talent for spiritual engineering. Her only contribution to the project was offering some high-level solutions that Ves could have never accomplished with his current understanding of spiritual engineering.

Ves felt very fulfilled as his mother rapidly created their combined work. Visually, the finished product resembled an engine.

As soon as she completed it, she approached the portal despite all of the danger it emanated. When she reached a suitable distance, she began to pour her power into the spiritual engine.

Space around his mother began to stir. The two realms slowly started to move closer to each other!

"It's working!"

The blue portal glowed brighter, but it didn't do anything else. Ves kept a vigilant eye on it though his mother had already explained that the Temple Protector couldn't do much when he was still on the other end of the passage.

Ves began to feel a strange pressure. His intuition sensed danger. It was as if there was something within him that told him that the two realms were never supposed to overlap to this extent!

Chapter 2406: Ves' Faith

The process of merging the material realm and the imaginary realm at the space around the portal proceeded steadily at first.

His mother continually poured power in the spiritual engine that he and his mother had designed. As a collaborative work, the creation encompassed both of their strengths.

Ves provided the mechanisms that transformed power in a way that allowed it to do more work at much less cost.

Cynthia added some very advanced spiritual components that took in the power and accomplished the feat they were trying to achieve.

He found it very inspirational to work with his mother on such a project! If not for their many disagreements, Ves would have cherished the experience even more.

Through the quick collaboration, Ves also gained a better sense of his mother's spiritual understanding.

Just as he expected, her depth and heritage was very extensive. If Ves compared it to his profession, then his mother was probably analogous to a Senior or a Master while he was just a Novice!

The gulf between them was too big!

However, Ves actually realized that this comparison was not accurate. While it was true that his mother possessed a lot of advanced knowledge, she didn't specialize in spiritual engineering.

Most of what she learned was geared towards applications other than creating spiritual products. While she could do it, she mainly did so to create something simple. She did not specialize in it. What she actually excelled at was a mystery.

Even so, her high understanding of a lot of profound rules granted her the ability to create spiritual products and components that simply defied his understanding. They were very specific, but also very powerful in their narrow roles.

The spiritual engine could have never existed if Ves worked on it alone. He lacked his mother's extensive spiritual foundation. Even when his mother created the few components he needed to make the spiritual engine worked, Ves simply couldn't see through what she was doing. There was no way for him to copy her efforts and replicate her work!

"I hope it will work."

He waited as his mother inputted more and more power into the spiritual engine. Through principles that he didn't fully understand, the physical dimensions and the spiritual dimensions were indeed moving closer. He could feel it in his bones.

In fact, the creeping sense of danger made him feel very uncomfortable!

Seeing that his involvement wasn't needed at this time, he decided to talk to his father. As a spiritual caveman, he played no role at all in the proceedings.

"Dad.. it looks like you and your mech are doing well."

"We are." Ryncol replied with evident satisfaction. "Your work is very unique, but great. I had some doubts about piloting a bestial mech, but I have grown comfortable in piloting it. While it is a temperamental machine, its power is beyond compare, especially against the opponents that we typically face in the Nyxian Gap."

Ves felt very happy that he made his father pleased with his work. His dad was one of his most important customers as far as he was concerned!

"The mech is not entirely safe to pilot, though. There are aspects about the neural interface and other elements that have not been designed with maximum safety in mind."

"I'm aware. Our resident mech designer has already explained the potential risks to me. The mech is very different from what it was from the start. We've taken extensive advantage of its nanomachines. Our head designer has also retooled it into an expert

mech that suits my capabilities. You don't need to worry for me. This mech has served me well so far and it will continue to be my fighting partner."

Through their brief discussion, Ves discovered that the Devil Tiger he created had already taken on a life of its own. Not only had it developed a close bond with his father, some other mech designer had tweaked and upgraded the machine extensively.

"Who is this mech designer you are talking about?" Ves asked with a hint of jealousy in his tone.

"That is not for me to say. It's better that you don't know, Ves. All I can tell you is that the mech you made is in good hands. I make sure that none of the changes alters the mech too much. I don't get as much enjoyment in piloting a mech that isn't made by you. I think at least half of my strength comes from the fact that a part of you is with me in every fight."

Ves sensed the love expressed by his father. He felt warm in his heart. The affection from his family was too precious! He had missed this sensation!

The two didn't have much time to catch up with each other before his mother's efforts hit a turning point.

As the material realm and the spiritual realm began to move closer to each other, the spiritual engine experienced more and more strain. The convergence gradually slowed down until it stopped entirely.

"I can't get them to move any closer!" Cynthia strenuously said, causing Ves to snap out of his leisurely conversation with his father. "I.. don't... have enough power!"

His heart sank as he heard this. He hoped the engine was ingenious enough to accomplish what they wanted without too much effort, but it wasn't enough.

The immense vortex had become more substantial around the portal. Ves even saw signs that it was slightly beginning to impact the portal. It wasn't enough, though. The realms needed to overlap even more!

"How can we solve this, mother?"

"Isn't that obvious?! I need power, any power! Do you have any more life essence?"

"You took my only stash of it away from me already!"

His mother's giant mutated face frowned. "If you can't provide me with any further strength, then I can supply it myself. It will cost me, though. If I give up too much.. I won't be able to maintain my existence."

"NO!"

"You can't!"

Both Ves and his father objected to this solution! Neither wanted to see her die!

"We don't have any other option! We need to make our move fast. The Temple Protector is closing in. I can feel his presence nearing the portal. It won't be long before he passes through!"

Ves thought for a moment. He recalled his earlier conversation with James and the ideas he generated from it. "Wait! I may have a better way! Do you recall the Superior Mother? She has grown very strong as of late!"

"This... may work."

In order to help his mother derive power from her avatar, Ves brought forth the statue of the Superior Mother. The lightning-struck work possessed an incredibly strong association to the ancestral spirit. He was sure that bringing it to Cynthia would help.

After locating and bringing the statue out, the Devil Tiger carefully grasped the marble-like statue with its limbs and hastily flew towards Cynthia's giant energy projection.

His mother's eyes lit up as she saw and felt the statue approaching. She sensed something remarkable from it! "Throw it inside me. Do it quickly!"

The Devil Tiger did as instructed. As soon as the statue entered Cynthia's giant body, it settled right in the middle.

Soon, changes began to take place. Ves looked on with great fascination as he sensed the presence of the Superior Mother emerging from his actual mother.

The energy projection changed shape as it became a little more human! Cynthia's bearing began to grow nobler and more regal as she began to take on traits of the Hexer Supreme!

Her power grew along with these changes. Not only that, Ves sensed the shadow of an enormous collective of Hexers who earnestly believed in the greatness of the Superior Mother!

"It's working, at least for now!"

The two realms began to overlap more and more. Though the movement didn't seem very big, the vortex was drastically becoming more real!

More and more force began to impact the portal. More blue radiance began to bloom from it. Yet just as the vortex was about to surpass a critical threshold, the convergence stopped again!

"I can't!" His mother cried! "I can't.. go any further than this!"

They were still missing too much power! Even though the spiritual engine looked as if it was working at full gear, the two realms still weren't close enough! To make just a tiny bit of progress, they had to input vastly more power!

"Damn it!"

Ves rapidly tried to figure out where he could source more energy. His design spirits? They were too weak. Himself? He possessed even less energy!

"Wait, maybe this will work!"

A vague idea came to mind. Though Ves didn't feel sure about it at all, he couldn't come up with anything better. He took control of the shuttle and piloted it closer towards his mother, the portal and the active spiritual engine.

His mother didn't want him to come closer. "What are you doing, Ves!? It's dangerous here! I can take care of this problem myself!"

Though the increased pressure put him under greater strain, Ves could still bear it! "I won't lose you again, mother!"

He rose from his piloting chair and opened the hatch. He launched into space and allowed the maneuvering systems of his Unending Regalia to move him past his mother and towards the portal and the overlapping realms.

"VES! GET BACK HERE NOW!"

"No! I can do this, mom!"

The strain on his mind, body and spirit rose tremendously. If not for the B-stone layer of his armor, he would have popped by now. Even then, he couldn't get much closer.

"Seems this will have to do." He murmured.

He then proceeded to do something that caused both of his parents to be startled.

He summoned his System comm.

As the slim comm materialized onto his suit gauntlets, he stared at it for a few seconds before issuing a request.

"System... can you help us repel his threat?"

It didn't answer.

"The relic originally belongs to the Temple, Ves." His mother softly said. "It can't help you in this fight."

"Can't, or won't?"

His mother didn't answer, but Ves already knew that it was too much to hope that the System would bail him out. He felt a bit melancholic as he looked at the comm.

"Are you thinking about throwing it inside the portal?" Cynthia distressingly asked. "That won't help us at all! You're just giving what the Temple Protector wants ahead of time. He will still come and hunt us down!"

"I know. I thought about it, but I don't want to earn the System's ire."

He was sure that the System had a million different ways to kill him if he did something as brazen as that. If it was so easy to get rid of it, Ves would have already tossed it through the portal!

No, he did not think about sacrificing it. Instead, he wanted to make use of it in a different fashion.

"Faith, huh? Maybe.. faith isn't so useless after. Maybe.. I need to stop denying who I am."

He closed his eyes and concentrated his mind. He clasped the System comm between his palms.

Ves then proceeded to do something he swore he would never do in his life.

He prayed.

He opened himself up to the System comm. He roused his entire spirit and tried to embrace it in a way he had never done before.

"I may be just a mech designer, but... I am also the Holy Son. The moment I made use of the Mech Designer System, I have accepted this heavy mantle."

It didn't matter if he did so unknowingly. It didn't matter if he spent years bouncing around with the System without knowing its profound nature.

As the holder of a relic that was very likely the Metal Scroll, Ves had become a figure that was in some ways central to the Five Scrolls Compact!

Shouldn't.. the Metal Scroll be revered by every member of the Compact in and outside human space?

Shouldn't a Holy Son like him be regarded as an absolute transcendent authority within the cult?

From what he learned from various sources, only the higher ups were aware of the details of the Great Betrayal.

The lower and middle ranks were ignorant of the fact that the Metal Scroll had been lost a long time ago! As far as they were concerned, the Compact was still led by five Holy Sons who each bore the responsibility of bearing all five Sacred Scrolls!

"And many of these cultists are probably spirituality active..." He boldly guessed.

As Ves communed deeper with the System comm, he began to sense an inkling of what he sought. His extraordinary high perception of spirituality and exceptional sensitivity towards life allowed him to notice something he had never sensed before from the System.

He managed to open his eyes to a miniscule portion of the immense worship directed towards Metal Scroll!

The power of this collective worship was frighteningly powerful, but also completely inaccessible to him under ordinary circumstances. He had to move as close as possible to the space where the two realms were overlapping to even capture a trace of his immensely powerful phenomenon!

"What are you doing, Ves.. no! Don't! Only gods are able to harness this power!"

His mother had a point. The power he touched was too immense. He knew for certain that he would get crushed if he attempted to touch it. Just getting close to it was enough for him to feel as if his spirit would evaporate.

Even so, he did not lose confidence!

Ves smirked even as he maintained his concentration.

"I don't believe in gods, mother. I believe in machines!"

He proceeded to do something that he never thought about. He really didn't want to do this, but he couldn't figure out any other way to accomplish his goal.

He grasped the Grand Dynamo in his mind, ripped it out, and threw it towards the channel where an immense amount of faith was being directed towards the Metal Scroll!

The Grand Dynamo held out remarkably well, but the power of faith was too strong. It flooded the powerful construct, causing it to swell with far too much energy that it was never designed to take.

It ruptured!

Ves hastily flew backwards, and the Devil Tiger had rapidly swooped close in order to grasp him and bring him away as far as possible.

Even then, the immense explosion that happened behind them practically flung the mech out!

In the meantime, the close overlap between the two realms had abruptly become total due to the immense spiritual explosion!

Cynthia Larkinson looked on with amazement as the vortex had fully entered the same plane as the portal. Immense corrosive spiritual winds and other dangerous forces instantly buffeted the portal.

The initial explosion triggered by his son had also inflicted considerable damage, thereby opening up crevices that the corrosive winds eagerly expanded!

Rage and emotion pulsed from the energy supporting the portal as it increasingly dimmed. Even if only a small portion of the vortex was crashing against it, the corrosive nature of the imaginary realm's winds happened to be incredibly dangerous to the portal's integrity!

A soundless explosion took place as the portal collapsed! Cynthia became shocked as she perceived the rage and fear of the enemy that was falling into the cracks between dimensions!

The danger had passed!

Chapter 2407: Silent Battlefield

The battle was over!

Wreckage and ruin spread throughout the battlefield. The final explosion that caused the realms to overlap and the portal to collapse had caused a fair amount of nearby mechs and ships to drift away.

The overlap did not last long after that instance. Cynthia Larkinson immediately stopped channeling the spiritual engine that she and Ves had built.

Without any further support, the unstable region affected by the explosion of the faith-infused Grand Dynamo rapidly stabilized, thereby no longer posing a hazard to the surrounding space.

As Ves recovered from the shock of getting slammed away, he quickly tried to regain his bearings. He manipulated his Unending Regalia's customized operating system to connect to the nearby ships and gain a quick overview of the surrounding space.

Practically every ship and mech showed no activity. The emergence of extremely powerful spiritual entities continuously subjected their fragile minds and spirits to heavy suppression.

Even if most of the spiritually-weak individuals were mostly able to avoid the brunt of the pressure, what little of it that managed to leak through was too much for the ordinary mech pilots to bear.

Ves was horrified at how effective these powerful entities could disable entire mech armies with their presence alone! Only those who were more spiritually active such as Ves possessed the capital to fight against them. Every other human stood no chance in combating these creatures!

What actually astounded him even more was the difference in power between the decrepit, half-rotten dark gods of the Nyxian Gap and a single dignitary from the galactic center.

He had no choice but to revise the threat level of the Five Scrolls Compact upwards after seeing how his recently-empowered mother did not even believe she stood a chance against this so-called Temple Protector!

In fact, given how powerful and capable he truly was, Ves couldn't quite believe how quickly his parents and him managed to eliminate such a great threat. Shouldn't someone more versed in spiritual sorcery be more careful about traveling through a space tunnel?

His mother did not seem to show any concern. She already directed her attention elsewhere.

Her monstrous energy projection had dimmed and shrunk a bit. She just expended a lot of energy to feed the spiritual engine that initially caused the two realms to converge. In order to recoup her losses, she proceeded to deconstruct the spiritual engine in order to salvage its energy.

His mother evidently never let an opportunity to salvage some spiritual energy to waste!

"There is no need for you to put up your guard anymore, Ves." She reassuringly said.
"The Temple Protector is gone. While I can't say he is dead, he is most certainly gone.

Many dimensions are inherently lethal to life. The remainder are so harsh that it will take his utmost to preserve his vitality. If he happens to fall in between the dimensions, then he will never be going back."

"Are you really sure about that? This fellow is one of the most powerful of his kind in the Compact. How can he open himself up to such an obvious vulnerability?"

His mother smirked as she finished absorbing the remnants of the spiritual energy. "The Temple Protector was careless, Ves. Lord Dista is incredibly old and powerful, but he is far from his powerbase. He came alone in order to remain incognito and to keep his rivals from the Ruined Temple in the dark about the treasure you possess. On top of that, he had just arrived at the Nyxian Gap and likely doesn't understand all of the perils of this region. With his arrogance, he thought that none of us could ever harm the portal."

In other words, the Temple Protector failed to follow the basic rules of warfare that Ves and the Larkinson Clan had intimately internalized during this eventful campaign.

Understanding the terrain, hiding your own strength, studying the enemy, forming contingency plans and accounting for failure were all principles that any power needed to master. Only by doing so enabled his forces to defeat more powerful foes that should have been able to win in straightforward battles.

Ves found it difficult that someone who was alive before the arrival of the Age of Mechs could be so stupid. All of the other old monsters he encountered were always calm, calculative and exceedingly careful. They only made huge gambits after setting up elaborate schemes. Senator Tovar was pretty much his model of what a multi-century fossil should be like.

..Then again, he had never met a sane member of the Five Scrolls Compact either. He could easily imagine that the higher-ranking members of the Compact were even crazier than the rank-and-file!

It was too much to expect these unhinged super-fanatics to abide by common sense.

"Okay. If you think the danger has passed, then I'll take your word for it." He swept his gaze around the chaotic battlefield. "The battle is over, but my men are still in danger. There are people in danger but unable to get any help because everyone is knocked unconscious. There are also a lot of intact pirate mechs and warships that can go active at any time to resume the fight."

A lot of work needed to be done to secure the battlefield and stem the damage.

"He's right." Ryncol Larkinson spoke. As the commander of the Oblivion Hand, he knew exactly how crucial it was to take steps right away. "We need to wake our son's subordinates to perform search and rescue and to disarm the surviving pirates."

Ves brought up a concern. "We need to keep matters secret as well. I don't want to reveal you to too many people. Right now, you're already exposed to some of my men, but as long as the numbers remain low, I'm confident that I can control the spread of information."

His mother nodded in agreement. "I have already employed some precautions, but it is best to be thorough."

He briefly discussed the problem with her. Ves was fairly confident he could wipe the data logged by various ships and mechs, but he couldn't do much to the memories of his clansmen. Some of them possessed implants as well that made it tricky to wipe their memories.

"I am not proficient in tampering the minds of people." Cynthia said. "However, it is within my capabilities to scramble their short-term memory, especially since their psyches have already been impacted from the moment the dark gods have come in their true forms. The people I affect won't forget anything, but their memories will lose a lot of detail, similar to trying to recall something that has happened years ago. This is the best I can do without damaging their essence."

"Good. Please do so. For secrecy's sake, they can't know too much."

There were some people in the fleet who possessed implants, but their numbers were small enough for Ves to make other arrangements for them. As for the expert pilots who were most likely still awake, he trusted them all to an extent.

Besides, all of his communications with his parents took place on a spiritual level.

As his giant mother proceeded to fly towards his unconscious men and began to scramble their short-term memories, Ves turned to the Devil Tiger.

He couldn't help but study how much his initial work had changed over the course of a couple of years. He felt a bit regretful that he wasn't the one responsible for converting it into an expert mech.

Still, he felt reassured the mech was in good hands. He could already see that the mech designer who upgraded and took care of the Devil Tiger was very attentive. The person who worked on it was at least a Senior, and a proper one at that.

"Father. Can you bring your mech to my ship so I can tweak it?" He asked.

"Why?"

"I made it, you know. I long wanted to tweak it and update it, but I never got the opportunity to do so. I programmed an auto update routine in its operating system, but it never activated."

"I had our resident head designer remove it." His father said. "I appreciate your efforts, but it's a security risk."

"I understand. Can you at least allow me to check on the mech and see whether I can improve it? If this plan of ours succeeds, you'll be leaving me again, right?"

"That's correct. We are marked. Neither of us can accompany you for fear of leading our enemy towards you. As long as we remain apart, the enemy won't have reason to believe you are involved with us. You need to leave the Nyxian Gap and this entire star cluster when this is over."

"Believe me, that is exactly what I want. Now, can you enter my vessel's hangar bay? There should be enough space to accommodate the Devil Tiger."

"Will do, son."

His father's mech took hold of his armored form and flew to the Scarlet Rose. The large and imposing Devil Tiger smoothly entered the hangar bay and landed on the deck.

Its large wings had to fold into its tightest form possible in order to prevent them from scratching the ceiling!

"We don't have much time, so I'll only apply some quick improvements."

Ves didn't feel safe with the pirates able to wake up at any time. Though he knew his mother would never allow the scum to do any harm, it was best for his own men to take over the battlefield as quickly as possible.

Since the Devil Tiger was already in good hands, Ves didn't feel the need to apply any major changes. Though he didn't quite agree with all of the changes made by its current caretaker, he could live with them, and that was enough.

Ves used his suit to fly up to mech in order to enter the cockpit. He retracted his helmet and grinned as he hugged his father's suited form.

"I missed you so much!"

"Me too, son. You have grown so much." His father smiled back as removed his helmet and disguise. "I'm sorry that I left so abruptly. There is much I wanted to say to you over the years."

"We can talk about it while I work. This won't take too long."

Ves proceeded to dive into the operating system of his mech and began to perform various inspections. He also proceeded to update or modify the settings whenever

possible. He had improved considerably ever since he made the masterwork mech, and he wanted to impart as much as he could before he separated from his parents.

One factor that allowed him to wield greater influence of the Devil Tiger was the fact that it was based on ASMAS. While Ves deliberately made it difficult for anyone to alter the programming of pure ASMAS, he was still able to implement some small modifications with the help of his control over the mech's design spirit.

Overall, he improved its autonomous upgrade trajectory and opened it up for suggestions from other mech designers. Ves embedded a set of instructions in the mech so that his father's mech designer would learn about these changes.

This ensured the Devil Tiger would fully be able to embrace more drastic changes that allowed it to reach the level of a second-class expert mech and maybe even first-class expert mech in the future!

While he was at it, he improved the integration of Zeigra into the Devil Tiger so that it became even more difficult to hack the mech.

Of course, he couldn't forget about upgrading the spiritual traits of one of his greatest works.

As an expert mech piloted by someone who had integrated well with it, the Devil Tiger had already developed a strong character.

In fact, not even the Shield of Samar was as strong as the Devil Tiger in this aspect!

Ves sensed the traces of his mother in some areas. This allowed him to skip some procedures. The only significant change he made to the spiritual makeup of the mech was to impart it with a couple of triggered abilities.

He discussed them with his father.

"The Devil Tiger is able to induce corrosion."

"I know." His father grinned. "I have taken advantage of it many times in battle. My opponents never expect that my mech is capable of eating them up from the inside."

"I can improve this and grant you more control over it. Does that sound good to you, dad?"

"You're the mech designer here, Ves. I trust in your ability."

There was something very satisfying about working on a mech piloted by his father. Ves had longed for this moment for so long that it felt surreal to him that he was finally able to access the Devil Tiger again. He missed this mech!

Chapter 2408: A Long Awaited Talk

With his father's permission, Ves decided to add two triggered abilities to the Devil Tiger.

The first one was a Corrosion Pulse that was based on the pulsing abilities of some of his other mech designs. Simply put, the ability allowed the Devil Tiger to release a radial wave that possessed a concentrated corrosion effect.

The closer the enemy, the greater its potency! The best part about the triggered ability was that it was capable of ignoring most physical barriers! Therefore, it was a killer move against any machine with delicate internals. Not even warships were immune to this effect!

The ability worked best against materials and in particular against powerful opponents.

In order to complement the Corrosion Pulse ability, Ves added the Primal Roar ability as well.

Based on the roars employed by the dark gods and the fearsome glow of his Doom Guard design, Ves added a way for the Devil Tiger to release a spiritual wave that was able to frighten and intimidate mech pilots.

This was a great way for his father to subdue a large number of enemy pirates. The weaker their wills, the faster they crumbled. Even stronger-willed pirates should experience some difficulties depending on the growth of the Devil Tiger and its design spirit.

Ves didn't have the time to add anything else. He had already accomplished a lot of different improvements in a very short amount of time.

Part of that was because he limited himself to easy changes. At his level of competence, he was able to work quite quickly, taking minutes to accomplish something that would take a typical Apprentice hours to complete.

Another part of it was because he already formulated and stored a lot of different potential improvements in his implant. The benefit of having the Archimedes Rubal was that he could store all of his ideas and build on them whenever he was in the mood to do so. Over years, Ves accumulated quite a lot of them, and now he picked out the most appropriate ones, thereby allowing him to skip hours or days of work.

While he had to work quite intensively to cram all of his desires into the Devil Tiger, he still retained at least some of his focus. He wanted to talk to his father in person for a very long time, and this might be the only window of opportunity he could get in his life.

Once he and his parents went their separate ways, they might not meet each other again. This made it even more important for Ves to cherish this precious moment!

"Dad.. can you tell me who my mother truly is?" Ves hesitantly asked. "She's obviously not normal. Did she used to be part of the Compact?"

"I can't answer that question." His father said as he watched his son work on his mech. "I don't know too much about mother's past. She doesn't want to share too much about it. All I know is that she has spent a long time fleeing from the Compact. She lost all of her companions along the way. The setbacks she suffered and dangers she encountered has marked her deeply. It took a long time for her to recover to an extent. Having you and raising you was a turning point in her life. She was much worse before you were born."

That partially explained why she was so secretive and bossy towards him. Someone who went through a perilous chase across the galaxy must have developed many instincts that were geared towards survival.

"Why did she die early?" He asked. "And how come she was able to get back to life in this form?"

"Do I look like I understand how all of this magic works? While I have long gotten over the shock that people can perform all of these amazing feats, that doesn't mean I understand how it works. I'm just a mech pilot."

"An expert pilot." Ves pointedly replied. "Your sensitivity and understanding towards my mother's magic' should be higher than normal people."

"That doesn't make much of a difference."

Ves momentarily paused his work in order to study his father very closely. Now that he was looking closely, he sensed that his father was different from the other expert pilots that he had encountered.

For one, Ryncol exerted a lot of control over his force of will. He kept an iron grip on it, preventing it from spilling out and affecting the people around him. Whether he did that to avoid influencing his son or because his mother taught him how to do so, it was impressive nonetheless.

What distressed Ves a bit was that his father developed quite an aggressive orientation for his will!

In fact, if he didn't know any better, he felt it was identical to that of Zeigra!

"Dad.. how did you advance to your current rank? As far as I know, you aren't expert pilot material. You are long past the prime age for that. You didn't break through back when you served in the Mech Corps. How come you're completely different?"

In the past, Ves and every Larkinson knew that Ryncol was not comparable to his older brother. Venerable Ark Larkinson advanced early in his career and became a prominent star of the family. This was despite the similar battles they fought in during the previous Bright-Vesia War!

"Your mother 'helped' me, in a way. She told me that I didn't have the qualifications to become an expert pilot, but tried out a method that will allow me to become one by force. It.. it was not something I wanted to experience, but it worked out in the end. I am fully in control of my strength."

"Did she.. merge your mind with the Devil Tiger's design spirit?" Ves asked suspiciously as he observed several worrisome clues.

"I had to fight against the big cat. The two of us were locked in a duel. To prevent him from eating me, I had to be stronger than him in order to absorb him instead."

His father rambled on a bit about his experiences. He wasn't good at describing them, but his words offered Ves enough clues to get the gist of how his mother managed to elevate him to expert pilot.

Ves admired his mother! If he interpreted his father correctly, his mother managed to forcefully elevate his father from a spiritually-weak mech pilot into a potent if abnormal expert pilot!

He eagerly took notes and recorded as much of his thoughts and observations into his implant as possible.

While Ves had already found a way to induce mech pilots with spiritual potential to become expert candidates, he didn't have a solution for the majority who lacked this precious quality.

If Ves could enable some of these normal individuals to advance, then that would open up a lot of potential promotion opportunities for his clansmen!

Of course, he also became aware of risks surrounding the method of his mother. Stuffing a piece of his design spirits in the head of a mech pilot was very dangerous, and he wasn't quite clear what techniques his mother employed to increase the safety and success rate of the merger process.

Ves tentatively labeled this theoretical technique as spiritual talent implantation. This was because it could quite literally implant someone else's talent in spirituality to another person!

The implications were staggering, but so were the many possible ways it could go wrong.

From his current understanding of how spirituality worked, this was an exceedingly dangerous move! The recipient would always be weaker than the donor. This meant that the most likely outcome was that the foreign spiritual fragment would instead absorb the recipient and become the body's new occupant!

Ves briefly shook his head. This was not the time to explore this notion any further. There was plenty of time afterwards to delve in this research topic.

"Your mother died due to succumbing to some sort of fatal wound." His father answered one of his earlier questions. "She did not die of a wound to her body. Otherwise, she could have received treatment from a hospital back in the Bright Republic. Instead, one of her pursuing enemies managed to damage her soul. That was how she explained it to me, at least."

That was a plausible, if worrying answer. If the Five Scrolls Compact was capable of harming people's spirits directly, then they were probably very good at assassination! After all, most people and organizations simply weren't on guard against spiritual attacks!

"Do you know the details about her wound?"

"I think she implied that her enemies destroyed or captured a piece of her soul. She has become incomplete ever since that. She's like a breached starship that is slowly venting air. She told me that she can't fix the hull breach. All she can do is to constantly absorb more air from other sources to keep herself alive. Your mother wasn't able to do that during your childhood, so that was why she died early."

That explained a lot of unanswered questions. No wonder his mother wanted to suck him dry all the time. Just as he suspected, her existence literally depended on it! Fortunately, this shouldn't be much of a problem anymore. His mother had not only grown stronger and gained more options, but also gained access to another source of energy.

"Did she ever explain how she lingered after her death?"

Ryncol shook his head. "No. I'm just happy that she has returned. You cannot imagine the delight I feel for having her back. I don't care what she did to return to life, and I am not versed in the details. I think.. powerful individuals like her don't live and die like normal people. I have always suspected that she is older than she appears."

"How old?"

"Maybe as old as your grandfather."

"Are you serious?!"

"That's just a conservative estimate." His father smiled wryly at Ves. "Other times, she comes across as positively ancient. It's rather strange, because she also has some youthful aspects, though she only shows that side of her when she's happy and relaxed."

If his mother used to be a member of the Compact, then Ves could buy the theory that his mother was much older than his father.

His mother was too strong for her apparent age. Her abilities were so sophisticated that he didn't think that she could possess so much power if she was only fifty or seventy years old. It took a long time to accumulate so much power!

Ryncol did not talk about his wife any further, as he could say little else. Ves found it rather strange that his father knew so little about someone he decided to tie the knot with. This was not typical for a Larkinson!

"This is love, Ves. It doesn't always have to make sense. Sometimes, love doesn't need to abide by a checklist in order to work. No matter how old she is or what kind of weighty past she bears, I love her, and she loves me back. Despite her obvious power and height, she never thought or treated me as lesser. We respect each other, and we had you. Aren't you in a relationship yourself?"

Ves hesitantly smiled. "Yes. She is.. quite a personality. We're quite different, but we respect each other as well. I'm about to get married soon as long as I can get back in time to make it for the wedding."

"I heard."

"Will.. will you be able to attend?"

"You know that's not possible. Unless the threat of the Five Scrolls Compact is completely gone, we won't be able to lift our heads out of the depths of the Nyxian Gap. The last thing we want to do is to draw our enemies towards you. While the Compact is able to track your mother and I, it shouldn't know about our current identities. As long as that is the case, you won't attract their attention. Let's make sure it stays that way."

Chapter 2409: Unwilling Separation

Ves and his father ended their conversation at the same time he finished his work on the mech.

As much as they wanted to take the time to catch up on each other, his parents had to go. His mother not only scrambled the memories of his clansmen, but also made sure they woke up soon.

Once that happened, it was very inconvenient for them to witness Ves acting chummy with the leader of the Oblivion Hand and the energy projection of a giant monstrous woman!

Both Ves and his parents had several good reasons to keep their association as discreet as possible. Nothing good would come if the public became aware of the astounding events that took place during the battle.

Ves was only willing to let the first half of the battle go public. As soon as the Gravada Knarlax started spewing out different kinds of fog-like energy, he did not want the subsequent events to be leaked.

As his parents were ready to say farewell and go, Ves looked emotionally at the Devil Tiger and his mother floating just outside the Scarlet Rose's hangar bay.

"I guess we won't be meeting each other for a very long time." He sighed.

"You're leaving for the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, right?" His mother asked.

"Yes. I want to explore new opportunities and get away from some of the problems here. I thought it would be a good way to distance myself from the Compact."

"Oh, you'll never be too far away from them. The Compact is everywhere. You can expect their people to be among the pioneers and colonists there. Don't ever let your guard down. As long as you take precautions and as long as you aren't too blatant with displaying your powers, you should be fine."

This happened to be one of Ves' latent concerns. Who knew what would happen if some hidden Compact member stumbled upon one of his mechs one day. Would the cultist be able to tell that Ves was connected to them? This was an outcome that he did not want to see!"

"Are there ways to reduce the risk of discovery?"

"It helps a lot that you don't practice your abilities like them. As long as you work more towards obscuring and mystifying your applications, you will probably be able to lay low. I advise you to take shelter under the Big Two, though. The closer you are to them, the more hesitant the Compact will be to approach you. While the MTA and CFA can't entirely be trusted, they are better than the alternative."

"I'll take that into account." Ves nodded. "Before you go, I just came up with a proposal. Aboard one of our other ships is an alien communication crystal. It's the same kind of crystal that you or your men used to transmit your blueprint. Would you be willing to take one along? While there are a lot of limitations to using the crystals, at the very least we can still stay in touch. That is, if it is secure enough for your liking."

His mother frowned and looked at the Devil Tiger. His parents must be having a private discussion.

"We know about the crystals. You can keep the two you have. Taking one will deprive you of a useful tool and may make your people wonder where it disappeared. Once your father returns to the Oblivion Hand, he will use his contacts to take over one of the other crystals, preferably in secret. Once that happens, we can remain in contact with each other, but only sparingly. We can't risk communicating too much in the event the connections aren't secure. Even I don't understand how this alien technology works."

It was better than nothing, and certainly a more palatable alternative than calling each other over the galactic net!

Ves felt fortunate that he was able to get his hands on the Xona Crystals. He suspected that the oversized crystals were able to communicate with each other through the heavy spatial warping that engulfed the core regions. He also believed their range was unlimited.

This meant that they did not have to make any special arrangements once he reached the Red Ocean.

Instead of forming a portal that would allow them to return to the core regions, his mother and the Devil Tiger instead sped up and began to fly into the distance.

"There are numerous eyes and observers as well as other troublemakers in the periphery. We'll clean them up before we go. Good luck, Ves, and don't play with fire next time."

"Goodbye!"

Ves saw them go with a mixed expression. While the Xona Crystals offered some hope for him to remain in touch with his parents, it was not possible for him to call them daily and have a chat whenever possible.

"Well, let's begin the cleanup."

It didn't take long for the first Larkinsons to wake up. They opened their weary eyes in wonder as they saw the disastrous aftermath of the battle.

So many assets were wrecked! The pirates suffered horrendous losses, but the Larkinsons weren't in good shape either!

Ves immediately took charge of his men. "Stop dazing around and wake your fellow clansmen! Although it doesn't look like it, we won the battle. Please organize yourselves so that we can police the battlefield."

The Larkinsons hesitantly and confusedly began to do what they could. They bumbled around for a time until some of the officers woke up. When leaders such as Major Verle, Commander Melkor and so on began to issue orders, the Larkinsons became more organized.

During this time, some pirates with spiritual potential had begun to wake up as well, but their numbers were too small to threaten the overall picture. The Larkinson mechs began to sweep the enemy mechs while transports and assault shuttles filled with infantry began to board the surviving pirate ships.

While Task Force Predator had lost a lot of ships, the Allidus Alliance still retained much of them. There were not only a lot of intact pirate carriers, but every warship aside from the Gravada Knarlax and Mortis Greyson had made it through without suffering heavy damage!

None of the Larkinsons needed a reminder that securing these warships was a top priority!

In fact, even the crippled hull of the Gravada Knarlax had to be swept clean of pirates. Ves wanted to prevent the surviving pirate crew inside from doing something stupid, such as destroying his loot, activating an intact weapon system or inducing the working power reactors into overloading. A heavy cruiser was still an exceedingly dangerous beast even if it looked as if she was on her deathbed!

Fortunately, the Larkinsons worked quickly and efficiently. Due to manpower and vehicle constraints, they couldn't be as thorough as they liked.

For example, the men only bothered to secure the more valuable-looking assets. There were too many pirate mechs floating in space for the Larkinsons to bother with retrieving them as intact as possible. To prevent their mech pilots from waking up and wreaking havoc, the Larkinson mechs simply pierced their cockpits and killed the pilots inside.

Something similar happened to many pirate carriers and other ships. There wasn't enough infantry to take possession of all of them, so the Larkinson simply blew them up no matter who or what was inside.

Ves winced a bit at the destruction of so many usable assets. The Larkinson fleet lost too many ships. His task force didn't even have enough carriers left to berth all of its surviving mechs!

This meant that his Larkinsons had to capture a lot of carriers in order to accommodate all of the surviving mechs.

Two hours later, Major Verle called Ves to appraise him of the latest developments.

"How is it going? I hope the pirate warships are no longer a threat."

"We have tentatively taken control over them, sir. We have already swept the Artis Fly and the Sundown at least two times as they are only frigates. It is taking longer to sweep the The Ailing Frey, the Cartin Motiva and the Livid Seven. As destroyers, they are larger and more complicated. Our men have already encountered various boobytraps inside. We will need to bring in engineers to thoroughly go over every system to make sure they won't follow malicious programming the pirates have planted as a precaution."

"Well, just shut off the systems. There isn't much they can do if they don't have access to power."

"Believe me, our boarding parties are doing our best, sir." Verle tiredly smiled. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. Dealing with these problems is better than suffering a defeat. It is just that the number and scale of our surviving opponents is a bit too big for us to secure right away."

"We're suffering from success." Ves put it succinctly.

The Major nodded and looked sharply at Ves. "Indeed. There.. are a lot of stories circulating around. Many of them sound astounding. What.. happened in the later stages of the battle?"

"Haven't you looked at the footage?"

"I did, but that has only made me more confused. The footage is not only fuzzy, but each of us are getting headaches whenever we try to think back on what exactly occurred."

Ves smirked. His mother didn't let him down in this regard. "I can't satisfy your curiosity. It will harm the Larkinson Clan if the details are spread. Make sure that everyone doesn't look too hard on what happened at the end. Have I made myself clear?"

Though Verle obviously did not like to be deprived of information, he understood the danger of spreading dangerous information. As a former intelligence operative, he took part in several coverups. This was no different in his regard.

"Understood, sir. I have already received word that Calabast and the Black Cats are scrubbing as many systems as possible."

Ves knew, because that was the first order he gave his spymaster after he slapped her awake. "Let the Black Cats do their work without obstruction. Now, what can you tell me about the state of the Gravada Knarlax?"

"I believe Ophelia Kronon can tell you more about the ship's condition. Right now, our boarding parties still haven't finished their initial sweeps. There are too many decks and compartments to go through."

"Have you found Lord Hivex? I can't imagine how much damage he can do if he wakes up and takes control of the remaining systems of the heavy cruiser."

Crippled or not, Ves knew that ships were built to take a beating! This was especially the case for warships and large ones at that. Her rear turret had not suffered any significant damage. As long as it woke up, it could do immense damage to the remnants of the Larkinson fleet!

"We are on it, sir. Trust in our men. While our infantry aren't as flashy as our mech pilots, they know what to do in this situation. They have drilled extensively on how to board and take over many different varieties of warships in the last month."

This was the power of preparation. It would have been a lot different if the pirate armada ambushed Task Force Predator out of the blue!

Though Ves still felt concerned about possible accidents, there wasn't much he could do short of boarding the crippled flagship himself. While he was very interested in doing so, he doubted that his circle of advisors would agree to such a reckless decision.

"Have your men retrieved all of the expert pilots and expert candidates?" He changed the topic.

Verle smiled a little brighter. "Yes. As the current and future standard bearers of our clan, I have made sure that they are receiving our best care. Of the expert mechs, all of them are exhausted. Venerable Tusa has suffered heavy injuries, though. Something smashed his mech apart and transferred a lot of shock to the cockpit."

"Will he survive?"

"He'll make it. Dr. Ranya Wodin is already administering to him in person. She is optimistic about his recovery, though it will take a lot of time and treatment."

"Oh. Okay." Ves no longer worried about the light mech expert pilot. "What about our expert candidates? How many survived?"

Verle shrugged. "We don't even know how many have originally broken through to expert candidates. According to the current figures, we have brought in nine injured or exhausted expert candidates. I don't think there are any more. None of the other surviving mech pilots have triggered the resonance sensors."

Only nine made it through. The Inexorable One had slain the rest. Ves lowered his head. This was a heavy loss.

"There were others. They burned bright and sacrificed themselves so that we may live."

"They deserve to be honored."

"Our clan will not forget their names."

Chapter 2410: Fallen Grandeur

Occasional fighting erupted inside the ships of the pirates. Boarding parties consisting of well-armed and well-trained infantry stormed through the passageways and compartments like enforcers quelling a riot.

The difference in gear and organization gave the invaders a considerable advantage. While the internal defenses of the ships were quite robust, the Larkinsons possessed too much excellent gear for those measures to make a difference!

Infiltrators ran ahead to sabotage key defenses. Saboteurs blocked essential power flows. No matter how well the pirates built their warships, their tech and sophistication fell far short of that built by proper organizations.

Not even the flagship of the Allidus Alliance resisted the invasion. Already damaged and partially crippled, there was too much chaos to organize the surviving crew properly. They barely woke up and couldn't do anything.

The Black Cats prioritized knocking out as many command and control systems as possible, thereby isolating the crew from each other. They also deployed numerous jammers throughout the ship, thereby preventing the pirates from relaying messages to each other through short-ranged wireless communications.

All of this enabled the Larkinsons to divide and conquer the considerably large ship! By attacking the numerous sections of the ship one by one, the Larkinsons didn't have to employ too many squads of infantrymen at a time, thereby allowing other troops to be sent to other ships.

Ves constantly kept himself apprised of the situation as the massive cleanup operation continued.

Just to be safe, Major Verle prioritized resupplying and servicing the most intact mechs the Larkinsons retained.

There wasn't much left. The secondary gun batteries of the pirate warships had ripped through numerous mechs. The thousands of pirate mechs had also exacted a considerable price.

The Larkinsons were still counting their losses, but in the initial hours, less than forty percent of mechs were still capable of putting up a fight.

Ves did not mourn too much for the fallen mechs. Alive or not, they served their purpose. Ves could easily rebuild or replace them in time.

What he truly cared about was the loss of life, particularly the lives of mech pilots. Ves considered every bloodied, veteran mech pilot to be a treasure. After all of the battles they lived through, they were destined to become the backbone of the militant arm of the Larkinson Clan.

Forged in battle, united by brotherhood, tested through hardship, Ves knew exactly how important it was to have his future mech forces led by those who experienced true war together rather than training for it in false simulations.

"This is something that money can't buy." He murmured as he sat behind his desk while stroking Lucky's back.

"Meow." His cat tiredly replied.

Even hiring existing veteran mech pilots didn't quite cut it. No matter their prior experiences, they weren't brothers yet. The newcomers wouldn't be able to integrate with the Larkinson Clan's martial tradition unless they fought at the side of other Larkinsons!

In the future, the Larkinsons who earned glory in this bloody campaign would definitely dominate the hierarchy of the clan. This was inevitable as the Larkinson culture centered around rising to prominence by achieving great and difficult feats.

The Larkinsons who had stayed behind at Cinach VI may be happy that their lives were never at risk, but this safety came at a price!

"I will definitely continue to have more say over the clan than Gloriana after I reunite with her." He confidently stated.

"Meow?" Lucky swatted his tail against his hand.

"I am being serious!"

"Meow meow!"

"You've been sitting out the entire last battle. Your opinions don't matter!"

"Meeeeeoow!"

"Producing some gems is hardly a contribution! It's your job to begin with. If you weren't so bad at digesting Unending alloy, you could have produced a lot more of them in the same time span. If we had a dozen more Highly Unstable Chaos Essence gems, we could have probably blown up the Gravada Knarlax straight away before the cultists inside had a chance to summon their dark gods!"

The painful battle illustrated that the Larkinsons were still too weak. If his mech pilots all piloted second-class mechs, then they likely wouldn't have lost so many lives.

Upgrading the combat assets of his clan would likely become his highest priority after his wedding.

He was tired of seeing his clansmen die because they were still making use of third-class mechs and ships.

These low-tech, thinly-armored constructions may have been suitable for him once, but he no longer placed third-class states and organizations within his eyes. Only second-class states offered what he and his clan needed to grow stronger!

"Acquiring ships won't be a problem, but the mechs are going to take a lot of work." He muttered.

The LMC's design capacity was limited. He wanted his clan to depend entirely on his own mechs. With the various innovations he developed, he could offer each and every Larkinson mech pilot numerous unique advantages that would definitely put them ahead of the competition.

As Ves ruminated over his future plans, he received an incoming hail.

The projector came to life, displaying Calabast in infiltrator gear. The background showed that she was in some sort of command center.

"Have there been any new developments on the takeover of the Gravada Knarlax?" He asked.

"We're still working on it. There are some stubborn holdouts who have locked themselves in vaults and other difficult-to-breach compartments."

"Did you focus on securing the ammunition stores? I don't want any crazy pirates getting the bright idea of detonating the ship's entire complement of nuclear missiles at once."

She looked contemptuously at him. "We're not stupid. Our men immediately secured the most volatile compartments like the engineering bay and central control systems after we managed to obtain some maps of the ship. Still, there are plenty of other compartments that we are trying to clear. It will take at least two days to gain initial control over the vessel."

The internal volume of an 800 meter-long ship was huge. A small city might stretch across a wider surface area, but the most defining traits about modern starships was that they were composed of many different decks stacked on top of each other. This

effectively made it so that a ship as large as the Gravada Knarlax offered a lot of ground for the pirates to make their last stand!

"How stubborn are the pirates?"

"Very." Calabast replied dryly. "The Allidus Alliance is one of the most powerful pirate factions in the Nyxian Gap, and the crew of the flagship largely consists of the most well-trained, diehard elites. It's safe to say that most of them aren't willing to surrender. So far, we have killed the majority while injuring the remainder to the point where they can't resist."

Ves thought for a moment. "You don't have to try too hard to capture them all alive. If it's easier to kill them on the spot, then just do so. It's too dangerous to leave them to their own devices."

"We can earn a greater bounty if we surrender them to the authorities alive, Ves. All of them have valuable intelligence that is of great interest to many people in civilized space."

"We have already won the most important prizes as far as I'm concerned."

"Very well. I'll tell the men to speed up their work."

They moved on to the reason why Calabast called.

"There is an update on the status of Lord Hivex. He's.. dead."

Ves closed his eyes and let out a disappointed breath.

On one hand, he felt relieved. The owner of the heavy cruiser could have used his remaining authority to trigger a lot of mischief.

On the other hand, he was disappointed. Capturing him alive would have yielded Ves a lot of high-level intelligence on the Nyxian Gap. Parading him around in chains would have also brought a lot of glory and honor to the Larkinson Clan. It just wasn't the same if the enemy leader was reduced to a corpse.

"How intact is the body?" Ves asked another important question.

"I'll let you see for yourself."

A new projection appeared that depicted a luxurious and spacious compartment that was filled with trophies.

Ves immediately recognized it as Lord Hivex's stateroom. When he compared the pirate lord's abode with the compartment he currently resided, he felt deeply inadequate.

The plush compartment in the projection befitted how a true great leader should decorate his personal space! The wall of weapons, the display cases of personal effects and the banners of fallen organizations all exemplified the past glory of the Nyxian pirate leader.

When Ves finally received his factory ship from the Hegemony, he resolved to set up something similar. He already set aside a bunch of trophies from the strong opponents he defeated in the past.

Ves focused on the only discordant element in the room. Sitting behind a desk that was much more imposing than his own was the former leader of the Allidus Alliance himself.

His grand armor with its numerous trophies and markings looked as magnificent as ever. What was wrong with this picture was that Lord Hivex's head was missing!

He had to zoom in the projection in order to figure out what had happened to it. He could see that the corpse had dropped a laser pistol onto the deck. That explained why the neck featured strong burn marks.

"I see. He destroyed his own head in order to deny us the opportunity to parade him as a recognizable captive."

"I can imagine he also did so to destroy every cell in his brain." Calabast added. "That's a shame. The good news is that not every senior officer aboard the Gravada Knarlax has chosen to go out prematurely like their leader. If we storm them fast enough, they won't have the time to shoot their own heads."

"Hmm. They probably don't know as much, though. From what we have seen from the other pirate organizations, most of the secrets are concentrated at the top."

"That's pirates for you. Trust is in short supply here. Well, I'll get back to supervising the takeover operation."

"Good luck."

Some time after this call, Ves received an update from Major Verle.

"Sir, our security situation is deteriorating. Right now, we are still in the middle of pirate territory, and I don't trust the surrounding pirate groups to sit still for long. While it is rather strange that the scouts and other groups in our vicinity have disappeared, our forward scouts have detected some pirate gangs forming temporary alliances. It's clear that they think we are weak."

Ves frowned. While he was grateful that his parents cleaned up the peripheral threats, they couldn't linger too long. There were still many pirates left in Maynard Fields that had adopted the attitude of waiting to see whether they could pick up a bargain.

"Do we have enough mechs to deter these hyenas?"

"We're not sure. Certainly, I think we probably have enough strength left to defeat these rabble, but even with our new expert pilots and expert candidates, it's inevitable for us to suffer further losses. We need to project greater strength during this sensitive time. As long as we can stall the gathering pirates for a few days, we can restore enough mechs."

"How do you intend to do that?"

Major Verle smirked. "We have the opportunity to take over basic control of the relatively intact pirate warships. Would you like us to expend our efforts on a single destroyer or a pair of frigates?"

If he uttered those words in civilized space, the Big Two would have marked him for death!

"I don't think the frigates are big enough to form enough of a deterrent." Ves thought.

"I agree, but having two ships instead of one offers us more tactical flexibility."

"The smaller and weaker pirates we are facing don't respect that concept. They're much simpler, I think. The bigger the gun, the greater the deterrent. Even if it's a lot more difficult, just focus on controlling a single destroyer as soon as possible. Shoot some asteroids with its guns. Give the secondary gun batteries some exercise. I bet as soon as the pirate scouts observe these movements, their superiors will think twice about launching an attack!"

"I like how you think, sir."

"I learn from the best."