

Mech 2931

Chapter 2931: Erupting Madness

"I can't believe your stupid idea is actually working, sir."

Ves comfortably leaned back on his chair as he observed the projection over his desk. Lucky, who laid close by, curiously looked up in order to see how many rats the pied piper had caught.

The counter displayed a figure of over 700 biomechs.

It appeared that the ultralifers had deployed all of their functional biomechs, including the ones that bore obvious signs of damage!

For over two hours, the four organic bots made by Ves marched forward at a steady pace. Their angelic wings flapped in the wind but did not help with speeding up their movements.

Ves wasn't in a hurry. He didn't want to startle the ultralifers or cause them to entertain doubts. The best way to do that was to avoid making too many abnormal changes.

He was essentially boiling them like frogs.

In order to reduce their vigilance even further, Ves controlled the four statues to take a circuitous route to their intended destination. The statues took random turns and even circled back the way they came before correcting their path and heading into the distance.

The ultralifers didn't want the statues of Lufa to go. They attempted to block or pull them back several times. Each time they did so, Ves cut off the glow of the statue in question. He only returned them to their old condition when the object in question was able to move forward without obstruction!

Through these simple, wordless reactions, Ves trained the ultralifers to let the statues move where they wished.

Of course, they couldn't possibly let these impressive treasures walk out of their reach!

If they couldn't stop the statues from leaving, then the next best decision they could make was to accompany it and see where it led!

Slowly but surely, the four statues moved towards a location that was very familiar to the ultralifers.

Plenty of them began to figure out where the fascinating organic statues were taking them, and that caused them to become increasingly concerned.

While Ves wasn't able to monitor their communications, he could see that the ultralifers had finally decided to pull the trigger and forcibly take one of his statues back to their underground base.

He immediately cut off the glow to all four statues in response.

This was out of the expectation of the ultralifers! If the statues exhibited the same pattern as before, then only the organic statue that was being affected by their actions should have cut off its effect.

The leaders among them evidently concluded that this was an acceptable price to pay. If they had need of it again, they could always bring it out and let it restore its special function.

Yet Ves didn't intend to let them exploit him like that. He shut down the entire game and only resumed when the ultralifers recognized their fault.

As a consequence, Ves effectively managed to subvert this dangerous and powerful extremist organization!

While he couldn't show up in the flesh and issue orders to his supposed enemies, he could continually make use of the control he had over his work to manipulate the ultralifers in doing his bidding!

It was quite amazing to see how much they submitted to a couple of random organic statues that showed outside their doorstep out of the blue.

Even if they possessed a mechanical core, even if they possessed glows that were similar to that of Ves' mechs, even if the statues were leading them straight towards one of their enemies, the ultralifers did not show any sign of quitting!

When Ves invited his mech commanders over, they both needed a lot of time to accept the fact that the ultralifers were this gullible.

"To be fair, they are not as stupid as they look right now." Ves defended the behavior of the ultralifers. "It's just that I have employed a very manipulative strategy to lower their vigilance and increase their propensity to obey. I trained them for several days before I even thought about luring them away from their underground base."

"Even so, the fact that none of them are trying to stop what is happening is a feat in itself!" Commander Casella exclaimed. "I feel like you can lead them right into a black hole without making any of them suspect that you are deliberately driving them to their deaths?"

"What can I say?" Ves smirked. "This is what the Bright Republic has warned us all the time. Superstition and fanaticism directly reduces someone's judgement to the point where they become susceptible to orders that go against their own interests. They developed this fatal character flaw of theirs in order to increase their control over the beliefs and actions of their own people. They shouldn't blame me for taking advantage of an exploit they already created themselves."

It was like taking advantage of a backdoor that the developer of a product secretly inserted in their own work.

While they may have implemented a backdoor with good intentions in mind, as long as one of their enemies gained access to it, the damage could potentially be massive!

"I feel ashamed of my birth state." Commander Rivington palmed his face. "Many Lifers aren't like this. They are decent, normal people who just happen to grow up with biotechnology. I don't know any friends or acquaintances that feel so strongly about our state that they are so gullible to being led around."

Ves smiled back. "You don't have to feel bad about this situation. The ultralifers aren't representative of the rest of the citizens of the LRA. They are just outliers. I'm sure that the rest of the locals are smarter and possess better judgement."

Okay, he lied at the end, but that wasn't important. He just felt that the Lifers were deeply flawed as a people. This was why he hated them and why he felt eager to leave this planet.

Yet before he left, he wanted to make sure he could gain the most out of this situation!

"You're bringing the organic statues to the warehouse complex of the paramilitaries, right?" Commander Casella asked.

Ves nodded. "Yup."

"That... isn't entirely proper." She cautiously said. "We have real grievances against the ultralifers. They attacked us again and again and tried to kill you. What did these paramilitaries do to you? Their only 'crime' is to stand in the way of your attempt to access a suspected pinnacle lab. It's wrong to launch an attack on them. We are Larkinsons. We must abide by our honor."

"We're not attacking them, Casella. They are." Ves adopted an innocent expression while emphatically pointing at the projected army of biomechs that were obediently following the statues towards one of their old enemies. "All I am doing is moving some of my properties around. It's not my fault these stupid ultralifers are following them from point A to point B. I don't intend to do anything once my statues have reached their destination. If a fight inadvertently breaks out between the ultralifers and the paramilitaries, then that is their business, not ours!"

Neither of the commanders were fools. Even if Ves was technically right, the diabolical way he manipulated the circumstances clearly made him responsible for whatever was about to ensue!

"Venerable Jannzi won't be happy, patriarch."

"I am resolving one of our enemies while putting the interests of our Larkinson Clan ahead."

This was a poor attempt at spinning the situation. The fact of the matter was that his actions might actually lead to the deaths of a lot of people who didn't deserve to be used.

Yet to Ves, there was nothing with this situation. The paramilitaries already committed an unforgivable crime in his eyes for occupying a site that he was already eying! Who knew how much progress they made in breaching through the defenses of a nearby pinnacle lab.

If they had already succeeded in taking out the treasures of one of the Supreme Sage's pinnacle labs, then they absolutely deserved to get smashed!

Time continued to pass by as Ves slowly drew the ultralifers towards the occupied warehouse complex.

He had already ordered his mech pilots to go on standby in case he wanted them to intervene, but for now he was not in a hurry to put them into the field.

Clearly, a force of 700 biomechs moving in unison was very hard to hide. The sheer amount of mechs marching on the ground and flying in the air looked incredibly intimidating.

The people who lived in the vicinity all fled or hid in their tree houses. Every smaller organization with mechs quickly brought their mechs away.

When they came closer and closer to the warehouse complex, their old enemies could not possibly miss the threat. In fact, it was highly likely that the paramilitaries thought that the ultralifers were on their way to launch an all-out invasion!

Even if it was rather strange for the ultralifer biomechs to adopt such a glacial pace, there was no way for outsiders to construe their movements as anything but a battle march.

Instead of letting the ultralifers walk up to the warehouse complex in peace, the base occupants decided to take matters into their own hands.

They fired their guns first!

As a consequence, the ultralifer mech formations came under immediate fire! After suffering some prior attacks, the paramilitaries had beefed up their counterbattery fire capabilities. A lot more shells and kinetic projectiles slammed into the biomechs and inflicted heavy damage onto their flesh or bone surface!

Coincidentally, one explosive shell landed right in between two of the organic statues. Once the shell detonated, the two statues that had been built with low-quality materials and organic tissue became ruined!

The ultralifer biomechs simultaneously froze for a moment. It was as if their mech pilots couldn't process that someone actually dared to destroy their treasures.

The extremists went mad!

A large portion of their defensive mechs instantly enveloped the surviving two organic statues. Their preciousness had grown even greater now that their rarity had doubled!

The rest of the ultralifers immediately went on the attack!

Over 600 mechs surged forward and stormed over towards the distance warehouse complex with nothing vengeance and retribution in mind!

At this time, none of the ultralifers were interested in slowing down! The incredible blasphemy committed by the paramilitaries was so unforgivable that they deserved to be killed!

The frenzied ultralifer mech pilots were so maddened with grief and failure that they directed all of their heated emotions towards the enemy! They didn't even bother to maintain formation or obey any instructions.

They just wanted to kill the blasphemers who dared to destroy the precious angel statues!

Soon enough, the two sides opened fire on each other. Due to the lower range and closing distance, both sides quickly incurred serious damage.

The ultralifer melee mechs continued to advance forward and gain momentum. The ground shook and the skies turned stormy as the furious ultralifers wanted to sink their blades in the biomechs of their vile adversaries!

As Ves witnessed the ultralifers initiating a highly destructive battle without exhibit any restraint, he couldn't hold it in any longer.

He laughed!

"Hahahaha! Hahahaha! HAHAHAAHAAAA!"

"Meow!..."

Lucky shivered a bit as he witnessed Ves becoming unhinged again. The cat had to admit that out of all of his schemes, Ves had truly outdone himself now! To be able to manipulate two of his obstacles into fighting each other without giving himself away was a masterstroke!

Compared to ordering the Larkinson airfleet to assault the ultralifer base, this was a much more elegant way of getting rid of a problem! In fact, Ves was able to hit two birds with a single stone, which made this successful ploy even more insane!

At this point, the existence of the remaining two statues weren't as important anymore. Even if Ves abandoned them, the ultralifers had become committed to the battle to retreat at this point.

"These ultralifers are ultramorons! Messing with me is the worst mistake that they could have ever made!"

Ves felt more and more vindictive as he observed the death and destruction he unleashed. "More! Kill some more! Don't show any mercy!"

Chapter 2932: Feeble

The conflict between the ultralifers and the unknown paramilitary group broke out completely!

The latter had already raised their guard when a large amount of green-coated biomechs steadily advanced towards the warehouse complex.

The only odd aspect about the huge movement was that it followed a slow, winding path towards the site. A true invasion force would have advanced faster in order to give their targets as little time as possible to rain down fire on the vulnerable mechs.

Perhaps this was another negotiation ploy. Perhaps the ultralifers sought to intimidate the paramilitaries in order to gain more concessions out of their next round of talks.

Yet as the distance continued to shrink, the chance that this was a bluff grew smaller while the possibility that this was an actual attempt to launch an all-out assault increased!

In truth, the ultralifer mech pilots who followed the four animated statues of Lufa did not have any attack intentions in mind. They might have deployed all of their available biomechs and they also equipped them with a standard loadout of weapons, but they were not prepared to launch a risky offensive against a base!

When the paramilitaries finally couldn't ignore the risk of an actual assault any longer, they opened fire with their beefed-up artillery assets.

The shells and rounds raining down on the massive ultralifer formation inflicted considerable damage, but most of the victims were tough, resilient organic war machines.

Even if they were uncovered, they were more than capable of withstanding some attacks!

The volume of incoming firepower was considerable, but their precision and consistency was fairly low. Shells exploded from every direction and no kinetic round struck the same biomech twice.

At this point, the ultralifers were merely alarmed, but far from worried about their safety. Their own kinetic ranged mechs already returned fire in response to the sudden attack. It was a pity that the ultralifers lost the bulk of their heavy artillery mechs. If not for this, they could have hurt the base occupants a lot more!

Yet from the moment a random shell detonated in the midst of two of the vulnerable statues of Lufa, the ultralifers snapped.

The loss of these two heaven-sent objects was more than a loss of two material objects.

It was a direct attack on their new faith!

The rage that welled up was indescribable. A level of fury that went beyond reason had swept through their minds.

"KILL!"

"SLAUGHTER THEM ALL!"

The maddened ultralifers descended upon the base with only destruction in mind! They did not hesitate to throw themselves into the fray and overwhelm the base occupants with their righteous fury alone!

The paramilitaries were caught off-guard. They never expected that their bombardment would incite the ultralifers rather than suppressing them. The unexpectedly violent offensive pushed them back so hard and fast that most of their defensive advantages failed to play a significant role.

The battle at the warehouse complex quickly turned into a frenzied melee where melee biomechs threw themselves against each other and ranged mechs fired at any moving object with the wrong colors!

"WE NEED BACKUP!"

"What has gotten to these ultralifers?!"

"Johnny! They killed Johnny!"

Though the paramilitaries were badly hit at first, the large amount of casualties they suffered in the initial round of fighting caused their emotions to be enflamed as well.

When your comrades and buddies started getting butchered left and right, it was hard for the remainder to sit still. They had to fight back and take revenge for the losses they suffered!

The paramilitary organization pushed back just as hard and was determined to slay the ultralifers and end their threat once and for all! Only by slaughtering their main mech force would the base occupants be rid of this dangerous and unstable enemy.

"Don't let them advance any further!"

The base commander of the warehouse complex also issued strong orders to prevent the ultralifers from reaching the interior of the base.

Neither side backed off. The ultralifers had seemingly lost all reason after the loss and the paramilitaires dug in deeper instead of retreating.

With both sides having their own reasons to commit themselves to a pitched battle, every opportunity to avoid their mutual destruction was lost!

Even if a handful of their members magically regained a bit of common sense, it was far too late to stop the hostilities at this point!

Dozens of biomechs fell every couple of seconds. Scorched, broken and ruined flesh and bone littered the warehouse complex. The stench emanated by all of the damaged and spilled biomatter was indescribable. In fact, due to the abundance of harmful exotics leaking from the damaged biomechs, the air had literally turned toxic to humans!

As this tragedy continued to unfold, the mastermind behind this destructive turn of events was grinning like a shark.

"Hahahaha! Gullible idiots! You fell for it so easily!" Ves almost fell over from his chair.

The effortless way he managed to manipulate fanatics only increased his contempt towards their kind. Blind belief and lack of critical thinking were the greatest threat to human advancement in his eyes. If every human in the galaxy was as stupid as the ultralifers, the alien civilizations in the galaxy would have long squashed the human race!

When Ves saw that the ultralifers had fully thrown themselves onto the occupied warehouse complex, he felt that the time was finally right for the Larkinson to take action themselves.

He immediately issued an order to his mech commander.

"The time to remain on standby is over! Deploy our mechs and prepare to launch a full assault!"

Commander Rivington and Commander Casella both looked concerned.

"Uhm, do we really have to enter the fray so soon, sir?" Rivington cautiously asked. "It takes a lot to take down second-class biomechs. If we show up too soon, the two groups might figure out the truth and decide to turn their weapons against us. It's best to wait until they have fired the last rounds in their magazines."

Ves smirked and shook his head. "The whole point of our current operation is to rile up our own men and convert them to the Larkinson mindset. How can we do that if we don't act proactively? Besides, I'm not thinking about attacking the warehouse complex right now. Our men might think we are trying to ally with the paramilitaries in order to squash a common enemy in the form of the ultralifers. This can't be further from the truth."

Commander Casella Ingvar widened her eyes. "You aren't thinking about..."

"Your guess is correct. I want to invade the underground base fortress that the main ultralifer mech forces have just vacated! There is a high chance that the hoodwinked extremists have deployed every biomech at their disposal, so the only hindrances we have to face are static base defenses, heavily damaged organic machines and irrelevant infantry soldiers."

In other words, the ultralifer base was completely incapable of repelling mechs!

His commanders immediately understood the opportunity. This was the chance that they had always been waiting for! While it was a pity that they couldn't destroy all of the ultralifer biomechs in person, destroying their vulnerable home base without incurring as much risk as before also sounded good!

"What about potential self-destruct measures?" Casella cautiously asked. "While we can't be sure that the ultralifers rigged the base up to blow, we can't discount his possibility."

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "Then send in our more disposable biomechs and mech pilots first. They can be our vanguard. Make sure to hold back our expert pilots and our original Larkinsons. We can't afford to lose them. They are the core of our mech force and the pillar that draws everyone closer to our values."

The airfleet, which had stayed dormant over the past few days, finally started to surge forth again!

The Larkinsons split up into two. Several Larkinson biomechs remained behind with their biotransports and bioshuttles while the rest flew on ahead.

Soon enough, several hundred deadly biomechs reached the site where the underground base rested below.

Several squads had already been equipped with specialized breaching and tunnel equipment. They planted several organic pillars onto the ground and turned them online.

Within the span of a few minutes, the industrial equipment displaced a large amount of soil. Large tunnels appeared on the surface that led straight into solid bone-like walls.

"Crack them! Be careful of any counterattacks. We don't have too many of these machines at hand!"

The Larkinsons salvaged the mining equipment from an abandoned company site. Despite their relative fragility, they were unreasonably effective at drilling through hard matter.

It didn't matter if they weren't designed to drill through fortified walls. They were so effective at their jobs that using them was a much better choice than relying on massed firepower to breach into the ultralifer base!

The people who remained in the base after the departure of their main mech force weren't ignorant of the attack. A number of turrets and other defensive measures came online, but they didn't even have a chance to go in effect before the alert Larkinson biomechs shot them apart!

"Too feeble!"

"This base is practically empty if this is the extent of their response."

"We're already half-way through drilling a hole through the wall!"

The invasion proceeded very smoothly so far. In fact, the remaining resistance was so light that Ves suspected that the ultralifers may have decided to evacuate the base!

"Watch out for escapees! If I was in their shoes, I would have fled through a secret escape tunnel that leads to a distant location. I want mechs in every direction around the base. If some unidentified vehicles or biomechs emerge out of nowhere, then do your best to intercept them. I don't want to let any ultralifer slip from my grasp!"

The remaining individuals inside the base were not useless in his eyes. Not only did they possess a wealth of intelligence, including knowledge about what lay hidden underneath the warehouse complex, but they could also serve as potential test subjects.

Besides, letting all of these valuable human resources slip away might come to haunt the Larkinsons in the future. They could flee to other ultralifer strongholds and convince the people over there to retaliate. They could also flee to allied groups and convince them to target the Larkinsons.

When Ves issued his latest orders, some of the escorts of the airfleet broke off in order to scout the surroundings. Most notably, Venerable Tusa opted to circle around a wide perimeter in order to respond quickly to any escape attempts.

As for Venerable Jannzi, she remained steadfast in defending the vulnerable airfleet. The departure of most of its escorts had made it more vulnerable against unexpected attacks. Though there was little she could do while piloting a single Bright Warrior IB, that did not deter her from doing her duty.

Time passed by. Despite all of the excitement going around, the command center remained calm.

None of the excitement happening at the increasingly more ruinous warehouse complex affected the Larkinsons.

As for the ultralifer base, aside from a few hiccups, its internal defenses were woefully unable to hinder the Larkinsons from going deeper. Though all of the solid walls and energy barriers in the way slowed down their advance, these passive defenses didn't play any significant role when the base lost its entire mech garrison.

In the end, the Larkinsons quickly managed to secure the majority of the largely-empty base. As soon as a specialized group of soldiers forcibly took over the primary command center, the critical data archives and the energetic power generators, virtually every relevant system of the base surrendered remarkably quickly to the invaders.

"Sir, while we have yet to clear away any lingering threats or sweep the base for hidden explosives, the base is ours." Commander Casella told Ves with an unbelieving expression.

It was too easy.

In an age where most defensive facilities always relied on mechs to do the heavy lifting, the lack of this important piece had already sealed the fate of the underground base.

Ves smirked wider. Aside from worrying about a potential self-destruct setting, the situation was largely under control.

"Excellent. Haul out any prisoners and interrogate them. I want to know everything of value. At the same time, survey all of the valuables inside the base. Make sure to reward our mech pilots and soldiers with a portion of the plunder if possible. They need to be rewarded for their efforts."

"Will do, sir."

Training his own Larkinsons was no different from training the ultralifers. If Ves wanted to keep relying on them to fight his battles, then he needed to make them willing and eager to face combat. This was a good first step in doing so. Sooner or later, this newest batch of clansmen would become just as fearless in combat as the veteran Larkinsons!

Chapter 2933: Under the Influence

After the conquering Larkinsons surveyed the ultralifer base, they quickly identified numerous goods, equipment and resources.

There were enough amenities to service at least a thousand mechs.

While the airfleet was already helping itself to all of these valuable assets, Ves didn't care too much about the improvement in logistics. This was all boring stuff that did not significantly change his strategic considerations.

What Ves really sought was relevant information.

He prioritized the acquisition of intelligence and made sure that his men did not neglect this vital process.

Biohackers and organic computer specialists descended on the hive-like data center. They immediately secured the numerous organic computers and databases before attempting to defeat their security measures in order to access the large amounts of data stored within.

Interrogations began as well. While the mech pilots had already left the base, the support and command personnel had all remained behind. Even if a substantial number of them died when they futilely tried to resist the overpowering invasion, there were plenty of prisoners for the Larkinsons to question!

A lot of ultralifer prisoners had become shocked at how quickly and how easily their base had fallen. They had become so disturbed by the strength exhibited by the Larkinsons that they folded relatively easily. They spilled out secret after secret and did not hesitate to explain how to disarm the security measures of various systems.

It was too bad that only a handful of the prisoners were willing to cooperate. The majority remained committed to their cause!

"After our initial successes, we haven't made any significant headway in interrogating the remaining prisoners." Captain Reina Ember of the Black Cats reported. As a former pirate officer, she had plenty of experience in trying to open unwilling mouths. "If they were mercenaries, we would have made them squeal a long time ago. The ultralifers are much more difficult to crack for reasons that I am sure you are already aware of. The harder we push, the more they dig their heels."

Ves frowned. This was a problem that he already anticipated to an extent, but it was still annoying nonetheless. The obstinacy shown by the captive ultralifers threatened to delay his follow-up plans and left him blind to future threats and opportunities.

After spending many days of knowing very little about the actual situation on the planet, Ves was desperate to gain some insider knowledge! He needed to know what the political factions were plotting and why anarchy still reigned across Prosperous Hill VI. There was definitely something fishy going on and Ves wasn't sure that it revolved completely around pinnacle labs and high-grade life-prolonging serum. He had a feeling that this was an overly simplistic view of the current reality.

Ves decided to pay a visit to the prisoners himself. He followed Captain Ember to one of the vehicles used as a mobile holding facility. As the clansmen who were specialized in intelligence and police work began to take out prisoners before proceeding to pepper them with questions, Ves became distinctly unimpressed by the lack of sophistication behind their methods.

"Why aren't we using any advanced interrogation methods? Aren't you Lifers good at manipulating human bodies? Where are the biotech experts injecting the prisoners with serums that cause them to run their mouths?"

"It's not as easy as you think." Captain Ember shook her head. "The methods you speak of can be effective, but they are too cumbersome to be applied to the rank-and-file ultralifers. As for the officers, they are all augmented with bioimplants that come with anti-interrogation countermeasures by default. If we inject them with any suspicious mind-altering substances, the bioimplants will either block the foreign substances from taking effect or forcibly shut down the brains as an emergency measure. Don't underestimate the effectiveness of these implants. The Life Research Association possesses one of the best homegrown bioimplant industries in the region. The locals here have access to higher quality implants at cheaper rates."

In other words, it took a disproportionate amount of effort to squeeze useful information from the cadre of the ultralifers. These high-ranking officers, experts and commanders doubtlessly possessed a wealth of useful information, but Ves felt incredibly frustrated that it wasn't possible for his men to succeed in making them squeal.

Would Calabast have done better? Perhaps. Ves couldn't expect too much from the locals he recruited recently. They were doing the best they could under difficult circumstances and with limited facilities at their disposal.

As Ves continued to mull over the problem, he suddenly came up with a fresh idea.

"Wait a minute. Have you tried subjecting them to one of my Aspects of Lufa?"

"Uhm, pardon, sir?"

"Think about it! My statues are all capable of affecting the mind in a remote and non-invasive manner. They can accomplish the same results of mind-altering substances but without adding any chemicals in someone's body that might trip any alarms!"

"That... could work." Captain Ember reluctantly conceded. "However, your organic statues aren't designed to facilitate interrogation. Will it really work? Which statue will you choose to make use of? I doubt the Aspect of Tranquility will help all that much."

That wasn't necessarily the case as Ves could tweak the glows of all of his products whenever he liked. He could tone down the effect of the Aspect of Tranquility so that everyone affected by it still retained a bit of conscious attention.

Of course, Ves didn't intend to go through all of that effort. Of all of the aspects he created, one of them seemed very suitable at the moment.

"Bring out a couple of stubborn fellows and bring them to the transport where I have stashed the Aspect of Rationality. I'm interested to see whether the effects of my creation is enough to persuade these fellows from making the right choice."

Though Captain Ember held a lot of doubts about this plan, they didn't have any better options at the moment. They might as well try this possibility out in the hopes of making some actual gains.

It took some time to set up the circumstances. Ves and the others had to prepare a special interrogation room that was both safe and discreet.

"Alright, who are we working with first?" Ves asked as he stood behind a workstation.

Captain Ember accessed her data pad. "We decided to put forward a low-ranking biomech technician who goes by the name of Emery Fallon. We have already succeeded in extracting some information out of him, so we can use this opportunity to confirm if the man will stick with his story when he comes under the influence of the aspect."

A pair of security bots dragged out a rather resigned-looking man in his thirties. The prisoner didn't look as tough as the rest of his comrades, but this was good as it was easier to make him talk.

Once the bots entered the range of the Aspect of Rationality, their emotionless and inorganic processors remained completely unaffected by the glow.

Emery Fallon reacted completely differently. The naked fear on his face quickly faded as if someone wiped a towel over it. The nervousness in his bones had gone away as well, causing his body language to lose all sense of apprehension.

Ves was already familiar with these effects. The Aspect of Rationality suppressed all emotions but left plenty of room for logic and dispassionate thoughts.

As a result, Emery should have turned into a complete person right now. Now that he was able to think without his emotions coloring his judgement, he began to develop very different perspectives on various issues!

Ves gave the prisoner and test subject a bit of time to think about his own situation from a different angle before ordering the interrogation to begin.

"What is your name, prisoner?" Captain Ember asked over the speakers.

"Emory Fallon." The affected individual replied without emotion.

"Where were you born?"

Ves did not pay too much attention to the initial question. While it was necessary to ask some simple questions in order to establish a baseline and confirm the Aspect of Rationality had taken hold in the prisoner's mind, he didn't learn anything useful at the moment.

It took five minutes before Captain Ember asked an actual question.

"A few days ago, four organic statues resembling the one before you appeared near the base you were stationed in. What did you and your fellow ultralifers think about the new statues?"

"We thought they were the works of a master. We all admired them from the moment we experienced their unique effects. The more time we spent with them, the more we desired to retain them. When they started to walk away, we became alarmed because we did not want them to fall into the hands of another organization."

Ves smiled. This was exactly what he attempted to achieve. It felt good to confirm that the ultralifers truly followed his predictions.

"What do you know about the paramilitary organization that occupies the warehouse complex that you have launched attacks upon in the past?"

"I do not know much about it. It is not necessary for me to know about them to perform my job. I only know that the organization is called the Teak Order and that it has ties to the military."

Ves already guessed as much, but it was good to hear a corroborating opinion from someone else. If someone as unimportant as Emery Fallon thought this way, then this must be common knowledge in the ultralifer organization.

The questioning continued. Captain Ember managed to tease out a lot of information from Mr. Fallon that a normal interrogation would never provide. The man even spilled his embarrassing childhood fears without hesitation!

It wasn't as if Emery Fallon abandoned his loyalties when he came under the effect of the Aspect of Rationality. There were both emotional and rational reasons why he remained loyal to the ultralifers, but without the former, the latter did not have as much effect. It was easy to abuse logic in a way that encouraged the affected prisoner to open his mouth.

For example, the Larkinsons could frankly tell Mr. Fallon that he was going to get killed unless he supplied an answer!

While the aspect muted the prisoner's desire to live, there were so many instincts related to staying alive that Fallon could not easily make a decision that led to the opposite result!

Therefore, when faced with a choice, Fallon did not hesitate to choose the course of action that prolonged his life!

"Damn. This is so easy!"

As they began to interrogate other ultralifers, Ves became more and more impressed by how the Aspect of Rationality wiped away everything irrational. They not only stopped caring about their unreasonable beliefs, but also lost much of their motivation to stay quiet and bring their secrets to the grave!

Ves and the interrogators began to collect a lot of useful intelligence ranging from passwords, opinions, hidden caches, other ultralifer bases on the planet and many more secrets.

Though the affected prisoners did not supply the correct answers all the time, the results were more than satisfactory!

Captain Ember even became more adept with interrogating prisoners that had forcibly turned rational.

Soon enough, a high-ranking officer finally supplied Ves with the answer that he was looking for all this time.

"Our organization received information from a friendly source that the Teak Order may have deciphered the coordinates to one of the pinnacle labs on this planet. We confirmed the veracity of this claim after opening talks with the Teak Order."

"How large is the chance that there is a pinnacle lab buried underneath the warehouse complex? Please give me your estimate." Ves eagerly asked.

"50 percent."

"That low? Why aren't you more sure?"

"We have conducted extensive scouting but found no abnormalities beneath the surface of the warehouse complex. We cannot confirm whether a pinnacle lab is actually on site, but it is improbable that the Teak Order invests a large amount of effort in occupying the location in question."

"Do you think the Teak Order has managed to break into the pinnacle lab by now?"

The ultralifer officer shook his head. "That is extremely unlikely. The entrance and security measures of a complete, self-contained pinnacle lab are almost unbreakable to most citizens of our state."

Ves relaxed a bit. If the officer was right, then Ves still had a chance of obtaining powerful spoils if he managed to enter the pinnacle lab!

"It's not too late!"

Chapter 2934: Picking Up A Bargain

When Ves initially came up with the Aspect of Rationality, he never envisioned he would use it for interrogation purposes.

The Aspect of Rationality was originally supposed to provide assistance to professionals such as Ves and other specialists. By stripping their chaotic emotions and leaving them to think logically, the organic statue had the potential to facilitate a lot of breakthroughs in difficult projects.

The point was that Ves always thought of the statue as a tool to help his own people!

Of course, its extreme effects could be harmful if used in the wrong circumstances. That was why he restricted its use and became very selective about who was allowed to experience its unique glow.

Ves never thought about using it on his enemies. Why should he give his opponents a favor by allowing them to sober up and think much more clearly about their own problems?

Only a fool would provide so much assistance to those who wished him ill! The Aspect of Rationality was a unique treasure that could provide substantial benefits to the scientists and engineers under his employ. Ves greatly valued its potential to enhance the R&D activities of his clan!

Therefore, Ves never conceived that the Aspect of Rationality could be used against his enemies. He always thought about the positive sides of the organic statue, but never imagined that he could use its darker side to exploit his prisoners.

He felt a bit ambivalent about this. It was as if he had veered off from the correct path and entered a dark and suspicious alley. A part of him screamed that he wasn't supposed to make use of his creations in this way.

Of course, Ves quickly shoved this useless part of him aside. There was no room for him to take the high road this time. He urgently required intelligence and if exposing his prisoners to a weird organic statue caused them to spill their secrets in a dispassionate tone, then so be it. He didn't really intend to spare the prisoners anyhow, so what was the harm in subjecting them to an unethical interrogation process?

He made sure to keep these interrogations a secret, though. The other Larkinsons did not have to know where all of the pertinent information came from. Aside from a few trusted subordinates like Captain Ember, the rest of his clansmen including Venerable Jannzi were left out of the loop.

If any of them grew suspicious, Ves would just say that his men managed to hack the databases and harvested a wealth of data.

Although Ves would have liked to continue to listen for interesting details, he didn't necessarily need to know all that much. He left Captain Ember to her devices and trusted her to write up a report that summarized all of the most useful details.

The reason why Ves left was because the window of opportunity to make his next move was dwindling. Once he returned to the command center, he took stock of the situation at the conquered underground base. Virtually every local threat had been neutralized and his clansmen were already in the process of plundering any useful assets that the airfleet sorely needed.

"What is the current state of the warehouse complex?" Ves asked Commander Rivington, who was monitoring the situation over there.

"The battle between the Teak Order and the ultralifers ended an hour ago. Both sides were roughly even. The Teak Order possessed fewer mechs, but their training and cohesion is much stronger. Once they got going, they fought hard and forced the ultralifers to bleed for every biomech they managed to fell. That still didn't stop the frenzied attackers from overrunning the last line of defense. Eventually, the final fifty or so grey biomechs broke ranks and fled the battlefield. A large number of surviving

ultralifer biomechs left as well to hunt them down. They haven't returned at the moment."

Ves raised his eyebrow. This was very good news! If the pursuit forces of the victorious ultralifers did not return soon, then the defenses of the heavily-damaged warehouse complex had reached a low point!

No matter whether the site remained in the hands of the Teak Order or fell under the sway of the ultralifers, it was impossible for the remaining defenders to be as strong as the original garrison!

Every surviving biomech did not only incur varying degrees of battle damage, but also depleted a significant amount of resources. Though the ultralifers left behind at the warehouse complex were currently helping themselves to the supplies they managed to scavenge from the site, this was a very slow process without the help of large crews of support personnel.

Perhaps at this time, the ultralifer base would have dispatched their personnel to take over the conquered location and fix up their mechs.

Yet all of that had no chance of coming true now that the Larkinsons took over their base.

"This is the right time to launch another assault. Let's clean the remnants of the ultralifers up and take over the location that they worked so hard to conquer!"

Nothing made him happier than taking advantage of the hard work of others! Usually, he derived this enjoyment by delegating tedious work to his subordinates. Now, he was starting to feel the same kind of rush by ordering his airfleet to pick the fruit that the ultralifers had bled and died to secure.

In the end, there was no suspense. When the airfleet along with the main force of the Larkinson Clan advanced towards the warehouse complex, the ultralifers lacked the strength to resist a fresh force of hundreds of mechs and biomechs.

In order to ensure the ultralifers didn't flee right away, Ves had authorized Venerable Tusa along with a company of light mechs to circle around and block the most obvious flight direction.

After sandwiching and surrounding the surviving ultralifer biomechs that weren't on pursuit duty, the last stand only lasted a few minutes.

In fact, the battle could have ended sooner if not for the fact that Ves held back his expert pilots and elite mech pilots.

It was rare for inexperienced mech pilots to get the chance of fighting a weak but desperate opponent. Ves did not feel any qualms about letting the rookies and inexperienced mech pilots get a taste of actual war in a reasonably controlled circumstance. Even if a couple of Larkinson mech pilots lost their mechs due to getting outfought by the desperate ultralifers, it didn't matter as long as the mech pilots were able to eject in time.

"It's too easy." Commander Casella said at the end of this unusually effortless operation.

Though there were still numerous ultralifers mechs at large, they lacked the numbers to dislodge the Larkinson airfleet from the warehouse complex. Unless a third hostile group that was greedy for the site appeared somewhere, Ves finally succeeded in his goal of securing this promising location!

Even though the prior battle had been so intense that pretty much every organic structure had collapsed, Ves didn't care about all of that. Everything above the ground was completely superfluous in his eyes.

"Alright, let's begin our search." He commanded. "Search for any underground spaces or entrances that might lead to something that is unusually advanced or impenetrable. Dig around if you have to. In the meantime, please scour the battlefield and find some surviving Teak Order members. Pass them onto Captain Ember. She will know what to do with these paramilitaries."

Though a lot of clansmen felt that the coincidences that happened today were very suspicious, Ves had no intention of explaining the full story to them. All they needed to pay attention to was that they successfully took revenge against the ultralifers for their attack against the airfleet.

"I wanted to kill them, but not like this."

"It doesn't feel satisfying to swoop in like carrion birds and prey on the weak."

"Is there anything honorable about this battle?"

The Larkinsons didn't obtain the satisfaction that they were hoping for. Ves promised something different, but as long as they earned some measure of victory, they didn't have much to complain about.

Ves no longer paid attention to the morale levels of his clansmen. He didn't even devote any time to the ongoing interrogations that proceeded with the help of the Aspect of Rationality.

Now that he had taken possession of the coveted warehouse complex, he became so swept by greed and desire that he had personally joined the search for the presumed entrance to the pinnacle lab!

"Where is it?! Where is it?! Aggh! Search harder!"

The initial searches didn't yield any useful results. In fact, when Captain Ember interrogated the first batch of surviving members of the Teak Order, it turned out that the original occupants of the warehouse complex failed to find the entrance as well!

"What?!" Ves looked incredulous at Captain Ember's projected form. "Are you telling me that the Teak Order sat on this location for many days without actually pinning down the location of the pinnacle lab?!"

"Yes, sir. While it may be possible that the higher ups of the Teak Order secretly found the entrance and kept the news hidden from the rest of their men, they have behaved rather bewildered and frustrated for the entire time, so it is unlikely they managed to achieved any progress."

This was both good and bad news.

The good news was that the pinnacle lab was probably completely pristine. All of its wealth and riches should still be in place.

Even if Ves could never physically bring all of the amazing equipment, tools and resources back to his fleet, he would already be content if he could smuggle out some small high-value products such as high-grade life-prolonging serum!

The bad news was that the pinnacle lab was not only hidden, but also retained its full defenses. As one of the most strategically-important facilities of the Life Research Association, Ves feared what kind of defenses he might encounter. As one of the sanctums of the legendary Supreme Sage, the odds were great that the internal defenses were so formidable that they could even crush an expert mech!

"I'll solve this problem when the time comes." He muttered. "First, I need to find the darned entrance."

This was not easy, to put it lightly. The Teak Order already tried and failed, so how could the Larkinsons do any better?

Ves even put his Odineye to use by hooking it up to a power generator and letting it scan in every direction at its highest setting.

"Nothing!"

Though his Odineye managed to discover several hidden caches, none of them led to anything resembling a pinnacle lab.

He frowned as he finally deactivated the Odineye. He already knew that it wasn't omnipotent. In particular, it couldn't reach deep into the ground.

"Is the pinnacle lab buried a hundred kilometers below the ground?"

That was quite troublesome if true! Fortunately, the Teak Order had already probed the depths below the warehouse complex. They hadn't found anything unusual.

This left Ves and his clansmen without any useful clues and hints. In fact, they never even confirmed that a pinnacle lab was even situated in this area to begin with! It could have all been a hoax that happened to have ensnared the ultralifers, the Teak Order and the Larkinson Clan.

"Where is the goddamn entrance?!"

As the hours passed by and the skies darkened, Ves grew increasingly more desperate. He even floated around and blasted his spiritual senses in a wide area around him in order to see if he could catch any abnormalities that others couldn't detect.

"Nothing!"

It wasn't until he was about to give up his personal search that he felt something unusual in the pocket of his Unending Regalia.

A strange idea entered his mind.

"Could it be...?"

Ves carefully opened his pocket compartment and retrieved a small pouch. He slowly drew out a large gem that resembled a crystallized organized heart.

The gem that Ves had managed to bring to life softly tugged in a specific direction.

Previously, he always thought that the gem just tried to flee out of his grasp, but what if there was more to it than that? What if Supreme Comprehension tried to reach a specific destination?

"I'll give you a chance." He directly told the gem.

Though Ves did not let go of the gem, he continued to observe and feel where it wanted to go. He slowly floated over the organic debris and rubble strewn over the ground and gradually moved away from the center of the warehouse complex.

It wasn't until he reached a remote corner which used to pile some neglected cargo containers that the gem started to tug downwards.

"Is the pinnacle lab underneath this yard?" He softly asked.

He had to interpret the living gem some more to understand that he was supposed to approach a specific cargo container that had remained oddly intact despite all of the devastation in the immediate surroundings.

When the gem softly collided against the surface of the container, a hidden entrance opened up. Ves cautiously entered and saw that it was largely empty aside from holding an odd stone block.

"Do you want to touch it?" Ves questioned.

He cautiously allowed the living gem to touch the stone block. As soon as the two objects made contact, the massive block spontaneously folded within itself as if it was a high-tech puzzle!

"What the!"

Ves and his escorts quickly drew back and continued to observe the odd transformation. In just half a minute, the materials of the stone block spontaneously reconfigured into what appeared to be a circular portal!

A strange light appeared in the middle of the portal. It quickly expanded in a strange and ethereal light show that looked very familiar to Ves. His eyes widened as he realized what he was facing.

"It's a teleportation portal!"

Chapter 2935: Cautious Study

The deceptively simple stone block turned out to be a hidden teleportation portal. Previous scans of the object showed that it was nothing special. It contained no detectable exotics or anything of value. It also lacked signs of sophisticated technology.

What was even more peculiar was that it did not contain any biological matter at all. That alone was enough to generate considerable suspicion. The citizens of the Life Research Association generally tried to use as little conventional technology as possible. While this was not always feasible, there were plenty of cloistered Lifers who never held a conventional piece of mechanical technology in their lives!

The disregard for conventional technology was so deeply rooted in the minds of the locals that a simple massive rock would never register as anything valuable in their minds!

Ves would have been fooled as well. While it was odd to find a cargo container in the warehouse complex that didn't contain useful goods such as feeder stock, the stone block was hardly the only random item stored in the yards. Due to its location and general usage, at least some portion of cargo that passed through this facility consisted of miscellaneous goods that various businesses and workshops needed to fulfill special jobs.

If someone like Ves or another Larkinson encountered the stone block, they would quickly set it aside, figuring it was used to make a sculpture or used as a prop for a monument or something.

Ves looked at the living gem pinched between his armored fingers. The heart-shaped gem constantly tugged forward as if it was eager to pass through the teleportation portal.

"Not yet, buddy."

He wasn't stupid enough to pass through a mysterious gate that led to a completely unknown danger. Right now, he had no idea where the portal led to, how many individuals could pass through, whether the portal was one-use, how many times it could activate, whether passage was restricted to specific authorized individuals, if there were enemies or hostile base defenses on the other side, whether the other side of the portal was still intact, if those who entered it could return to the warehouse complex by going back the other way and etcetera.

There was so much uncertainty about this odd situation that it was incredibly irresponsible for Ves to randomly jump into the portal as if he was going on a stroll!

"I've learned since last time!"

The previous time he passed through a high-tech portal, he ended up in a weird qualification ritual organized by Rim Guardians. Though the situation didn't seem too dangerous at the time, Ves knew how foolish he had been to trust the odd instructions he received.

This time, Ves wasn't taking anything for granted. He did not take a single step forward. Instead, he waited for one solid minute until the portal turned off by itself. The circular construction broke apart as the stone material reassembled into a simple stone cube.

"I see." He hummed. "Let's decipher it first."

As the Larkinsons settled into the ruined warehouse complex, Ves ordered a select team of trustworthy specialists and engineers to study the disguised teleportation portal.

He himself studied it as well. He used both his Vulcaneye and Odineye to try and see if he could glean some useful information about the teleportation portal in either of its forms, but strangely enough he attained no useful results.

"The portal is too advanced!"

None of the sensors and scanners in the possession of the Larkinsons yielded any usable data at all. Since the tech disparity was too great for the Larkinsons to glean anything useful about the inner workings of the teleportation portal, Ves decided to redirect their studies to trying to figure out whether it was safe to pass through.

They activated the portal a few times and dispatched some pre-programmed bots to test the waters. Fortunately, the portal was two-way, as evidenced by the quick return of the bots.

The Larkinsons eagerly poured over the sensor recordings. After patiently studying the teleportation portal for several hours, Ves and the science team managed to tease out a number of rules regarding its operation.

"Let's sum up the most important points we've learned." Ves spoke as he and his science team gathered in an improvised lab."

He pointed his finger at the first item on the list.

"First, we don't know for certain whether there is a pinnacle lab on the other side of the portal, but if it is, this clearly isn't the main entrance. If anything, this entire setup looks like an escape route."

Everyone else nodded. The portal device was practically designed to catch as little attention as possible. Not only was it located in a weird and fairly remote spot, the stone portal also didn't release any energy emissions when active.

This was the most obvious indicator that it was designed to be a hidden exit! For something as difficult and energy-intensive as a portal that could instantly bring people elsewhere, the amount of energy it consumed was substantial, but not only did it show any signs of exhaustion, the entire contraption did not release even a single joule of heat energy!

Ves was so amazed by this that he felt tempted to claim the stone block as his spoils of war and take it back to his expeditionary fleet.

It was too bad the stone block seemed to be stuck in place. No matter how much force the Larkinsons exerted on it, the disguised teleportation portal and the cargo container it was one were seemingly anchored on the spot!

His finger pointed at the next item on the projected list.

"The second rule we've ascertained is that the portal only allows for ten people or self-contained objects to pass at a time. When too many people or bots have passed through, the device automatically shuts down for 78 minutes. Once this artificial cooldown passes, the portal resets and we can use it as before."

One of the odd quirks about this rule was that it registered both entry and exit as a form of passage. This meant that five people entering and five people exiting in a short amount of time caused the portal to reach its limit.

This was a very limiting rule because Ves couldn't instantly bring an army of footsoldiers inside. Even if he did by patiently passing ten people at a time, the room on the other side of the portal wasn't large. What was worse was the base defenses on the other side.

He pointed at the third item on the list.

"The most dangerous aspect about the other side of the portal is that anything that emerges there can only stay alive in a limited three meter zone around the portal. Any bot or individual that steps out of this safe zone will instantly get annihilated by the active base defenses in the room."

The Larkinsons sacrificed plenty of disposable bots before they learned this lesson. Ves was most concerned about this rule. It not only proved that the facility on the other side was still active and dangerous, but might also limit the passage of unauthorized troops.

Perhaps Ves might be able to move beyond this safe zone with the help of his living gem, but it would be troublesome if he wasn't able to bestow authorization to his escort.

He could not afford to underestimate the defenses of the pinnacle lab! If he wasn't able to disarm them or make them turn their attention away from him and his troops, he was not willing to venture any deeper.

There were a number of other rules and details that gave Ves a better understanding of the situation. For example, the bots on the other side recorded numerous details such as the gravity levels and the amount of cosmic radiation that passed through the space on the other side.

After lots of calculations, the science team determined that the destination of the teleportation portal was likely situated somewhere on the planet and not far away in space or anything like that. The indicators suggested that the pinnacle lab was situated somewhere between 500 meters and 20 kilometers below the surface.

Unfortunately, the Larkinsons failed to pin down the coordinates of the pinnacle lab. It could be situated on this side of the planet or the next. They simply couldn't tell due to a lack of data.

After gathering all of the data and making these tentative conclusions, Ves wasn't willing to waste any further time. He did not know what kind of state the pinnacle lab was in, but from the fact that the teleportation portal he stumbled upon was not the main entrance, there was a significant chance that others may have entered the lab as well!

The more time passed by, the greater the chance that other parties succeeded in plundering the spoils of the pinnacle lab.

Ves had to find an adequate balance between caution and action. This was why he eventually moved on to planning how to enter the portal and explore the other side.

"What? You're crazy, sir! You can't explore the lab in person! You're too important for that!" Commander Casella protested.

"I agree as well." Commander Rivington concurred. "Let your men do their jobs. You have plenty of tough-looking soldiers by your side. If you are worried that they don't have the background to navigate a science lab, then pick out a biomech designer among us and let him make sense of the situation."

Ves shook his head. "It won't work. I have to be the one to enter. I'm the only person among us who holds the key to the pinnacle lab. Without it, the automated base defenses will shred everyone to pieces."

The living gem showed a surprising degree of intent. Out of his expectation, it did not activate the teleportation portal by itself or allowed anyone else to use it as a key. Only when Ves held it in his own hands did it do its job and open up the way.

This was rather suspicious behavior on its part. It showed that the gem was controlled by an active consciousness rather than an instinctive will.

Still, Ves had no intentions of staying away this time. It might be his reckless streak acting up again, but he simply could not resist exploring the pinnacle lab in person!

It took quite a bit of arguing for Ves to have his way. While his fellow Larkinsons were well-meaning in their attempts to hold him back, the fact of the matter was that only their patriarch was able to secure safe passage into the pinnacle lab.

"I can protect myself." Ves slapped his near-indestructible Unending Regalia. "My mech designer background allows me to understand a lot of things. I just need to bring a biotech expert in order to make sense of the biotechnology that I will certainly encounter in the lab. Don't try to stop me any longer. I will regret missing this opportunity if I turn away under such favorable circumstances."

After all, with the Supreme Comprehension in his hands, Ves essentially possessed an all-access key to the pinnacle lab! He could avoid many dangers that beset other intruders!

Due to all of the strange restrictions, the exploration team only consisted of ten members.

After a brief discussion, Ves decided to bring a biomech designer, seven of his elite honor guards along and Lucky.

When the exhausted gem cat in question heard that his name was included in the exploration party, he immediately raised his head and lodged a complaint.

"Meow!..."

"You've rested long enough, buddy." Ves self-righteously spoke as he picked up his protesting pet and put him on the shoulder of his Unending Regalia. "I don't care if you have yet to return to your peak. You're coming with me as my insurance. If we encounter anything that is beyond my ability to overcome, you better do your best or else we all die!"

"Meeeeooooowwww!..."

Chapter 2936: Doctor Avalon Perris

After Ves discovered that the living gem was leading him to somewhere rather than trying to run off on its own, he had become a lot more wary of its motives.

It became clear to Ves that the intelligence driving the gem possessed enough awareness of its situation to perform navigation, recognize specific people and lead its current owner into the pinnacle lab in order to fulfill an unknown objective!

It was the latter part that really sent alarm bells ringing in his head.

Perhaps the gem had been observing Ves ever since he obtained it. Perhaps storing the Supreme Comprehension gem on his own person was a mistake!

Still, just because something was alive didn't mean it was an enemy. If the gem was driven by some remnant portion of the Supreme Sage's spirituality, which Ves highly suspected was the case, then it should be smart enough to make a deal.

Ves simply wanted to gain some valuable loot. As long as he could take away some of the most valuable high-level goods and research data from the pinnacle lab, he didn't mind cooperating with a gem that sought to fulfill a specific goal.

Of course, the premise of their cooperation was that the precocious gem did not have any hostile intentions towards Ves and his clan!

During the preparation phase of their upcoming exploring run, Ves quietly drew out the gem in question in order to issue a stern warning.

"Listen, I know you can understand me. I'm only giving you this warning once. If you do anything that I regard as hostile or dangerous to me, I will pinch you until you crumble into pieces. You're not indestructible. So if you want to keep your current form and gain my cooperation, you better show some sincerity. Have I made myself clear?"

The gem vibrated up and down as if it was nodding.

That was good enough for Ves. It was pointless for him to issue any further warnings. He believed the gem was smart enough to make the rational decision to cooperate and play along with Ves. As long as their goals didn't clash against each other, they could both get what they wished!

Once he had and his team had made their preparations, they all entered the suspicious cargo container while fully kitted out for a dangerous mission.

His honor guard all wore formidable combat armor that had been loaded with extra equipment. Grenades, ammunition boxes, medical kits, workshop tools, hacking devices, flamethrowers and more all hung from their frames.

Though Ves did not expect that his honor guard needed to use all of this equipment, there was no harm in bringing it all along as long as the teleportation portal was not too picky.

Nitaa stood out from the rest by being the only person aside from Ves to wear a suit of combat armor plated with Unending alloy. This gave her a much greater chance at surviving any threats they might encounter from within.

Of the eight people that were ready to plunge into the portal, one of them clearly stood out. A woman wearing a slimmer suit of light combat armor awkwardly moved her limbs as if she was still trying to get used to wearing something different from a hazard suit

She was the only non-combatant in the team. Since they were about to explore a pinnacle lab, how could they not bring a biotech expert along?

Out of all of the possible choices, Ves settled for an Apprentice Mech Designer who recently joined the clan. Even though she was part of the later wave of refugees who fled from the city center, she adjusted fairly well to the clan. Ves did not feel that she possessed any complicated motives, unlike some of the older biomech designers that had joined the ranks of the Larkinson Clan.

"Doctor Avalon Perris, are you sure you wish to go through with this mission? The risks and dangers we might face inside this forbidden lab might exceed your imagination. This is a job for soldiers, not civilians. If not for your expertise, I wouldn't have added you to the team in the first place."

The woman adjusted her pixie-cut blond hair before enclosing it with her integrated suit helmet. "I will try my best to stay out of the way of your soldiers, sir. I have no intentions of turning away. Do you know that everyone who grew up in this state admired the Supreme Sage? The chance to enter one of his main labs and witness the cutting-edge research he conducted is the opportunity of a lifetime! If I can retrieve just a single data chip's worth of research data from the lab systems, I will be happy for the rest of my life!"

Even if she recently renounced her identity as a Lifer, it was hard to shake off a lifetime of indoctrination and hero worship! The Supreme Sage was a legendary figure in the Life Research Association and practically anyone who entered the biotech industry wanted to walk in his footsteps!

As Nitaa and her fellow honor guard were checking all of their gear for the final time, Ves briefly chatted with his biotech consultant in order to get to know her a little better.

"What did you do before you joined our clan, Dr. Perris?"

"I worked as an assistant mech designer for one of the biomech companies based on this planet. I did not design any biomechs by myself, but I assisted in the development of a dozen different designs."

"What is your specialty?"

"My aim is to specialize in rapid self-regeneration. I have studied this topic extensively in my spare time and I have already developed some methods that could improve the regeneration of soft organic tissue under field conditions."

Though Ves only possessed a limited understanding of biomechs, he could already tell that this was not an easy specialty to pursue. While all biomechs possessed some self-regeneration capabilities, their healing process was very slow without external aid. Just like human bodies, it could take weeks or months to restore moderate wounds!

If there weren't any battles on the horizon, then this was completely fine. Allowing biomechs to heal by themselves and without much external aid might not be perfect, but it was a lot cheaper than the alternatives.

Trying to accelerate this self-healing process was doubtlessly possible, but all of that time savings had to come from somewhere. The burden of allowing mechs to heal their damaged tissue in a shorter timespan not only consumed more energy and resources, but also required the inclusion of additional modules in order to make it all possible.

There were three reasons why Ves paid attention to Avalon Perris.

First, she was suitable to join his design team. While she mainly specialized in designing biomechs, one of the prerequisites of that was understanding how to design

regular mechs. This meant that she would always be useful even if she wasn't assigned to a biomech design project.

Second, her specialty might be useful if Ves intended to work on a number of biomech or cyborg mech projects in the future. He had a feeling that her specialty might be especially useful in the design of Venerable Joshua's expert mech.

Third, she stood out from her peers within the clan. Doctor Perris was not the only biomech designer that his clan recently picked up, but she was the most promising one. As one of the few individuals who possessed spiritual potential, she might become the first Journeyman among the Larkinsons who excelled at designing biomechs!

Though Doctor Perris also had her faults, Ves was confident that he could deal with them as long as he nurtured her properly.

Originally, Ves wanted to add Dr. Swindell to his team, but the biomech technician was woefully underqualified. Even though he graduated with a degree in biomech design, he didn't study a lot of advanced knowledge after his graduation.

What Ves needed right now was a consultant who was well-versed in academic research and more advanced applications of biotechnology. Someone who fixed up competitive biomechs for a living might possess a lot more practical knowledge than a lab nerd, but he latter was unquestionably superior when it came to interpreting high-level research!

After making sure that everyone's gear was in working condition, the exploration team was finally cleared to go. Ves carefully stepped up and used his gem to activate the teleportation portal once again.

"Here goes nothing."

The honor guard stepped in first. Once they confirmed that the internal base defenses did not respond to their intrusion, the rest followed suit.

Once they all passed through, the portals on both sides automatically shut down. The Larkinsons had to wait at least 78 minutes before Ves could activate them again!

The immediate area around the portal on the other side had become very crowded due to the abundance of armored personnel. They carefully stayed within a marked radius of three meters for fear of triggering the automated base defenses.

Ves lifted the gem in front of his faceplate and shook it a bit. "Okay, we're here. Can you tell the base systems to refrain from treating me and my men as intruders? I don't want to get crushed by 10,000 gravities."

Just because he was protected by his Unending Regalia didn't mean he assumed he was invincible. Gravitic attacks still posed a very lethal threat against him. It didn't matter if Unending alloy could resist the pressure. The human physique, even an augmented one like his, would definitely get crushed into paste if subjected to so much force!

And this was just one of the potential hazards that intruders of the pinnacle lab had to face. Ves did not intend to take any step forward until his gem was able to convince him that the way forward was safe.

"Open our path."

Different from many other facilities in the LRA, the room they were in right now was not made of organic tree matter. Instead, it was made of highly-metallic bone that barely looked different from fabricated metal. Ves had no doubt that all of this bone alloy was incredibly difficult to damage.

What was worse was that all of the base defenses were covered with this resilient material. It would definitely be a pain to destroy all of the open turrets. It would be even more challenging to destroy anything situated behind the bone alloy walls!

Fortunately, his gem did not leave him hanging. It vibrated a bit and tugged in the direction of his wrist. Ves interpreted the gem's actions as best as possible.

"You want access to a comm interface?"

Though this was a risky decision, he had already trusted the gem to this extent. He decisively activated an external comm interface, allowing the gem to input specific commands by directing Ves to press specific buttons.

Slowly but surely, the gem directed Ves to transmit an open electronic signal to his immediate surroundings. Ves wasted a lot of minutes by manually inputting a 237-character password.

Once his comm transmitted this laboriously typed code, the turrets seemed to have lost their vigilance. They retracted their barrels and ignored the presence of the humans who entered this room.

An honor guard carefully stepped forward. Unlike the bots that had attempted to move beyond the three-meter safe zone, the base defenses didn't act.

When the rest moved past the teleportation portal, Ves released some of his nervous tension. "We can proceed forward! Be careful though. I doubt that transmitting a simple pass phrase is enough to allow us free reign to the pinnacle lab. Don't touch anything without permission."

The exploration team was about to venture through one of the most important research facilities of a second-rate state. Safe passage was never guaranteed especially since they weren't originally authorized to enter the lab in the first place.

Ves was sure that there were multiple layers of access permission. The emergency code that he just transmitted with the help of his sentient gem should have just given him and his team surface-level access.

This meant that if any of them entered the wrong space or touched the wrong item, the deadly base defenses might decide to eliminate the exploration team!

Everyone was aware of this possibility, so no one moved impulsively. Even Lucky was content to rest on Ves' shoulders, his tail flicking with worry.

"Meow..."

Chapter 2937: High-level Research

The exploration team cautiously exited the emergency escape room.

As soon as they approached the heavily-fortified exit gate, it automatically unlocked and slid open.

A long and spiralling tunnel lay ahead. The Larkinsons steadily ascended as they followed the lengthy tunnel. They walked for over 300 meters before they finally reached another thick gate.

This time, Ves had to type in another code in order to open this secure gate. Ves figured that it was not connected to any central systems, but instead operated in isolation. This was a good way to prevent someone's escape route from getting cut off by some nefarious infiltration party.

With the help of their awfully-helpful gem, the exploration team soon managed to pass through this barrier.

They entered a wide open space where the same bone metal material covered the walls and ceiling.

Different from the cramped spaces of before, the Larkinsons finally encountered some actual base components.

Ves turned his view to the sides to see several identical fleshy growths that looked like tumors. Each of them was covered by thick energy shields, which basically screamed that these organic machines were very important for some reason.

He had no idea what he was looking at. All he could tell about the massive, mech-sized growths was that they appeared to be quite critical.

"What am I looking at, Dr. Perris?" He asked.

The entire reason why he brought a civilian biomech designer along for the ride was to clarify matters like these. The knowledge that she possessed was far more valuable than an extra soldier in his opinion.

The woman in question stared in amazement at the massive organic machines.

"Hello? Is there someone home inside your head?"

"Oh! Uhm, my apologies, sir. I didn't expect to see such a sight. What you're looking at is some of the most impressive power generators in the LRA. While I do not recognize this model, I estimate that a single one of them already provides enough energy to power an entire capital ship!"

"That much?!"

Ves may not know anything about organic power generators, but he was fairly well-versed in the properties of conventional one. It was incredibly difficult for a single power generator to service all of the energy needs of an entire capital ship. This was especially the case when they were smaller in size.

Right now, the hall they were in boasted six active organic power generators!

A facility that needed that much juice was definitely promising. All of that power had to be utilized in a productive manner in order to justify the existence of all of these power generators.

It appeared that the escape route that the exploration team had just entered led them straight to one of the hearts of the facility!

"This shouldn't be the only source of power in this facility." Dr. Perris guessed. "As impressive as this looks, the rumors I've heard about the kind of research that takes place in a pinnacle lab should be considerably more demanding than what these power generators can sustain. At the very least, the lab should offer considerable redundancy in case any of these generators fail."

Ves nodded in agreement. Her logic was sound.

"That still doesn't take away from the fact that this is one of the more important locations in the pinnacle lab. There ought to be an access point somewhere that we can use to obtain more information or expand our limited access level."

The living gem eagerly tugged him to the side. After tapping the cold bone metal wall, a projected interface appeared into view.

After inputting another laborious pass code, Ves apparently gained access to a secret control interface.

A few minutes passed by as the gem instructed Ves to activate several coded settings. He had no idea what he was triggering, but he had trusted the gem to this extent already. He did not feel it was doing anything malicious.

Soon enough, some strange set of passes materialized into existence.

"Materialization technology!" Dr. Perris gasped. "As expected of a pinnacle lab! I've heard that every facility is equipped with a lot of tech supplies by the MTA!"

"This is nothing." Ves dismissively said. "There are several different grades of materialization technology. Making a few simple passes is very different from materializing an entire mech."

The passes were rather odd, thick and heavy. Ves could already guess that they contained a wealth of advanced circuitry.

Still, no matter what kind of underlying tech they contained, their function was rather obvious.

"I guess these are our access passes."

He distributed them to everyone. Even Lucky received a smaller one that magnetically attached to his back.

"Meow!..."

"Hey, don't scratch that off! You might die if you do that!"

That caused his cat to settle down quickly.

Ves felt a lot more secure after receiving the passes. Carrying the physical tokens was much more reassuring than purely relying on software changes.

"Can you provide us with a map or something?"

Unfortunately, that was beyond the gem's means for some reason.

After it finished directing Ves to activate some hidden settings, the gem pulled him towards the exit. Once the exploration team left the power generation room, they moved through a few pale and eerie corridors while encountering nothing of note.

The corridors were completely empty and devoid of any objects and markings. Nothing he had seen so far allowed him to confirm that he entered a pinnacle lab as opposed to some other top secret facility.

It was only until he entered the next hall that Ves truly felt he entered the right place.

The space the gem had led him into was some kind of research lab dedicated to the study of a certain kind of arthropod exobeast species.

The exoskeletons of the giant insects stored in cultivation vats were like crystals. They shone in the light and looked incredibly hard.

There must have been something special about this odd exobeast species if they were being studied in this kind of high-quality lab. He spotted over fifty different lab machines in this hall. Some of them were organic in nature, but the majority looked more familiar to him. They must be the MTA-supplied lab equipment.

"Dr. Perris, try and access the servers if you can. I want to know what is special about these creatures."

While he was mildly curious about the research conducted in this room, he just wanted to see whether her new pass granted her access to sensitive research data. He also wanted to see whether the automated lab defenses would turn against her for attempting to access highly confidential data.

The worst did not happen. When Dr. Perris navigated the menus of a projected terminal, she was able to call up all of the research data without restriction!

"This is amazing, sir! Whatever you did earlier allows me free reign over the local server! It's a pity that this computer system isn't connected to the rest of the facility. Every research lab appears to be an isolated silo in terms of data transfer."

Ves wasn't surprised to hear that. "That's natural. It would be too easy to steal all of the research data if they can be accessed from a central location. It's not worth the convenience to leave this risk open."

Even though he hadn't explored much of the pinnacle lab as of yet, he already gained a preliminary understanding of the architect of this facility. The Supreme Sage was meticulous and careful. He took the design of the pinnacle lab seriously and followed all of the expected security precautions without cutting any corners.

He was probably underestimating the security measures even now!

"So what did you learn about these alien bugs?"

"They're not a naturally-recurring species, sir." Dr. Perris explained as she rapidly read through various documents. "Project Arvalix is an attempt by the Supreme Sage to design a specific species of organisms that is capable of generating a specific venom that is useful for other applications."

"What kind of applications are you talking about?"

"All I am able to ascertain at the moment is that this venom is exceedingly lethal to ordinary humans but can be quite helpful to certain types of biomechs. I can't tell you any further about the uses of this special venom because the local server doesn't contain any specific references aside from a single mention of Special Project 'U'."

"Well, that's revealing."

Ves pretty much lost interest in Project Arvalix. Neither these strange designer beasts nor the venom they produced sounded relevant to his own interests.

"Is there any of this special venom in storage here?"

"No, sir. The lab operations here have stalled ever since the Supreme Sage... died. The designer beasts have all died and the venom put in cold storage has deteriorated despite being freezed."

"Okay. Let's move on then."

So far, he was not very impressed by the research taking place inside this facility.

That soon changed when they entered the next research lab.

The interior layout looked almost identical to the last one. The only difference was that the cultivation vats didn't contain any designer beasts or exobeasts.

Instead, they contained the bodies of humans!

Ves immediately felt a bit agitated when he saw their partially-covered bodies. There was something about these muscular men and women that sent him on edge and caused his intuition to go on alert.

He approached one of the tanks while Dr. Perris attempted to access one of the terminals. When his armored feet stopped before a semi-transparent vat, he peered through the odd yellowish liquid and studied the state of the male cadaver floating inside.

The man used to be a soldier. Ves had no doubt of this judgement. The athletic body was toned and muscled in a way that reminded him of elite mech pilots.

There were two other indicators that clearly denoted that the person inside the vat was a soldier and most likely a mech pilot. The left side of the corpse was heavily marked with burn damage. In addition, the right side of the body bore various tattoos that servicemen typically acquired. One of them even referenced a Lifer military mech regiment called the Molier Steelhawks.

Yet as Ves stood in close proximity to the vat that held the corpse, he started to feel more and more unsettled for some reason. There was something about the body of this mech pilot and the ones stored in other vats that made him suspect there was something abnormal about these experimental materials."

On a hunch, Ves decided to concentrate his mind and expand his spiritual senses.

As he began to perceive the body using his other senses, he immediately felt an abnormality within the brain cavity of the deceased soldier.

"It's... empty?"

He sensed a spiritual void in what should have been the most important organ of a mech pilot and any human for that matter.

Ves circled around and saw to his astonishment that a very neat hole had been drilled in the back of the dead body's skull!

A shudder ran through his body.

What was the use of extracting the brain of a dead mech pilot?

He suddenly heard a feminine gasp. Ves immediately turned to Dr. Perris, who had just taken a few steps backwards from the terminal she accessed.

"What did you learn?!"

"Sir... this is..."

"Explain!"

"Well... I don't really know how. The Supreme Sage... I never thought he could do something like this. I... according to the top secret documents I've accessed, the bodies stored in these vats aren't regular humans. They're... expert pilots."

"...Say again?"

"Each of the specimens here used to be expert pilots! Some of them are Lifers, but at least half of them originate from other states!"

Expert pilots! Ves finally knew why he felt so strange about these fit and muscular individuals. They were demigods, transcendent human beings who had reached a state of life that was far beyond regular mortals!

The bodies of these honorable former heroes should have been buried in magnificent tombs. They deserved highest honors, yet instead the Supreme Sage robbed them of the treatment that they were owed in favor of performing dubious experiments on their brains!

"What exactly did the Supreme Sage do with the remains of these expert pilots? Where did their brains go and why are they separated from these bodies?"

It took a few seconds for Dr. Perris to gain the courage to speak again.

"If I am interpreting these documents correctly, then the Supreme Sage himself sought to... harvest and... refine the extracted tissue matter into a specific substance."

"What is the application of this specific substance?"

"It is used as an ingredient for the production of..." She trailed off as her emotions roiled.

"Finish your sentence!"

"I'm sorry, sir! It's just... if I am interpreting this correctly, the specific substance is a key input material for the production of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum! Although I cannot determine whether this is one of the standard formulas used by the Big Two or a substitute formula developed by the Supreme Sage, the serum that is ostensibly being developed and produced in this facility is partially made out of the remains of deceased expert pilots!"

Thunder rang through the minds of Ves and everyone else in the research lab. Even Lucky dropped his maw.

This revelation was too shocking! The implications of what she claimed was so great that Ves couldn't even begin to wrap his mind around this controversial discovery!

It was one thing if this taboo research project was just an isolated attempt by a single unethical biotech researcher to develop a substitute formula for the insanely rare and expensive serum offered by the Big Two.

It was another thing entirely if the formula that the Supreme Sage worked on happened to share a close resemblance to the formulas used by the Big Two's own serum production departments!

"What... is the name of this research project?"

"Project Cain."

Chapter 2938: Orphidor Citadel

Pretty much every star sector within human space possessed an MTA and CFA presence.

As the most powerful public trans-galactic organization that meddled in human space, the Mech Trade Association always sought to plant their flag in the most central and notable locations in a given star sector.

For example, in the Komodo Star Sector, both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony coveted the Centerpoint System during the start of the colonization period. It's great location, abundant exotics and energetic suns could all provide enormous boosts to any nascent state looking to supercharge their industrial development!

Yet from the moment the MTA dropped in and claimed Centerpoint for its own purposes, the Fridaymen and Hexers obediently avoided the location and fought for the surrounding star systems.

This pretty much happened in every star sector.

It was one thing if the MTA claimed the desirable and centrally-located star systems in recently-opened star sectors.

It was another thing if the MTA claimed a star system that was already developed by an existing state!

This happened to a lot of states during the rise of the powerful association and the onset of the Age of Mechs.

At that period, the devastation across human space and the might of the recently-established Big Two left the weakened states with little choice but to give up their prized star systems!

The Morgana Deltor System happened to be one of them. Situated in a highly desirable location in the center of the Majestic Teal Star Sector, the state that preceded the Harmony Association invested a lot of money, resources and manpower to develop its economic, military and cultural might.

Yet just as the modest state started to earn a return on its investment, the end of the Age of Conquest and the emergence of a powerful new organization that sought to make its mark on human civilization abruptly changed this trajectory!

The predecessor state to the Harmony Association had no choice but to acquiesce. It 'voluntarily' gave up its capital system and its greatest jewel in exchange for a large infusion of cash and rare exotics.

While this compensation was very sumptuous by the standards of the galactic rim, the permanent loss of territorial potential proved too much of a loss! The predecessor state fell and the weaker and more modest Harmony Association rose in its stead.

Ketis found this story to be rather intriguing as she and her massively-expanded Swordmaiden fleet entered this heavily-regulated star system.

From the moment her ships emerged in realspace, every one of them became buffeted by strong radiation. Despite the immense distance from the center of the star system, the seven suns that were orbiting complex trajectories all outputted their energy at the same time!

"Damn, that's bright!"

When the MTA took over the star system, they added a few extra stars to the mix. As a result, a whopping seven stars of different sizes, masses and luminosities illuminated the immediate space with an abundance of hot and very lethal radiation. The dense Dyson swarms that enveloped them all helped a lot in blocking too much energy from melting everything in the inner system, but regular starships simply could not survive a single trip to the interior!

In order to reach her destination, Ketis had to transfer to a space station situated at the edge of the star system and wait for a specially-designed MTA passenger vessel to bring her to one of the massive artificial starbases located close to all of the suns.

Ketis, who decided to make the trip by wearing her modest dark green Living Mech Corporation uniform instead of her ostentatious swordmaster dress uniform, looked wondrously at the projection in the center of the luxurious passenger ship.

"Why would the MTA allow the local stars to keep blasting the inner system with heat?"

"It's a natural defensive measure against invasions." A distinguished-looking man replied as he curiously eyed the floating sheathed greatsword hovering behind Ketis' back. "They say that all of the suns generate so much gravity, electromagnetic radiation and other forms of energy that it's virtually impossible for starships to use any form of FTL to drop inside the inner system. Those that do make the attempt will likely get shredded."

"Won't that block the MTA's own starships from using their portals to get to their destination quickly?"

The older man gently shrugged. "I don't think they mind the inconvenience as long as it provides them with a bit of peace of mind."

"Who are they guarding against, though? The nearby alien civilizations aren't that strong. There is no one in this region of space that can challenge the MTA's might."

"You're not entirely right, young lady. Who is humanity's worst enemy?"

It didn't take long for Ketis to come up with the answer. "Ourselves."

"Indeed. The MTA isn't worried about the local states. Even if all of the military forces of the Harmony Association, the Life Research Association, the Heavensword Association and so on gather together, the MTA's mech forces can easily wipe them out from a distance. The MTA is actually on guard against another organization, one that not only matches them in scale, but also excels at anything related to ship-based combat."

"You're talking about the CFA."

The talkative man nodded. "The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance are often lumped into a single category, but they're like brothers fighting over the same inheritance. Just because they are kin to each other doesn't mean that they will turn their weapons against each other. While the probability of this happening is not great, it's best to be on guard, hence why the MTA went through the trouble of relying on a natural countermeasure instead of a technological one. Machines can be disabled, but massive natural satellites like stars are virtually unassailable."

The man took one last look at the projection of the star system before wandering off to the shopping and dining section of the passenger ship.

Ketis kept staring at the projected stars, each of which were surrounded by many energy-gathering platforms, and kept thinking over the lessons she just learned.

She didn't even notice that her force of will, while rather subdued compared to other expert pilots, did not affect the man at all. Even if she did, it didn't really matter.

She didn't drop by the Morgana Deltor System to go on a sight-seeing tour.

After the passenger vessel calmly entered the inner system and easily resisted the abundance of heat and energy buffeting her hull, the ship finally docked on a massive artificially-constructed moon.

This was Orphidor Citadel, the sector headquarters of the MTA in Majestic Teal.

When Ketis realized that she already qualified to be recognized as a Journeyman Mech Designer, she decided to postpone her return to the expeditionary fleet in favor of finishing her mandatory pilgrimage.

After all, she had to go to a sector headquarters sooner or later, so why not cross this item off the list straight away?

The interior of Orphidor was impressive and imposing. Huge space, massive halls and lots and lots of metal surrounded the visitors from all sides.

The bare gunmetal grey decks and walls practically defied the more elegant aesthetic tastes that was common in Majestic Teal. It was a sign that the local branch of the MTA still closely adhered to the overall culture and customs of the central organization.

The first-class multipurpose mechs that stood on guard or patrolled the surroundings offered the visitors a feast for their eyes. An uncommonly high proportion of passengers happened to be mech designers, so they each looked at the pinnacle mechs of human civilization in different lights.

"How powerful." She whispered.

Even from a distance, she could already tell that a single mech could pretty much wipe out all of the second-class mechs of the Larkinson Clan! Not even the prime mechs would be able to last more than a few seconds, Unending alloy or not! The power disparity was so great that Ketis simply could not generate any desire to resist against the best at what the MTA had to offer!

She spent enough time around Ves to know that this might be part of a deliberate ploy to intimidate the space peasants who visited the sector headquarters for one reason or another.

First impressions were unforgettable, and many newly-advanced Journeymen would definitely curb the arrogance they gained from breaking through to a rank that many Apprentices failed to attain!

It was too bad that Ketis was not like other Journeymen. Her other identity was a swordmaster, and one of the effects she gained from it was boundless confidence and an unyielding will.

A challenging glint crossed her eyes. While she was aware that she stood no chance against these powerful MTA mechs, one day that might change.

After passing through some security checks, Ketis was surprised that the guards on duty did not bother to restrict or lock up Bloodsinger. Evidently, the mechers were so confident in their security measures that they did not feel threatened by ordinary weapons.

They were right to feel this way.

After the visitors entered a reception hall, a number of androids personally greeted specific people and led them deeper into Orphidor Citadel.

Ketis was waiting for her own assigned android to lead her to her next destination, but to her surprise a flesh-and-blood human walked up to her instead.

"Miss Ketis Larkinson, welcome to Orphidor Citadel."

Ketis looked straight at the approaching woman in shock. "You... you're Master Willix!"

The Master Mech Designer, who wore a clean white lab coat underneath an elegant ensemble of smart clothing, simply turned around and gestured for Ketis to follow.

"Ordinarily, one of my colleagues should be receiving you in his office at the moment, but I took the liberty to take your case off his hands."

"Why... why would you do that, ma'am?" Ketis asked.

Though she was a swordmaster, she could not help but lower her posture a bit when faced with a powerful MTA Master. Ever since Master Willix started showing up around Ves, Ketis had already begun to admire her. It was difficult for her to change that in a short amount of time, especially when Sharpie resided inside Bloodsinger at the moment.

Master Willix continued to glide forward as if she was an ethereal existence. "Your unusual accomplishments as well as your affiliation with an interesting clan has caught my interest. You might not believe it, but you are truly the first human in existence who has become both a swordmaster and a Journeyman at the same time. The Association has never encountered such an anomaly. In this case, it is more than justifiable for someone of my stature to welcome you instead. Have no fear. We just wish to perform some physical examinations. This won't take long and will not delay you much."

"Uhm, thanks. I need to get back to the main fleet of the Larkinson Clan as soon as possible. I don't know if the Larkinsons over there need my help, but I feel bad for staying away for so long."

"You don't have to be too concerned about your fellow clan members." Willix reassured the younger woman. "There is danger in opportunity, and there are few people in the star sector who can exceed the resourcefulness shown by your mentor and his band of misfits."

Ketis frowned. "Aren't you concerned that Ves might succumb to an accident or something? From what I've heard about Prosperous Hill VI, people are still getting killed left and right. Wouldn't it be awful for a mech designer as good as Ves to fall just because he was at the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Master Willix briefly stopped her advance. She turned around while still levitating above the deck.

"The galaxy is a cruel place, young lady. Don't be fooled by our civilized facade. Ves Larkinson is a man who thrives on the duality of our race. He has chosen a different path from other mech designers, and must bear the consequences of his decisions. In any case, this day is not about him. You should be considering your own future now. Let us continue this discussion after we have put you through a brief physical examination. As a unique existence, we are quite curious at what is going on in your head."

Chapter 2939: Underutilization

Master Willix didn't lie. The examination didn't last more than half an hour. Even though all sorts of hyper-advanced medical equipment scanned her body inside and out, making her feel as if she exposed all of her secrets, the mechers never made her feel too uncomfortable.

Obviously, the focus of the scans was definitely on her head, or more specifically her brain cavity. As the center of power for both swordmasters and mech designer, her noggin had definitely developed in an abnormal direction.

Still, Ketis was aware that the MTA might not be able to find what they were looking for. She had quietly kept Sharpie locked within Bloodsinger, which she had temporarily stowed in locker. This meant that her mind only contained a fraction of the power of a swordmaster at the moment.

Perhaps the results of all of their examinations would make the MTA doctors conclude that Ketis was not really comparable to a true Swordmaster.

This was fine by Ketis. She did not forget about the remarks made by Heavensworders of how the MTA did not think well of swordmasters. Though she could rely on her mech designer identity to remain in good standing with the Association, she did not wish to push her boundaries too much.

She could already see the faces of the doctors and scientists behind the projected consoles looking a bit disappointed by the results they were getting. Maybe Ketis wasn't entirely living up the hype to them. The will she exuded did not even match the strength of a typical newly-advanced expert pilot.

Once all of the examinations came to a close, Master Willix allowed her to retrieve her weapon before leading her to a large but mostly-empty office.

Ketis looked at the artful display of projected fishes as she sat down on a floating chair.

"Miss Ketis, let us begin with the basics." The Master soothingly said. "Please describe your design philosophy to me. It is best to be as forthcoming as possible. The more we

know, the more guidance we can offer you. Do not be afraid of sharing your trade secrets with us. We always respect confidentiality."

"My design philosophy is straightforward. I chose to specialize in designing swordsman mechs, with a special eye towards arming them with the sharpest swords that I can make."

Ketis was already prepared for this round of questioning. Ves had once given her a brief description on what she would face if she made her pilgrimage to a sector headquarters.

Though he did not tell her much, he made sure to emphasize that she should reveal as little she could get away with. Ketis didn't know why he felt it was important for her to avoid entrusting too much information to the MTA, but he had never led her astray so far, so she made sure to understate her capabilities as much as possible.

It helped a lot that Ketis barely knew what she could do these days. Not a lot of time had passed since her breakthrough and she had yet to engage in any mech design activities.

Still, she instinctively felt she was capable of accomplishing some feats that she wasn't able to do when she was still an Apprentice. She did not mind sharing them since her work in the near future would doubtlessly incorporate her new capabilities.

After answering a lot of routine questions, the MTA gathered enough information to draft a shallow profile of her capabilities as a Journeyman Mech Designer.

Master Willix also benefited from what she learned about Ketis. Prior to the young woman's breakthrough, the Swordmaiden mech designer had never registered on anyone's radar.

Even the MTA itself never thought that the Larkinson Clan had hid such a treasure! The questioning that took place was very necessary for that reason.

As one of the senior dignitaries in the region who possessed a special interest in the Larkinson Clan, Master Willix had also generated a considerable degree of personal interest in Ketis' career.

Compared to a conventional and classically-trained Journeyman like Gloriana Wodin, Ketis presented a much more interesting puzzle to the MTA!

The deep investigations into the Swordmaiden mech designer's background easily picked up a lot of suspicious signs. Her physical examination also revealed a considerable number of abnormalities outside of her abnormal brain development.

Still, the MTA did not have any reason to confront Ketis on these notable abnormalities. Master Willix was much more interested in establishing a friendly relationship with the latest notable Journeyman from the Larkinson Clan.

"I think quite highly of your decision to pursue a narrow focus in your mech design career." Willix spoke with a hint of appreciation in her tone. "Though the mech industry does not look highly upon mech designers who overspecialize, it is less difficult for you to develop powerful new methods that can greatly enhance the strength of a specific type of mechs. Having big and broad dreams is also good, but too many mech designers overestimate their capabilities and pursue ambitions that are far too unattainable."

"I know what I'm good at and what I'm not good at, ma'am. I'm not interested in designing mechs that don't wield swords, so I don't feel the need to force myself to branch out. There are so many mech designers out there that I don't have to shoulder every burden. Someone else can design rifleman mechs. Nobody wants one that is designed by a mech designer who isn't passionate about ranged mechs."

"Well said. You have the right idea, Miss Ketis. I do have to warn you that your approach is only viable if you are a purely commercial mech designer or if you are part of an organization that is able to employ multiple mech designers. When the people around you have no choice but depend solely on you for their mechs, your self-imposed limitations will become a major hindrance."

Ketis felt pleased at being flattered, but she did not take it too seriously. Master Willix was just putting a positive spin on a very severe restriction.

"Do you have any advice on how I should progress as a Journeyman? I'm kind of new to this and I don't have a clear idea on what it takes to become a Senior."

"Oh, you don't need to worry too much about that. Journeymen are considered mature mech designers by our standards. Compared to Apprentices, you are much more capable of taking care of yourselves. However, our Association also considers Journeymen to be beginners who are just starting to explore their unique research direction. You need to develop a foundation by creating powerful new methods that tie into your design philosophy. The mechs you will design from now on must reflect your unique advantages in order to reflect your identity as a Journeyman. The more you are able to translate your design philosophy into more powerful mech designs, the closer you are to becoming a Senior."

Master Willix didn't give her any advice that was too specific because Journeyman were not children anymore. They may be new to higher-level mech design, but their level of ability, intelligence and creativity should have exceeded a minimum standard.

Incompetent Journeymen simply didn't exist!

As long as they found a good direction and didn't get distracted by other matters, it was not that difficult to advance to Senior. The difficulty of advancing from Apprentice to Journeyman was far greater than advancing from Journeyman to Senior!

After a bit of chatting, Ketis received a lot of general advice that would doubtlessly make her future advancement smoother.

At the end of the session, Master Willix stood up and invited Ketis to go on a small excursion.

"There is something that you should know. When Ves advanced to Journeyman, he earned the right to learn some secrets that our association has withheld from humanity. Now, you are entitled to learn the same secrets."

The Master brought Ketis on a tour through a large ceremonial hall where numerous impressive masterwork mechs were put on display.

Though many of them were outdated by modern standards, Ketis couldn't help but appreciate their craftsmanship. Willix even allowed her to stop in front of a masterwork swordsman mech that looked absolutely gorgeous to someone who specialized in designing this mech type!

At the end of the hall, they reached an enormous pit where an orb that consisted of pure antimatter was suspended in the center.

It was there that Ketis finally learned about psionics.

To be frank, she had already figured out some elements about this phenomenon. It was hard to remain ignorant when Ves relied so much on it. Even if he abided by the rules of the MTA and avoided the P-word, his design philosophy was so intricately tied to it that he had to reveal some aspects of it in order to explain his work to the Design Department.

What she learned also tied closely to expert pilots and swordmasters. Both of these professions developed psionics in a different direction, and Ketis found that she was able to understand her own state a lot better now! Though Master Willix refrained from delving too deep into the mechanics of psionic power, Ketis was able to derive plenty of guesses based on the scattered knowledge she held!

Master Willix looked knowingly at Ketis. "As a mech designer who worked extensively under Ves Larkinson, you should have already experienced how psionics can enhance conventional mech designers. They exist as a layer on top of purely mechanical creation and is one of the principal reasons why mechs are so much more powerful than other weapons of war. There is no other weapon system in human space that can derive as much empowerment from psionics as mechs."

"What is the purpose of this?" Ketis asked a question that many mech designers in her place would ask. "Don't get me wrong. I think it is wonderful that mechs have so much potential. What I am wondering about is why we humans devote so much effort to developing mechs when there are more powerful alternatives like warships. Is it really worth it to devote so much energy in developing better mechs when warships still remain our main weapons of war against hostile alien races?"

"Oh, it is very much worth it, Miss Ketis. I cannot divulge the full story to you, but I can share at least one angle to you. First, do you remember the mech designer's creed?"

Ketis briefly paused. "We exist to serve mech pilots, is that right?"

"Correct." Master Willix looked pleased. "Usually, this phrase is used to humble our profession and remind every mech designer that we are not the protagonists of this age. However, the other side of this expression is that mech pilots are an important group of people to humanity. Mech pilots and especially the ones who have transcended their humanity are of great value to our civilization. The clan you are a part of already boasts a handful of expert pilots, but it is rather regretful that none of them have yet to make use of their prowess."

"It's difficult to obtain expert mechs from scratch."

Master Willix let out a small sigh. "Indeed, but that is not an excuse to delay the progression of all of those promising expert pilots. It would be an enormous tragedy for them to succumb in battle too soon due to the Larkinson Clan's inability to supply them with adequate expert mechs. I predict that all of them have a great future ahead of them if they continue to fight alongside an interesting mech designer such as Ves, but they are wasting too much time now. If they continue to be deprived of their expert mechs for a couple more years, then I am afraid that they will have exhausted their potential in vain. That would be a grave tragedy. I hope that your mentor will not fail to uphold his responsibilities as a mech designer."

This matter deeply concerned Ketis as well. She wanted both Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise to succeed, but that was a lot harder to do when they only had access to prime mechs.

"Is this why you offered to help Ves and Gloriana with designing the first batch of expert mechs for the clan?"

"Correct." Master Willix smiled. "There are several reasons why I have agreed to lend my aid. Still, as a general principle, I cannot stand by and allow the Larkinson Clan to underutilize its exceptional talents and waste its promising expert pilots. Every expert pilot deserves the opportunity to grow stronger. Although it is unlikely for an expert pilot to go further, I hope that one day your clan will welcome an ace pilot among your ranks. Our association celebrates the emergence of every new ace pilot because one more addition comprehensively strengthens the top-level combat power of the human race."

Your clan will become renowned as long as it succeeds in pushing their expert pilots to greater heights."

Ketis grew eager after hearing this aspiration. "I hope to do my own part. My future contributions will definitely help them surpass their limits!"

This was what she was good at! She was confident that her unique experiences as a swordmaster would definitely provide her with an advantage with helping her fellow expert pilots grow stronger!

Chapter 2940: The Grand Conspiracy

From this day onwards, Ves would never look at high-ranking mech pilots in the same light ever again.

Ves had seen his fair share of horrifying and diabolical research projects. The infamous researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact knew no limits and broke ethical boundaries on a daily basis. Their fascination for biotechnology and spirituality caused them to perform a lot of awful experiments on innocent human beings.

Yet according to various sources like his mother, the Five Scrolls Compact no longer reigned in human space. The Big Two actively suppressed the powerful cult and made sure that its researchers could no longer kidnap a lot of humans and perform reckless experiments on them without their consent.

The times had changed!

The new values and principles advocated by the MTA and CFA when they came into power explicitly enshrined fundamental human rights.

The Age of Mechs was supposed to be a more restrained, enlightened era where humans treated each other with respect.

Even if wars broke out between different human states, their armed forces were supposed to fight against each other while restricting their attacks, methods and decisions to an acceptable range.

Honor was paramount!

Of every mech pilot who bravely fought on the battlefield, none were more nobler and honorable than the heroes who physically, mentally and spiritually exceeded their human limits!

Ves had long been accustomed to the galactic trend of viewing expert pilots as individuals who deserved great respect. Though he did not look up to them as much as he used to, he still held a lot of instinctive regard for demigods.

After all, as a mech designer, he was supposed to serve mech pilots, and expert pilots deserved even better treatment!

Therefore, it was initially hard for him to wrap his mind around how Supreme Sage treated expert pilots.

Of all of the research projects he encountered so far, Project Cain was the most outrageous to him. While he had certainly encountered more destructive experiments that had the potential to wipe out a lot more humans, the nature of this particular project hit especially hard to mech designers like Ves and Dr. Perris.

"This can't be... the Supreme Sage... he's one of the greatest doctors in the galactic rim... how could he do something like this? This is impossible! This experiment must be a fake! The LRA shouldn't be engaged in this kind of experiment at all! The MTA would have long shut this project down if it knew!"

Ves threw a pitiful glance at the biomech designer that he had decided to bring along. The evidence was clear and the research data was all real. The bodies in the vats truly belonged to expert pilots. He could confirm that by himself.

The conclusion was clear. The Supreme Sage unquestionably experimented on expert pilots.

Not only that, but this great researcher essentially farmed them as well! By extracting their brains and processing them into a special material, he sought to produce a key ingredient that was supposedly essential in the production of a type of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum!

The only question was whether this formula was the same as the one utilized by the Big Two.

At first glance, such a notion sounded too absurd to be true. The MTA honored and celebrated high-ranking mech pilots. It gave them special privileges and encouraged every human in the galaxy to view them as heroes.

These measures all suggested that the MTA highly prized their existence.

Up until now, Ves always thought that the Association sought to lavish a lot of attention expert pilots and ace pilots in order to raise the amount of god pilots in the galaxy.

As the most powerful mech pilots that humanity produced, the power and majesty of god pilots was unquestionable. Whether their reality-defying powers allowed them to defeat CFA battleships or not, each new god pilot granted the MTA and the mech industry another opportunity to explore the absolute limits of what mechs were capable of! The possibilities that these inhumanly powerful mech pilots enabled through their

existence alone were so great that the MTA was able to derive a lot of new innovations by studying the new phenomena!

Yet now, Ves began to see the MTA's obsession with nurturing high-ranking mech pilots from a different angle.

A more nefarious angle.

"Are they treating expert pilots and so on as raw materials?"

This was a shocking question that would doubtlessly cause everyone who heard it to beat him up! There was no conceivable way that the MTA was secretly farming expert pilots in order to enable more old geezer to live a few centuries longer, but this was exactly the scenario that Ves had to consider in light of Project Cain!

Had the MTA and CFA truly banded together and transformed the galaxy into a giant farm of high-ranking mech pilots?

Ves already knew that the Big Two were not above using unsavory means in order to fulfill their grand goals.

If the serum formula related to Project Cain shared an undeniable relation with the formulas utilized by the Big Two, then the true nature of the current order was much darker than Ves and many other humans suspected!

He quickly ran through what he knew about the current state of human civilization.

First, the Big Two were rebel off-shoots of the Five Scrolls Compact. Even if the Mech Trade Association and Common Fleet Alliance had forsworn the heinous methods of the once-dominant cult, the two trans-galactic organizations still shared a common root with the people who once nearly led the human race to ruin!

Second, the current makeup of human space in the galaxy gave a lot of space for mech pilots to advance in rank. There was no better way for them to break through by getting stimulated in desperate, life-threatening battles. The fractured and divided nature of human space meant that states frequently waged war against each other, thereby giving lots of mech pilots the opportunity to undergo apotheosis!

Third, although it looked incredibly macabre for someone to use the brains of high-ranking mech pilots as raw ingredients for a product that extended life, there was at least some logic behind this premise!

From his previous studies, Ves already discovered that one of the key factors that enabled life-prolonging serum to do the impossible and allow humans to live longer was because they contained an immense amount of universal life-attributed spiritual energy.

In fact, Ves suspected that this component alone was responsible for at least 90 percent of the desired effect of life-prolonging serum!

Without this essential spiritual component, the physical serum barely did anything to rejuvenate the aging bodies of regular humans!

Of course, Ves wasn't entirely sure whether this was truly effective and efficient. He already knew that while expert pilots developed a high degree of spirituality when they broke through, the root of their strength was their extraordinary will!

According to that bastard James Ylvaine, spirituality was just an amplifier and assisting factor to the strength of an expert pilot. The force of will that emerged was much more powerful than spiritual energy and willpower alone!

"In fact, this component actually becomes less important as expert pilots continue to grow stronger."

As these powerful pilots continued to advance, they gradually allowed their wills to overtake their spirits. Supposedly, the end point was for ace pilots to replace their entire spirituality with their powerful wills alone!

According to this logic, ace pilots and god pilots shouldn't yield as much value as expert pilots.

Yet that was assuming that the quality of spiritual energy in ace pilots did not substantially improve.

If quality was the crucial factor in determining the grade and efficacy of life-prolonging serum, then that might explain why the more valuable serums were so rare and difficult to acquire.

The supply of raw materials was too low! There weren't enough ace pilots to go around!

In fact, maybe even god pilots were not exempt from being regarded as another ingredient source.

If the formula for the serum actually made use of the extraordinary will of expert pilots as an essential component, then not even god pilots were exempt from being treated as cattle!

Of course, the Big Two couldn't act too blatantly in this regard. The value of high-ranking mech pilots was more than just their potential to enable the production of life-prolonging treatment serum. They were powerful warriors in their own right and were capable of performing many miracles by relying on their wills.

Yet in the bigger scheme of things, this excuse sounded a bit hollow. After all, with only a hundred or so known god pilots in all of human space, it was far too difficult to rely on them as an essential pillar of human strength.

It was much easier for the Common Fleet Alliance to produce tens of thousands of battleships than it was for the Mech Trade Association to nurture a single god pilot!

Therefore, a rational group of human rulers should never put too much stock in such a horrendously slow and inefficient way to raise the might of human civilization.

The benefits that god pilots provided was not commensurate with the immense trouble that the MTA took in order to maximize their rate of emergence.

It only truly made sense if god pilots had value beyond the obvious!

Perhaps... god pilots were essential ingredients for the production of the highest grade of life-prolonging treatment serum. In fact, Ves even guessed that their value might be beyond that! Perhaps their true value lay in the potential to contribute to a formula that was even more potent than the ones that the Big Two currently used.

For example, processing the brains of god pilots might be an essential step to allow certain individuals to live for a thousand years!

Ves did not underestimate the intense greed and desire for powerful old geezers to live forever. No amount of centuries of lifespan was enough for people who were long used to wielding great power!

Nothing else was valuable to them. Ideals meant nothing. Principles were just another tool for them to maintain control over their own subjects. They were willing to doom trillions of humans to their deaths and bring many states to ruin if that was what it took to live another century!

Yet... wasn't this theory a little too far-fetched?

Ves didn't immediately believe in this horrendous scenario. The MTA and CFA might not be entirely straight, but even if they broke their own rules, they always had a justifiable reason for their behavior. They shouldered the enormous responsibility for defending humanity and maintaining the prosperity of its civilization. It was unavoidable for them to make some sacrifices for the greater good.

The ultimate question now was whether the serum formula associated with Project Cain was reflective of the methods of the Big Two.

It could be that the Supreme Sage's immoral experiments were just part of an isolated attempt to develop a substitute formula.

Perhaps the proper key ingredient was too rare and difficult to acquire through other means. The Big Two would have definitely allowed more old people to grow older if serum was easier to produce.

This could even be the main reason why the Big Two was able to hold a monopoly on high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. Only they possessed the means to acquire this proper key ingredient!

If this was the reality, then biotech researchers outside of the Big Two were left in a difficult position. Their inferior standing prevented them from gaining access to the proper key ingredient. This left them with little choice but to look for substitute materials that could stand in for this unobtainable substance.

Just like how Master Katzenberg specialized in combining cheaper exotics in order to replicate the effects of a rarer and more expensive exotic, the Supreme Sage sought to do the same but only for a very rare spiritual material!

This possibility puts the Big Two in a better light. Only the Supreme Sage went in the wrong.

Yet was this theory too optimistic? Was he trying to make excuses for the MTA and CFA?

"Which theory is right?!"

Ves didn't have enough information to know for sure. He deeply wanted to know which one was true!

He turned his eyes to the terminal where Dr. Perris discovered the truth. The biomech designer looked broken as she tried and failed to reconcile her previous impression of the Supreme Sage as a model researcher with the image of a heartless scientist who did not hesitate to defile the bodies of noble expert pilots.

"This can't be... the Supreme Sage... why is he... are we living in a lie? How can he..."

"Get out of the way." Ves said as he shoved her suited form aside.

The only way for him to get to the bottom behind this situation was to look at the research files himself!