

## Mech 2941

### *Chapter 2941: Tainted Research*

Different scientists developed different approaches to notation and documentation.

Some logged an abundance of data without organizing them too much. Their documents were filled with tables, spreadsheets, graphs and other forms of raw data. Someone who was well-versed in a particular field could easily read and decipher this complex data, but those who lacked the required expertise might as well be looking at pure gibberish! The flood of data could drown anyone trying to make sense of the chaos.

Others tried to be as short and curt as possible. Time was money and scientists only had a limited amount of time to devote to a given research project. If they had busy schedules, they couldn't afford to waste much time on recording, processing and analyzing data. Interpreting the research of this kind of academic was very difficult in a different way. The reader not only had to possess the right expertise, but also had to be clever enough to infer and deduct information that the researcher hadn't bothered to spell out in concrete terms.

What Ves faced right now was the latter situation. As soon as he shoved Dr. Perris aside and browsed through several different logs and research reports, he noted that the Supreme Sage did not document his thoughts in a presentable manner.

Sure, he was meticulous enough to form complete, grammatically-correct sentences. As one of the best classically-trained scientists in the galactic rim, it was impossible for such a great figure to be sloppy.

The problem that Ves faced was that the Supreme Sage made so much use of jargon, code words and self-invented terminology that a layman in the life sciences understood almost nothing of the contents!

Even a biomech designer like Avalon Perris was only able to interpret some general statements. Anything that had a direct relation with the processing of expert pilot brains was far too complicated to understand for a researcher who did not excel in human augmentation or expert pilot physiology.

Ves wasn't completely helpless, though. He was an engineer by trade and was accustomed to interpreting academic articles. This foundation allowed him to interpret at least some common aspects of academic discourse.

It was still damned hard for him to understand more than 5 percent of what he was reading.

Still, after Dr. Perris had given him some vital clues, he was able to understand some key phrases.

[3439-CFR-A yield: 0.81 percent. Reduced efficiency after pre-injection of substance 11232343-KR; must obtain fresher source material.]

[Time pressure increased. Special Project 'V' stalled due to insufficient supply of 3439-CFR-A. Attempts to increase yield of Material 3439-CFR-A failed. Alternative: request more source material.]

[Material 3439-CFR-X: Failed product. Compatibility with Special Project 'V' reduced by 93 percent compared to 3439-CFR-X. Current framework of psionic power is more flawed than expected.]

Through interpreting brief sentences like these, Ves managed to gain a very broad impression on what the Supreme Sage managed to achieve with Project Cain. he also gained some insights on what he felt was lacking and the problems he wished to solve.

"It seems my guess is right." He murmured. "The production process of the key ingredient required to synthesize the valuable life-prolonging treatment serum is too inefficient. Much of the potential of the remains of an expert pilot is being wasted in the process. It can't be helped since the extraordinary qualities of demigods are too difficult to contain."

His own understanding of spirituality allowed him to view Project Cain from a different angle. He had his own explanation for what the Supreme Sage tried to do. The research documents he skimmed over pretty much confirmed his initial guesses.

What the Supreme Sage actually sought to harvest was the remnant spirituality and maybe also the willpower of expert pilots.

While it was impossible for conventional technology to actually capture and store this intangible energy without resorting to an obscure material like P-stones, there was actually a substitute.

The brain of a human anchored that person's spirituality. An expert pilot was no different. Though most of the will and spirituality dissipated from a corpse after death, at least some of it would always linger depending on several different variables, most notably how much time had passed between death and harvesting.

In effect, the brain of a person acted like a natural P-stone to that specific person's spirituality. While it was much less effective in acting as a container than a proper P-stone, the Supreme Sage may not have a choice.

Ves pitied the Supreme Sage. For all of his knowledge and accomplishments, his foundation in spirituality was incomparable to that of Ves. Since this great scientist was

not a spiritual engineer, he suffered the punishment of trying to study and harness a phenomena that fell outside of his area of expertise!

It would be the same story if Ves attempted to design a biomech! Even if designing conventional mechs shared a lot of common ground with designing biomechs, the requirements were ultimately very different. He did not believe he could succeed in designing a functioning biomech with his current level of knowledge!

"It turns out the Supreme Sage isn't omniscient after all." He muttered. "It also doesn't appear he's affiliated with a certain band of insane researchers."

He always felt there was a chance that the Supreme Sage was affiliated with the Five Scrolls Compact. The cult was infamous for pushing the boundaries of everything related to biology. It would have been strange not to ascertain a possible relationship between the two. When Dr. Perris initially explained what she had learned about Project Cain, this suspicion shot up in his mind!

Yet... unless the documentation was all fake, which Ves didn't think was the case, the Supreme Sage exhibited an obvious lack of understanding towards spirituality!

There were only a few scattered references towards psionic power. This key term happened to be the most preferred way the Mech Trade Association liked to talk about this phenomenon.

Together with all of the high-end lab machines and lab equipment that the Supreme Sage redeemed from the same organization, it was clear that the great researchers definitely maintained a working relationship with at least one of the Big Two!

The problem was that Ves was not able to infer how they were. This working relationship could simply amount to the Supreme Sage earning lots of merits by submitting valuable research results and using his earnings to procure powerful research equipment.

However, the Supreme Sage may have actually gotten in touch with the higher-ups of the MTA. Perhaps he had become a valued and important external collaborator who assisted in the research of very high-level projects.

While the MTA doubtlessly employed a lot of top-tier researchers, that didn't mean that outside help was redundant. The Supreme Sage possessed a very different background and perspective on the sciences. If the MTA's internal research teams were stuck on a difficult problem, it made sense to look for a second opinion and collaborate with an outsider in the hopes of achieving a breakthrough.

"Which possibility is the case here?" He muttered as he continued to look for certain key words that might provide the answer he was looking for. "Is the Supreme Sage merely a

convenient collaborator for the MTA or is he a core partner to the MTA's internal research teams?"

He failed to find an answer in the research documents stored in the local database.

Regardless of the answer, Ves felt the probability that the Supreme Sage was tied to the Five Scrolls Compact was minimal. Even if the great scientist turned out to be a ruthless, amoral researcher who did not hesitate to use expert pilots as raw materials, lack of ethics was hardly a quality that was exclusive to the cultists. Plenty of other scientists who were related to the Compacts engaged in horrendous studies!

"It's just a coincidence that the Supreme Sage is both a biotech researcher and greedy to find a way to make himself live longer." He dismissively muttered. "There are many other people and organizations in the galaxy who are trying to accomplish the same goal."

Now that he thought about it, he felt it was too improbable that the Supreme Sage had any relations with the Compact. Since the old man actively transacted and collaborated with the MTA to an extent, how could the mechers not do their due diligence?

Ves guessed that the Big Two constantly scrutinized every biotech researcher in order to determine they remain uninvolved with the cult! If there was any sign that the researcher in question was in cahoots with the Compact, then he had no doubt that the Big Two would take action to eliminate the violator in question!

"The Supreme Sage shouldn't be that stupid."

He quickly ended his examination. He wasn't able to derive any more useful information and already gained an overall impression of Project Cain's role in the pinnacle lab.

To the Supreme Sage, Project Cain was merely a means to an end. Its main purpose was to supply a spiritually-infused ingredient for Special Project 'V'.

Ves saw numerous references to this specific project. Different from regular projects, anything called 'Special Project' was probably one of the core focuses of the Supreme Sage!

"I also stumbled upon a mention of Special Project 'U' earlier. Is that another major research endeavor?"

He felt as if he was only seeing the tip of the iceberg when it came to the research being performed in this pinnacle lab. Perhaps he might be able to discover the rest of the details as he headed deeper into the facility.

"Our goal is clear." He spoke to his team. "The data here suggests that this pinnacle lab not only holds high-grade life-prolonging serum, but might actually be used to produce

it. While I'm not sure whether the serum produced by the Supreme Sage is an authentic product, even an imitation is of great value to me. Right now, we must find the research lab where Special Project 'V' is based in order to obtain any serum the Supreme Sage might have produced before his death. I hope he hasn't used it all up or something."

Before he left, he extended a data cord from his Unending Regalia and connected it to a slot in the terminal. He transferred all of the files in the local database to one of the secure data chips mounted in his combat armor.

"What... what are you doing, sir?" Dr. Perris recovered a bit from her shock.

"I am securing valuable research data."

"What? Why!? This is tainted research! The Supreme Sage has committed a great evil! If any of this data gets leaked, the consequences will be dire! We can't do this, sir! It is evil for us to take advantage of the defilement of these honorable expert pilots!"

Ves remained determined. Since the strange access pass he received from his living gem granted him total access to any local systems, there was no way he was going to miss this opportunity!

Tainted research or not, anything related to the study life-prolonging treatment serum was priceless in his eyes!

He briefly smiled back at her. "You're looking at this situation from the wrong angle. While I do not deny that the Supreme Sage has committed a great injustice, we should not let the sacrifices of these expert pilots go to waste. We should make sure that we do right by them, and the best way to do that is to find a good use of the research results that the Supreme Sage has obtained. In our hands, we can do a lot good with this data. It might even be enough to counteract the crimes committed here. Doesn't that sound great?"

"I... uhh... it still feels wrong..."

"Nonsense, Dr. Perris. The greater wrong is to throw away all of these invaluable files. That would only ensure that all of the bodies of the expert pilots that the Supreme Sage has defiled over the years have been violated in vain! If you asked these soldiers when they were alive, I'm sure they would be more than willing to allow us to make use of their sacrifices. We're not the ones who committed the crimes, after all. We are the only people who can make everything right!"

Though Dr. Perris didn't look fully convinced by his spiel, it was already good enough if she didn't hinder his attempts to take the data for himself!

This pinnacle lab contained a lot of good stuff. The serum was hardly the only treasure that Ves sought to obtain from this excursion!

"I can't waste this trip!"

#### *Chapter 2942: Special Projects*

Ever since the exploration team exited the research lab that housed Project Cain, Dr. Avalon Perris had become a lot more subdued.

She no longer maintained a curious and wondrous demeanor to all of the experiments taking place around her. She saw everything in a different light now that she had been confronted by one of the skeletons in the Supreme Sage's closet.

Ves felt that Dr. Perris was too naive. From what he had encountered after interacting with many different biotech experts, the knowledge they accumulated over the course of their careers always had a darker side to them. There was great potential in what they could do with their acquired expertise, but the most promising of them always demanded a sacrifice in some form or another.

The temptation to perform forbidden research grew stronger as the scientists grew older. The prospect of exhausting their mortality was so great that the normal values they held no longer mattered as much.

If this could happen to a Senior or Master of the Life Research Organization, then the Supreme Sage was definitely not immune to these considerations!

Ves had already entered the pinnacle lab with the expectation that he would stumble upon some shameful deeds. It was unfortunate that the citizens of the LRA were so inured by state propaganda that they never considered the possibility that their greatest leader possessed a darker side!

"Stop moping." He told her as they moved to another research lab. "The Supreme Sage is not a god, nor a saint. He's a human just like you. Everyone is flawed, and someone who has lived for several centuries like him has accumulated a lot of sins. That doesn't diminish any of his accomplishments. The contributions he made to the LRA and its citizens are all real."

Dr. Perris frowned behind her faceplate. "I can't get over it, sir. Project Cain is so opposite of what scientists should be engaging in. The LRA is very firm about that and has always cracked down on those who break the rules. If biotechnology can ever enter the mainstream, then it is vital that those who represented it put their best face forward. If the Supreme sage's deeds become known, then the LRA's cause will suffer an immense setback!"

Ves huffed. "You don't have to worry about that. The LRA is a massive state with lots of people who don't want to see that happen. Even if someone leaks the news on the galactic net, the story will gain no traction because it is too outrageous to be true. Not even providing hard evidence will change anything because any electric file can be

falsified. Besides, even if the LRA and the local biotech industry incur a lot of damage, it's none of our business. Don't forget your new identity. As a member of the Larkinson Clan, you should put our interests first. It makes no sense for us to sacrifice ourselves for the good of a foreign state."

That reminder caused her to fall silent. Obviously, she still identified herself with her former state. Though it was easy enough to change the citizenship in her record, it was a lot harder for her to erase all of the affection and emotional attachment she acquired during her upbringing!

From what Ves had experienced, he found that biomech designers and other biotech experts were especially bad when it came to adjusting to their new loyalties! The LRA clearly invested more attention in instilling loyalty into their heads.

Ves didn't waste too much time on Dr. Perris. Once she shut up, he gleefully entered another research lab and began to access the terminal.

"Let's see what the Supreme Sage was up to in this lab."

As long as any research project he encountered during his exploration was relevant to him, he had no qualms of copying all of data in order to make use of it all! While Ves did not possess the expertise to make use of it all, he could simply hand his bounty over to Dr. Ranya Wodin and his fast-growing collection of biotech experts.

"Damn, it doesn't look as if I can get something useful here." He spoke after he figured out what the Supreme Sage was studying in this lab.

As far as he could determine, the Supreme Sage sought to develop a means to relieve extreme pressure and density for heavy organic machines. This was an important requirement for Special Project 'U'.

The subsequent labs he visited were also related to Special Project 'U' in one form or another.

One research project sought to develop an enhanced version of high-density blood.

Another research project sought to develop an efficient way to lighten the mass of large organic products.

The most peculiar project he encountered in the last half hour was a way to accelerate regeneration by supplying lots of raw and dense nutrients regardless of the quality and composition.

When Dr. Perris encountered Project Ammit, she finally dropped her apprehension and revulsion towards the Supreme Sage's research activities.

Compared to Project Cain, Project Ammit was a lot more innocuous. The Supreme Sage saw no need to cross any lines in order to develop a specific means of to increase the self-repair function of a specific organic machine.

"This... this is fascinating!" Dr. Perris practically had stars in her eyes after studying the valuable research data. "The progress I have made in the study of high-speed regeneration is practically child's play compared to what the Supreme Sage has accumulated. One of the greatest problems that I'm grappling with is developing a viable means to fuel the regeneration process in the field. According to the results of Project Ammit, the Supreme Sage refined a very easy means to enable regeneration without being too picky about the input materials."

The nuances and implications of Project Ammit were great. Ves and Dr. Perris didn't have the time to delve too deeply in this project.

Dr. Perris already began to correlate what she learned with her existing knowledge. She began to see her chosen specialty and research direction from an expanded perspective. She realized that she had overlooked way too many variables that the Supreme Sage meticulously took into account.

Even her understanding of existing variables had changed after getting enlightened by the Supreme Sage's knowledge. Her nascent design philosophy experienced major shifts as she became flooded with brand-new insights.

Though the comprehensiveness and rigor of her newly-developed theoretical framework was doubtlessly better than her old framework, Ves wasn't sure that was a good development. Low-ranking mech designers weren't expected to get in touch with all of this high-level knowledge from the beginning.

In fact, knowing too much might become a hindrance to their quest to advance to Journeyman. Apprentices needed to develop an inquisitive mind and develop a strong willingness to plunge into the unknown and perform original research.

No Apprentice ever managed to advance to Journeyman by relying purely on acquired knowledge!

Still, Ves didn't to remind Dr. Perris. Every mech designer was different and it was not impossible for her to find another promising research direction in light of what she learned.

After exiting the seventh research lab, the exploration team reached the end of a floor.

"Hmmm." Ves paused for a moment. "The teleportation portal should have brought us to the lowest floor of the pinnacle lab. It's pretty much certain that this underground facility has multiple floors. According to standard practice, the less important projects are all

situated in the periphery while the most critical ones should be situated in the center of the middle floors. What do you think, Dr. Perris?"

The woman slowly nodded. "That is true, mostly. In order to guard against the risk of tunneling breaches, labs like these always concentrate the most vital activities at the center. This way, no matter in which direction people enter the research facility, they always have to pass through several different barriers before they can access the heart of the site."

All signs so far suggested that the Supreme Sage was not someone who broke convention for fun. As long as a rule made sense, the deceased leader had no reason to do anything differently.

"If this is the case, then the lab that houses Special Project 'V' ought to be in the center as well."

They knew their destination now, roughly. While they still hadn't obtained a map, Ves felt a lot more reassured that he wasn't totally dependent on the living gem for directions anymore.

Though the Supreme Comprehension gem constantly urged Ves to travel in specific directions, he always felt a bit afraid where he might end up if he blindly followed its instructions.

If a situation arose where Ves might be forced to get rid of the gem, then he wanted to make sure he would be able to navigate the pinnacle lab without any external guidance!

"Let's find a way up. There has to be a stairs or elevator here somewhere."

There were still plenty of rooms on this floor that were not devoted to research. Some rooms serviced a lot of maintenance beetles. Other rooms were geared towards maintaining a constant environment.

Ves even managed to stumble upon a luxurious bedroom of sorts. Though it never showed any signs of use, he found a large virtual library of science-related books and articles. Many of them touched upon high technology and were not accessible on the galactic net!

Naturally, Ves helped himself to all of these virtual books. Since he had already anticipated that he would be plundering a lot of data from the pinnacle lab, he had made sure to prepare a large number of data chips to hold all of the virtual loot.

Though he did not bring enough storage media to steal everything he encountered, he had more than enough to take away the essence of entire research projects!

Eventually, the exploration team failed to find a way to move to the next floor. Ves had to rely on the guidance of his mysterious gem once again. It led him to an apparently empty wall. Once the gem bumped against its surface, a secret entrance opened up that led to a short-range teleportation portal.

Ves frowned at the sight. "This is too extravagant!"

After a brief examination, Ves was able to ascertain that the range of the teleportation portal should not exceed 50 meters. Though stairs or elevators were much more cost-effective, using teleporters was much more secure. It was easier to isolate a floor or track those who passed through the portals.

Before Ves and Dr. Perris passed through the short-ranged teleporter, Nitaa ordered an honor guard to scout the other side first.

Ves calmly waited for the guard to scope out the other side and return to tell them that everything was fine.

Much to his surprise, the honor guard returned in a battle-ready posture! The armored soldier held his heavy assault rifle as if he was ready to pull the trigger!

"Sir, I have detected signs of active fighting taking place!"

"What?!"

The honor guard didn't stick around for long, so he didn't have much details to share. The only reason why he came to this conclusion was because his suit registered distant sounds of active weapon discharge.

As Ves briefly listened to the amplified audio recording, he distinctly recognized the sounds of kinetic impacts and exploding warheads.

All of them sounded fairly light. Ves already determined they came from small arms fire. So far, he did not hear any sounds that suggested that there were mechs fighting in the distance. The scale of mech-grade weapons was so greater that the sounds they made were inherently deeper and more guttural compared to their infantry-grade counterparts.

It was like the difference between the cry of a house cat and the roar of a lion!

Ves relaxed a bit. He did not have much solutions against mechs, but as long as the others in the pinnacle lab were wielding infantry weapons, he and his team could handle them if they turned out to be hostile.

Still, the presence of other humans in this restricted lab completely changed the nature of his exploration.

"Who are they? How did they enter this lab? Are their goals the same as mine?"

If the latter turned out to be the case, then Ves would have a very big problem in his hands!

#### *Chapter 2943: Busy Lab*

Ves' face turned ugly. The discovery that there were other people on the next floor of the pinnacle lab did not make his day any better.

Previously, he thought that the pinnacle lab had been shut down and restricted from entry now that the Supreme Sage had succumbed.

Though he heard that the conservative faction still managed to gain control of some facilities in order to 'restore' the braindead Supreme Sage, Ves didn't think this was the right lab.

If the conservatives were truly in control here, then they would have occupied all of the floors! They have placed numerous engineers and guards in the power generation room that Ves and his men had initially entered.

"What is going on here?"

From the research projects he had surveyed up until now, Ves was able to figure out that this pinnacle lab was devoted to the development of a specific formula of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. The Supreme Sage definitely had a lot of personal and professional reasons to invest his formidable research capabilities on Special Project 'V'.

His own life was at stake!

"Could this pinnacle lab be the same facility where the conservatives are treating his body?"

If his guess was true, then the importance of this facility was far greater than he realized. This may even be the reason why his Supreme Comprehension gem was so ardent in leading him deeper into the halls!

For a moment, Ves didn't know what to do. He did not seriously account for this situation. Even if the pinnacle labs weren't empty of people, the most he expected to encounter were researchers who acted as the Supreme sage's assistants.

No scientist could accomplish everything by himself. Since Ves was able to gain a huge increase in productivity after employing a lot of assistant mech designers, then the Supreme Sage should also be able to accelerate his research progress after hiring a bunch of scientists from his state!

Due to the extremely high importance of a pinnacle lab, the Supreme Sage shouldn't have granted access to a lot of other researchers. Their access permissions should also be limited. There was no reason for them to access any labs that didn't have any relations to their assigned projects.

They also shouldn't have access to the more controversial projects such as Project Cain.

"Maybe that is the reason why someone is fighting in this pinnacle lab."

Could the conservatives be trying to barge in areas they were not allowed to enter? Could they be locked in a struggle against the base defense of the pinnacle lab?

Though this theory sounded nice, Ves didn't think this was the case at the moment. The sound recording he just heard did not sound like turrets opening fire.

The more probable answer was that the soldiers on the other floor were fighting against another faction of humans!

Perhaps both the conservatives and the radicals gained access to the pinnacle lab! Ves was well aware that the lab had at least one main entrance and possibly several side entrances.

If those entrances purely consisted of teleportation portals,, then that could explain why he didn't hear any mechs. The portals were too small!

Even so, Ves did not feel eager to clash against other soldiers. His exploration team would not only be outnumbered, but would also develop a hostile relationship with the faction behind the troops.

Ves still hadn't forgotten that his main goal was to find a way to safely exit from this planet! It would be a lot more difficult for him to do so if he turned one of the powerful local factions into his enemy!

Right now, he didn't have enough information to know for sure. The only sure conclusion he could make was that these other people would likely pose a hindrance in his attempt to retrieve the vials of life-prolonging treatment serum from this lab!

"How will we proceed?" He asked.

No one was able to give him an answer. The situation was too uncertain and open-ended.

Nitaa might be an incredibly diligent bodyguard, but she was not equipped to deal with this kind of scenario. His honor guard were mainly defensive in nature and did not specialize in offensive operations.

Dr. Perris was even more useless. While she was able to provide him with some assistance in interpreting the Supreme sage's research activities, she was a complete civilian!

Ves wanted to palm his face. What he wouldn't give to have a dedicated commando or special forces unit. Though it was rare for Ves and the Larkinson to encounter a scenario where they needed to infiltrate a facility, it was definitely worthwhile to invest in a crack unit in order to know what to do when faced with the current circumstances!

Still, with none available to him, he had no choice but to rely on himself. Not even his exhausted cat could offer him any assistance at this time.

"Let's enter the other floor but remain discreet. We'll try to avoid other people as best as possible, but if we manage to bump into someone, let me do the talking. I don't want to come to blows with the other side."

"Sir, I don't believe you'll be able to avoid a confrontation." Nitaa spoke up. "We are intruders to this lab. Everyone else will regard us as an undesirable variable in the struggle to control this facility. Since we aren't backed by the conservatives or any of the other local factions, the other Lifers will not have any reasons to treat us seriously. This is especially the case if they suspect that you wish to take away the life-prolonging treatment serum that they might also be aiming for. With our current numbers, we don't have any leverage."

"...You're right, Nitaa." Ves sighed.

Ves wasn't sure how many soldiers the other factions were able to bring into the pinnacle lab, but it sounded as if there were way more than ten goons on each side!

Even if the other teleportation portals restricted the amount of people that could pass through at any time, their settings were probably more generous than an exit reserved for emergencies.

"We should return to the portal we came from and ask for backup." Nitaa suggested. "We stand a better chance of achieving our objective if we are able to increase our might. The other side will not be so ready to open fire on us if they see we stand a better chance at defeating their forces."

"Hmmm..."

Ves shook his head. "I don't think we can solve this problem by having the bigger fist. It will be problematic for us to return to the warehouse complex if our team surpasses ten people. Besides, we may not necessarily have to confront the other parties head-on. Have you forgotten about our expanded access?"

He tapped his access pass to emphasize his words.

This pass and other measures not only granted Ves complete access to restricted research data, but also allowed him to access at least some of the lab systems.

He held his living gem in front of his face and shook it a little.

"Hey, the way ahead may be blocked by other people. Do you have any way for us to circumvent them or anything?"

Under the living gem's prompting, the team cautiously passed through the teleportal portal and emerged onto the other floor.

As the Larkinsons tried their best to stay silent in the room they emerged in, Ves cautiously paid attention to passive sensor readings of his Odineye.

When he stepped outside the door to the transfer room, he clearly heard the sounds of fighting in the distance.

That was odd!

So far, from what Ves had seen of the earlier floor, the interior of the pinnacle lab was designed to isolate different lab rooms as much as possible. After all, it would be very bad if an experiment in one room contaminated the results of an experiment taking place in an adjacent room!

Even the corridors were sound-isolated. There were several gates and checkpoints in between that made sure that every disturbance was contained as much as possible.

Yet Ves could already see why he was able to hear lots of weapon discharges in the distance.

The gate on the other side of the corridor no longer existed. Someone had destroyed the extremely resilient bone metal material that blocked the way forward!

Ves studied the damage done to the remains of the gate.

"The gate hadn't been blasted apart by explosives. Instead, someone patiently used a plasma cutter to forcibly cut through the thick material over time. Considering the density and damage resistance of this bone metal material, a typical hand-portable plasma cutter would have to waste at least an hour to cut away the entire barrier!"

This was a lot of effort! Ves felt that it had been a long time ago since someone cut this specific opening. This discovery had a lot of implications and further confirmed his suspicion that the conservatives had long gained access to the pinnacle lab but did not have permission to go everywhere.

The exploration team cautiously advanced forward. They saw signs of other damage. Most notably, Ves observed a lot of torn and damaged holes in the ceiling.

"Those must be the turrets that used to guard this corridor." Nitaa spoke.

Ves looked a bit uncertain at the sight. "The damage here is too light. There are definitely other defenses in this space. I don't see any signs that someone has actively destroyed those other systems."

"The people responsible for this may have gained partial access to the base defenses." Nitaa guessed.

"That doesn't make much sense. There is no need to destroy the turrets by force if they can subvert control over the turrets."

"Maybe their control systems are too different. Maybe they were able to deactivate the other defenses through other means that aren't evident on the surface."

That sounded more plausible, but Ves didn't feel too sure about this explanation.

He lacked too much information.

"Listen to the sounds of fighting." Nitaa spoke again. "It is abating to an extent."

Now that Ves paid attention to it, the intensity of combat in the distance had reached a low point all of a sudden.

The transition was a bit abrupt. Ves thought that the fighting would have persisted for some time, but the sudden drop-off suggested that one side or both sides retreated.

The strange part about this was that it happened too cleanly. This was not normal. At the very least, the winning side should have tried harder to run down the retreating soldiers.

He held out his living gem again. "Hey, what is going on here, exactly?"

His gem couldn't talk. While Ves was able to talk to all manner of spiritual entities, Lucky's gems had the annoying quality of isolating everything locked within from outside perception.

In the end, Ves just decided to trust the living gem's directions.

"Lead me to a security center. I'm sure there is something like that on this floor. I won't go anywhere else until I am able to gain a better understanding of the situation, and accessing the security systems is a necessity!"

The gem didn't seem to protest. Ves and the rest of his team cautiously moved forward before taking a left turn. The Larkinsons all felt relieved that they weren't moving closer towards the direction where all of the sounds of fighting originated.

What depressed Ves a bit was that the subsequent corridor sections had all been breached by force. The gates had been cut away with high-powered plasma cutters while the turrets had all been destroyed with overwhelming force.

After five minutes of advancing, they finally reached a large room which had also been breached.

The burned and ruined remains of a lot of organic computer systems greeted the exploration party.

"Damn."

Everything had been wrecked! Whoever was responsible for wrecking the security room knew what they were doing. Absolutely nothing was left intact.

Ves performed a few scans at the ruined remains. "Hmmm, I'm sure now. This destruction happened fairly recently. It should be at least some weeks ago."

This likely meant that the outbreak of violence happened a short time after the Supreme Revolution broke out!

*Chapter 2944: Expert Mech Duelist*

"How are you doing, sister?" Brutus Wodin asked as he entered her shared stateroom aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

Her expression said it all. The continued absence of her husband did not put Gloriana in a good mood. While she knew what she was getting into after marrying a known daredevil, she never expected that the reality would be so bad!

"Miaooooow." Clixie cutely rolled on her lap and attempted to distract Gloriana.

The young wife sighed and ran her hand across Clixie's belly. "It's not easy being in my position. The antics of Ves aside, there are a lot of expectations on me. Our parents, our dynasty and even the Hexadric Hegemony think we can make miracles."

"You did set a pattern for them, sister. The Blessed Squire, the Valkyrie Redeemer and now the latest batch of Hexer mechs you designed with Ves is making the rounds. From what I've heard, the soldiers of our state are finding creative uses for your Cherub, Devious and Bright Boy designs."

Her brother strode forward and sat by her side. His protective force of will intimately embraced her sister's body, causing her to release some of her stress.

He looked around and found that Gloriana had already made the main living room compartment her home. Though she was forced to leave enough room for personalization for Ves, the side claimed by Gloriana already featured a lot of hexagons, projected images of home and other familiar touches.

Though she married into the Larkinson Clan, she was still a Hexer at heart.

Thinking about her recently finished mech designs put a smile on her face. She was ultimately proud of what Ves and her had been able to do when faced with limited design budgets. None of the last three Hexer mech designs were as powerful as the Valkyrie Redeemer, yet the utility they provided was undeniable.

The Cherub model revolutionized battlefield communications for the Hexers. Jamming hardly took effect and the only known method of interrupting its communication channels was for enemy expert mechs to come close.

The Devious model was not as eye-catching or revolutionary as other mechs of its type. Yet its price-performance ratio was quite high. Despite being made with cheaper materials and components, its effective stealth performance resembled that of a mech that was at least 50 percent more expensive. Its notable ability to circumvent the unexplainable intuition of nearby humans made it very suitable to invade Fridayman forward operating bases in the field!

As for the Bright Boy...

"The new Bright Boys are doing their jobs." Brutus commented. "They're stalling the Fridayman advance. That's better than anything our side has been able to manage ever since our enemy started to contract foreign expert pilots."

"It's not enough." Gloriana regretfully sighed.

The Bright Boy's ability to blind and debilitate expert pilots directly through their expert mechs was revolutionary and invaluable. The Hexers tested this effect a multitude of times and learned that it was very effective in many cases.

Yet it was not a panacea to the fundamental problem of lacking enough expert mechs. The Bright Boys were able to discomfit expert mechs, but destroying them was out of the question. Only an expert mech could truly defeat another expert mech!

It took hundreds of Bright Boys to effectively debilitate an expert mech, but interfering with their perception did not mean they were paralyzed. The expert pilots of the Coalition already learnt to cope with the new mechs.

"There is only so much that a mech designer can do to change the strategic outlook of the war." He tried to reassure her as he pulled her into a hug. "Technology is but one of many factors that can change the balance. The Friday Coalition may lack our glows, but we can't deny its edge on diplomacy. Their sweet talkers have not only managed to persuade third-rate states to lend their best mech pilots to them, but they have also forged more trade deals with the states beyond the Komodo Star Sector. The foreigners across the border don't seem to like the Hexadric Hegemony all that much."

In the past, that was an inconceivable notion to Gloriana. How could people possibly reject the superiority of women and the righteousness of the Hexer cause?

It was only after she started to travel around with the Larkinsons that she was forced to acknowledge that the rest of the galaxy did not welcome the proper order!

"We've neglected the value of making friends in the region." She regretfully said. "The way the Larkinson Clan is able to meet new people and convince them to join or befriend them has made me feel that the Hegemony back home is too insular. We thought we were strong enough to defeat the Friday Coalition and take over the Komodo Star Sector, and we were right. Yet we never fully took into account that our enemies didn't intend on playing fair. Instead of relying on their own strength, they cheated and sought outside help."

Now, all of the foreign aid pouring into the Friday Coalition in the form of manpower, resources and funding caused its various partners to enjoy a comprehensive rise in strength!

Every Hexer who was aware of the reality of the situation felt frustrated by this development. The worst part about it was that the Hexers effectively had no solutions.

Their diplomats weren't welcomed in foreign courts.

Interdicting trade was not feasible due to the enormous amount of territory the hunting fleets needed to cover.

Attacking the states that directly or indirectly supported the Friday Coalition was counterproductive.

The fact of the matter was that the Hex Army no longer possessed the numbers to pursue too many objectives! They had to muster all of their battered mech armies to hold the line and prevent the Fridaymen from breaking into the heartland of the Hexadric Hegemony!

Thinking about the likely incursion of Fridaymen into Hexer space caused Gloriana to feel depressed.

To be honest, Fridaymen already crossed the border at some places. They just needed to topple a major fortified star system in order to effectively break open the Hexer defensive line.

Brutus knew what she was worried about. He placed his hand on top of her own limb. "Our dynasty will survive no matter what happens. The Scimitar System is situated on the other side of the Hegemony. Matriarch Xiaphna has already ordered our dynasty to prepare for the worst. We have already evacuated some of our assets and people, and we will continue to prepare more evacuation fleets as time goes on. The only problem we're facing is that it has become incredibly difficult to obtain more ships, but as long as we focus on taking people, we can squeeze a lot of them on a simple converted cargo hauler."

Gloriana had already witnessed this kind of evacuation before. The Sand War had led to a lot of deaths. Though the Fridaymen wouldn't be as cruel as the sandmen, there was no doubt that the Hexers under their rule would suffer under the yoke of equality and respect for men!

"Will the Glory Seekers receive a lot of reinforcements in the near future?" She asked.

Brutus nodded. "Yes. Some of our fleets are catching up to us even now. Our mother and our close relatives won't be joining us, though. They have different plans and they don't want to supplant your role in the expeditionary fleet. We don't want to put all of our eggs in a single basket."

"Where will the rest of our dynasty go if not the Red Ocean?"

"I'm not privy to that information. Our heads are keeping that close to their chests. It might not matter if we are able to beat back the Fridaymen offensive. Unless our state is truly falling, our dynasty is still determined to fight for what is right."

War was never certain. At the start of the outbreak of hostilities, the Fridaymen were on the backfoot. It took a lot of effort for them to gain the upper hand. Perhaps the Hexers might be able to replicate this feat!

"Enough about the war. I didn't invite you over to talk about matters we can't control. Let's continue our planning session for your upcoming expert mech."

Gloriana activated a projection that displayed a vague but definable sketch.

"According to your previous input, I drafted an expert mech that is partially based on the Star Dancer. I made sure to prioritize its mobility and offensive power. The only major shortcoming is that I don't have much leeway to fortify its armor. I can spare a little room for fortifying portions of its torso and cockpit against penetrating damage."

It didn't matter to her if the limbs were flimsier and easier to damage than usual. She could easily fix this kind of battle damage. What she couldn't fix was Brutus dying because a powerful expert mech managed to punch through the cockpit!

Venerable Brutus carefully studied the sketch. He felt as if her sister poured a lot of love into its design. Its similarities to his former expert mech were quite welcome in his eyes.

"I want an expert mech that excels in dueling against other expert mechs." He decisively spoke. "With the increasing strength of the Larkinson Clan and its allies, ordinary mechs don't pose as much of a threat to us anymore. It's the expert mechs that we need to be worried about. The Battle of Reckoning has taught us all a painful lesson on what it takes to stop hostile expert mechs."

Gloriana clearly remembered that Brutus almost lost his life during the Battle of Reckoning. If not for getting saved by Venerable Davia Stark at the last moment, she might have lived a life where she would never be able to enjoy her brother's company ever again!

After this near-disaster, Gloriana became determined to design a better replacement for her brother's Star Dancer! Though the expert mech had served him well, its specs were rather average. As a boy, Brutus did not receive as much investment as a female expert pilot.

Gloriana didn't care about that. He was her brother. She wanted to make sure he would be able to win the battles he struggled to overcome in the past! This was why she made sure to splurge lavishly in order to raise the estimated parameters of his new expert mech as much as possible!

As she continued to explain her plan, Brutus looked increasingly more impressed.

"Since you insist on fighting expert mechs over regular mechs, I made sure to equip your expert mech with a rifle and accompanying support systems that excel at high penetration. Every expert mech is very tough, so lighter weapons won't do. I'm rather thankful that the Hex Army granted me permission to borrow their expert mech-grade components. I've already picked out a suitable model for your rifle, though we will doubtlessly tweak its design to suit your personal tastes."

Brutus studied the rifle model. "I don't understand everything on its spec sheet, but I can already see that its firing rate is low and its demand for ammunition and energy is quite severe."

"It's worth it. The punch it can pack is enormous. While it is not efficient to waste its firepower on weaker mechs, it can immediately inflict considerable damage on expert mechs like the Charlemagne. As long as you can land a hit, then all but the most heavily-armored expert mechs will suffer!"

That sounded great for Brutus. While the advanced rifle paired with his upcoming expert mech was not comparable to an artillery cannon, its damage potential was still very high despite its manageable size and mass.

"What about the mobility of my mech? I don't want to get weighed down too much."

"It will be at least as good as the old Star Dancer, but I'm not aiming for that." She said with a determined expression on her face. "I want to improve the mobility of your expert mech by at least 20 percent compared to your old one. Since you want to excel at dogfighting, I made sure to focus on improving the evasive capabilities of your new machine. It will become a lot harder for enemies to land a hit!"

All of that sounded good to Brutus, but he did not miss the fact that he would have to pay for these improvements. The lack of protection along with the limited capacity for ammunition and energy meant that Brutus would not fare well in a drawn-out battle against lots of weaker mechs!

Fortunately, this was a price worth paying for him. He enjoyed dueling other expert mechs and felt this was the best contribution he could make as part of the expeditionary fleet.

He suddenly recalled something else. "What about the special nature of my new expert mech?"

"Ah, you're referring to the proto-gods." Gloriana grinned. "Well, have no fear. While Ves isn't here right now, I've worked alongside him enough times to know what to expect from him. Right now, I plan to incorporate at least two different proto-gods into your expert mech. It goes without saying that the Superior Mother will bless your expert mech. However, I've been thinking about adding another one to the mix..."

#### *Chapter 2945: Contributing Gem*

While Gloriana happily discussed with Venerable Brutus about his upcoming expert mechs, Ves faced a very different problem.

After discovering that invaders had wrecked the security room of the floor he was on, he had the illusion that the situation was spinning out of control.

He was still far from reaching the core lab section that housed Special Project 'V', but the way forward was essentially barred by at least one group of armored soldiers!

Due to the unusual layout of the pinnacle lab, there was no way to circle around them. In fact, Ves not only had to worry about bumping into the soldiers who were previously engaged in fighting, he also had to guard against encountering other people stationed elsewhere in the lab!

Ves briefly gathered his team in order to discuss their current situation. He projected a simple cube and pointed at the bottom.

"The layout of this facility looks like this I think. When we initially entered the teleportation portal, we emerged at the bottom. After walking across the lab, we managed to reach another portal that took us to the next floor."

He tapped the projection, causing it to divide into several different horizontal layers.

"I'm not really sure how many floors we are dealing with here, but from my own guesses, we're probably dealing with at least five floors. Now that we have entered the fourth floor, we have discovered the presence of other people. These unknowns have likely entered the pinnacle lab from the main entrance that is very likely situated at the top."

He pointed at the top floor, which featured at least two different gates.

"While we haven't confirmed the identities of the unknowns at the moment, my guess is that we are dealing with the soldiers dispatched from the opposing sides of the civil war that has engulfed the LRA. Much of the fighting taking place across Prosperous Hill VI can be explained if the factions were fighting over this pinnacle lab. The leaders of the conservative faction and the opposition faction are all fighting over the high-grade life-prolonging serum that the Supreme Sage must have managed to produce!"

"In other words, their goal is the same as yours." Nitaa remarked with a grim tone.

Ves sighed. "That's the most likely possibility here. From the research documents I managed to skim over, Special Project 'V' has reached a fairly advanced stage. I can infer that the Supreme Sage has already succeeded in producing a form of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. The only problem is that the yield is too low. He set up Project Cain in order to find a way to increase the conversion rate of the key ingredient required to make the serum."

This was quite an impressive accomplishment, especially when the Supreme Sage probably wasn't a spiritual engineer! He was able to overcome many difficulties and solve problems that would have stumped any other biotech researcher. Ves had gained a much greater appreciation of the Supreme Sage's incredibly deep knowledge and problem-solving capabilities.

He no longer wondered why many citizens of the Life Research Association worshipped this great researcher.

In any case, the value of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum was so great that Ves saw no possibility of cooperation with any of the parties that had managed to enter the pinnacle lab.

He didn't foresee encountering anyone who would be willing to cooperate with his team. He had to assume that everyone else was a competitor.

Fortunately, the other people in the facility had yet to discover the presence of his exploration team. This was his greatest advantage and one that he did not intend to let go. After all, he didn't set out to take over the lab or monopolize all of the research. He just wanted to get in, get his stuff, and get out as soon as possible!

The fact that his modest objective happened to be the most valuable treasure in the entire lab was very troublesome though.

Even if Ves managed to circumvent the other parties taking part in the treasure hunt and retrieve his prize, as long as he leaked his identity, it didn't matter whether he would be able to return to his airfleet!

It was easy enough for the established factions to track Ves down after he left the pinnacle lab. Ves could already envision the arrival of thousands of mechs! Against the overwhelming might of the established factions on the planet, there was no way for him to cling onto the serum he obtained after taking lots of risks.

He might as well not take the risk of advancing any further if that was the most likely outcome of trying to compete over the life-prolonging serum!

After discussing their options, the team did not manage to find a good way to proceed without revealing their identities or avoiding a violent confrontation against the people who invaded the lab weeks before. The original invaders enjoyed too much of a head start for Ves to match their efforts.

"Why don't we simply turn back?" Dr. Perris suggested. "We are no match against the ruling powers of the LRA. The serum that you are eying is tainted with the blood of expert pilots. I don't think it is right for us to make use of it. Besides, you're still young, patriarch. You'll have to wait centuries before you can actually make use of the serum. Why not wait for another opportunity?"

"There are more uses to the serum than extending our lives." Ves replied. "Also, just because the Supreme Sage made use of expert pilot brains to make his serum doesn't mean we should avoid it. Think of what the other Lifer researchers will do if they gain access to all of this tainted research. If the conservatives or opposition gain access to everything associated with Project Cain and Special Project 'V', do you think that they will do what is right or do what is best for themselves?"

Avalon Perris couldn't help but lower her head when faced with this question. "They may choose to make use of the existing serum, but I don't believe they will go as far as defiling the remains of expert pilots."

"Are you sure about that?" Ves snorted and crossed his arms. "Previously, you thought that the Supreme Sage would never descend to this level. You were wrong. If even the greatest biotech researcher has given in to temptation, how will his lessers fare any better? I bet that one of the greatest reasons why Master Leehay Brixton is so enthusiastic about starting the Supreme Revolution is because he found out about this pinnacle lab and became pissed when the conservatives refused to give him a share!"

He had never been fully convinced that this civil war was all about changing the direction of the Life Research Association. While there were plenty of rebels who believed in the cause, the leaders of the opposition factions shouldn't have been swayed by high-sounding ideals alone.

When Master Brixton initially revealed the true state of the Supreme Sage after the conclusion of the design duel, he deliberately referenced ongoing attempts by the conservatives to 'revive' the Supreme Sage.

Was this what the conservatives attempted to do in this lab? Was his body being stored somewhere in this lab?

Ves eyed the living gem in his possession. If the Supreme Sage's body was stored in another part of the lab, then that explained why his newest gem was so eager about leading him on. Perhaps the spiritual remnant of the Supreme Sage sought to reunite with its origin!

He temporarily ignored everyone else and pulled out his gem. "I think it's time you came clean with us. Are you trying to get back to life?"

The gem froze for a few seconds before trying to bop up and down. This was its equivalent of a nod.

"Thank you for being honest. I thought as much. Unfortunately, I can't oblige your wish. We are under no obligation to restore you to life. It's none of our business, you see."

The gem obviously didn't like to hear that. It violently shook his grasp. It was too bad that its strength was way too weak to escape his fingers.

Ves huffed at the response. "For a remnant of a highly-accomplished scientist, you sure are stupid. Do you really think we can proceed forward in this kind of situation? The risks are too great and I don't want to give those blasted factions any reasons to hunt us all down. They are still in control over the planet and star system. There is no way I can escape their pursuit if they find out about us. I would rather follow the suggestion made by Dr. Perris and turn back. I'm already happy with the research data that we have managed to collect up until now. There is no reason to let our greed lead us to our doom."

He was not lying. The research data of Project Cain was a pleasant surprise to him. It was incredibly valuable for him to learn of a crucial aspect in the production of high-grade life-prolonging serum.

While he would not be able to synthesize the serum in its entirety without obtaining the corresponding research files related to Special Project 'V', he already obtained a lot of clues.

It was not impossible for Dr. Ranya and the Larkinson Biotech Institute to find other useful applications by combining the theory and results of Project Cain with his own theories on spirituality!

Yet even as he started to turn around, he kept paying close attention to the actions of his gem. Once he started to take a few steps towards the exit, the Supreme Comprehension gem began to shake as if it had something urgent to say!

Ves inwardly smiled. His negotiation ploy succeeded. He hadn't actually given up on Special Project 'V' and the serum. He was just tired of forging on ahead alone while his stupid gem sat back like a boss who just delegated all of the hard work to his minions.

After a bit of shaking, the gem tried to lead him out of the ruined security room. Ves cautiously followed its directions, making sure that he didn't get too close to the site where the unknown soldiers recently fought.

They eventually entered a lab room that was larger than the ones he entered before.

"What is this?!"

Ves, Dr. Perris and his honor guard all looked vigilantly at the multitude of large cylindrical tanks spread across the compartment. They counted fifty of these large and prominent objects!

Compared to the vats that Ves encountered before, the tanks in this new space were larger and more massive. They also weren't transparent, so none of the Larkinsons could see what was inside.

"What kind of exobeasts are stored in these tanks?" Perris wondered.

"Well, whatever they are, the creatures inside are probably as big as an elephant."

Despite the large quantity of ominous-looking preservation tanks, they didn't spot any immediate threats. This was just one of many abandoned research labs.

"Let's see what this place is all about."

Ves and Dr. Perris immediately approached a terminal and used their access pass to log into the local database.

They soon discovered why this lab might be useful to them. They looked shocked as they figured out how they could make use of the experimental subjects to accomplish a breakthrough!

Ves turned to his gem. "Can you really revive them and unleash them onto the opposition? What if they turn against us first?"

The gem shook and pointed at his access pass. Evidently, the passes provided to the Larkinsons would help prevent this possibility.

Though Ves had plenty of doubts, he felt this was a good way to allow him to forge ahead.

"Let's do this, then."

With the combined efforts of Ves, his gem and Dr. Perris, they began to manipulate some of the controls. They activated and tweaked all kinds of settings before pressing a prominent red button.

A brief alarm rang across the hall as the tanks started to shake and the liquids inside started to boil.

Soon enough, the tanks started to slide open. The floor started to shake as fifty large humanoid organic machines emerged from the containers. Their solitary eyes glowed red as they automatically sought each other out and gathered into a mob.

Then, they roared in unison, causing the entire room to get blasted by their monstrously thunderous cries!

If the Larkinsons weren't wearing helmets that could automatically dampen excessive noise, they might have lost their hearing!

"So this is Project Cyclops!" Ves spoke.

As soon as these biological monstrosities rallied together, they completely ignored the presence of the Larkinsons and simultaneously surged towards the exit.

They were storming right in the direction where the soldiers had previously fought!

*Chapter 2946: Restrained Soldiers*

Sergeant Gabriel Hipper checked and cleaned his rifle as he sat on the deck of the lab room claimed by his unit.

No one was in a good mood right now. They had lost numerous good brothers and sisters after they fought against their foes. He stared into a wall and imagined that his gaze could pierce right through every obstacle until he was able to observe his opponents.

Just like him, his enemies must be taking a breather as well. The two sides had sparred against each other across multiple floors. Somehow, the balance never tilted, but the bodies kept piling up. If not for the strange conditions of the pinnacle lab, the struggle between the two sides should have produced a decisive outcome by now. Yet because everyone inside was forced to follow the rules left behind by the Supreme Sage, their battle continued to be strung out across several weeks.

"When will this hell ever end?" Corporal Peter Cardin despairingly asked.

Sergeant Hipper snorted. "It's only over until we kill the entire rebel force and take control of their teleportation portal. Our mission won't end until that happens, so don't waste your time moping around."

To be honest, Hipper also felt worn down by the frequent intervals of fighting. He would much rather fight a single all-out battle than prolong his torture by abiding by the restrictions set by the pinnacle lab.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Back before the Supreme Revolution broke out, Sergeant Hipper and Corporal Cardin were just guards assigned by the dominant conservative faction to patrol the pinnacle lab.

Ever since the Supreme Sage died, the remaining researchers largely lost access to all of the lab rooms.

Fortunately, they weren't locked out entirely. As long as they retained at least some permissions, it was always possible to expand their rights and gain access to the core research that the Supreme Sage always withheld from everyone else.

In the past one-and-a-half years, the researchers along with numerous specialists from the conservative faction sought to take over the systems of the pinnacle lab step by step. Their biohackers had made steady progress in circumventing the security systems that prevented the conservatives from retrieving the valuable research data from the isolated local databases.

Yet just as they started to work on trying to access the core research rooms where the Supreme Sage stashed his most prized projects, the opposition got wind of what was happening!

Sergeant Hipper blamed one of the biohackers for the leak. Because the pinnacle lab boasted the best security systems in the LRA, it took exceptional skill to undermine their functioning.

After many failed attempts, the conservatives learned that many of their own personnel were completely outmatched. They had no choice but to hire the services of the best biohackers of the LRA!

Even though the conservative faction did its best to ensure the biohackers they employed did not leak any information, how was it possible for anyone to stop biohackers from doing what they did best?

It didn't matter if there was any proof. Hipper simply knew for certain that one of those nerds informed the opposition faction of the goodies the conservatives were salvaging from this facility!

From the moment the Supreme Revolution broke out, another teleportation portal quickly came online. The opposition faction managed to gain access to another entrance!

When hundreds of heavily-armed infantry soldiers poured into the top floor of the pinnacle lab, the two sides immediately competed to gain more spoils from the pinnacle lab!

They destroyed a lot of good research labs over the course of their uninhibited destruction.

The latecomers were far too behind when it came to hacking their way deeper into the pinnacle lab. If they attempted to follow the same route as the conservatives, then they would be more than a year behind their opponents!

This was why the rebels who intruded into the lab chose to bull their way through!

They boldly breached every gate and destroyed every active security system by force. In fact, the rebels had a much easier time in forcing their way deeper because the biohackers in the service of the conservatives had already deactivated a lot of security systems months ago!

Due to the methods they used to deactivate the security systems, it was very hard to bring them back online. This gave the opposition faction a great opportunity to rely on unrelenting destruction to exceed the progress of the conservatives!

Naturally, the powers that be who monopolized the lab for a long time weren't happy with what the rebels were doing. The conservatives intensified their attempts to push back the rebel forces.

The fighting rapidly escalated until the combatants somehow triggered an emergency contingency command.

Hipper remembered the day the lab had enough. Alarms rang throughout the facility and the gravity around them rose by three times. No one expected the gravity to grow so heavy all of a sudden, so the fighting immediately stalled.

Ever since then, a new set of rules came into force.

First, the teleportation portals forcibly limited the amount of people that could enter at any time. The portals controlled by both the conservative faction and the opposition factions only allowed ten soldiers to enter the lab at a time.

Second, weapons that were heavy enough to threaten the integrity of a lab room were no longer permitted to be used. The soldiers had to discard a lot of cannons and powerful explosives.

Third, the soldiers were only allowed to fight 20 minutes per 12 hours. This sounded quite generous at first, but the two sides later found out that this was a difficult restriction.

It was hard to defeat a large and entrenched force of enemy soldiers when neither side could make use of heavy weapons!

Small arms wasn't enough to wipe out a large force of well-armored soldiers within the given time limit!

In fact, the losses during every round of fighting mostly hovered between five to twenty soldiers at a time.

While this meant that both sides were slowly losing soldiers even accounting for the reinforcements pouring in every day, both sides still had hundreds of soldiers left!

It would take a long time before one side gained the upper hand.

Still, strictly speaking, the conservatives and the rebels didn't have to abide by these rules.

It was just that the consequences were far too dire!

The soldiers might not care a lot, but their superiors were different!

This was because the pinnacle lab issued a very stern warning. If the two sides didn't abide by the rules and limited the amount of destruction they inflicted on the facility, then the core research rooms would all self-destruct, preventing anyone from salvaging any data or valuable products from the most important research projects!

Neither side wanted to trigger this final contingency!

Hence, this was the reason why Sergeant Hipper and the rest of his comrades were resting instead of continuing the fight.

Just as Corporal Cardin was about to open his mouth, an alarm suddenly rang throughout the occupied research room.

"To arms! Unknown enemies are incoming! They're very big and they're approaching very rapidly in our direction! Suit up and man the defenses!"

The soldiers knew better than to question this sudden command. They all stood up and wore their suits of combat armor. They picked up their weapons just in time for the approaching enemies to appear into view.

"What the hell are those?!"

"It's a cyclops!"

"Damn! It's barging straight through our defenses!"

The lone cyclops roared as it smacked its enormous, gorilla-like arms across the defensive lines. Infantry soldiers on guard screamed as they were punched away. The force of the impacts were so strong that their combat armor practically caved in from the force!

"Shoot this cyclops!"

A lot of soldiers opened fire against this monster. Much to their dismay, the damage they inflicted on the tall and heavy brute was largely shallow. Even the big eye enjoyed a lot of protection!

"There's more!"

A dozen more cyclopes followed after the initial one. Once they barged into the research room, they completely went mad and tore into the tiny soldiers that were attempting to shoot them down!

"We need backup!"

"Why the hell is the lab allowing these monsters to fight? This isn't fair!"

"Screw the rules! Get the rocket launchers! I don't want to lose my life against these big bastards!"

As Sergeant Hipper ran to the nearby armory and attempted to pull out an explosive mine, a battle-scarred cyclops had reached his position and grasped his armored body with its meaty hand.

"Let go!"

The soldier's feeble attempt to escape barely registered to the humanoid monster. After giving its victim a toothy grin, the cyclops mercilessly brought the captive forward and bit into its torso!

The cyclops' hard teeth crunched straight through the bone armor and bit Sergeant Hipper's body in half!

The monsters turned out to be maneaters!

Elsewhere, Ves and Dr. Perris both reflected on what they just unleashed.

Project Cyclops was an attempt by the Supreme Sage to create a monstrous army that would take over some security duties from his human personnel.

Perhaps the great researcher increasingly lost more trust in his subordinates. Maybe he already predicted that some of the Lifers would pursue selfish objectives and make a mess out of his pinnacle lab once he wasn't around to restrain his successors.

The Cyclopes he came up with was a derivative of Special Project 'U'. Smaller and more compact than a typical biomech, these humanoid monstrosities were the equivalent of mechanical battle bots.

They were anything but disposable, though. Though their smaller size limited their combat power, much of their design principles were identical to that of high-quality biomechs!

This meant that they were incredibly powerful in indoor situations where conventional biomechs couldn't fit or possessed too much destructive potential.

After all, mechs and biomechs were infamous for inflicting a lot of collateral damage. While that might not matter that much if they rampaged in a typical city district, it was another story entirely if they inadvertently breached a lab room and ruined a critical experimental procedure!

That didn't mean that the cyclopes were perfect, though. One of the persistent problems of battle bots and similar products was the risk that they might get hacked by the enemy.

There was no better way to screw someone over by taking over their battle assets and turning them against their original owner!

Though this was a lot more difficult to accomplish with organic battle bots, a biotech expert who specialized in manipulating beasts could still take over control in the right circumstances!

This was one of the reasons why Project Cyclopes remained unfinished. If the fifty one-eyed monsters cultivated by the Supreme Sage were mature enough to serve as his new lab guards, then they wouldn't have been left in their cultivation tanks.

From what Ves was able to figure out from the research notes, the Supreme Sage had already solved the various problems related to their physical properties. Only a handful of very stubborn issues remained unsolved, including the control aspect.

To be honest, the Supreme Sage had already readied a possible solution. That was why it took some time to unleash the monstrosities. It turned out that the great researcher borrowed the results of one of his other projects and combined it with Project Cyclops!

"What a novel attempt to solve the control problem. Is it really useful to inject a small quantity of substance derived from expert pilot brains into a cyclops?"

He hadn't noticed any significant spiritual activity from the monsters when he released them from their tanks, but he felt a bit strange when they started to roar in unison.

That single collective action not only buffeted his Unending Regalia with loud noise, but also caused his mind to shake a little bit!

Was it an illusion? Ves wasn't sure, actually. It could be that he was just awed by their primal roar. When fifty elephant-sized humanoids cried out at the same time, it was hard not to take notice!

Shortly after the army of rampaging humanoid monsters left the lab, Ves soon heard sounds of distant fighting.

This time, he heard a lot of roars as well the sounds of lots of physical smacking on top of the sounds of weapon discharges.

"Let's take a look." He suggested.

The Larkinsons left the lab and approached the location where the cyclopes had encountered a lot of opposition. Strangely enough, the soldiers in the distance still put up a lot of resistance against the unleashed monsters. This vindicated his decision to avoid confronting the other parties!

"Stop." He spoke over their communication channel. "If we go any closer, we risk getting detected."

He could hear plenty of screams and sounds of desperate fighting up ahead. He doubted that the soldiers had any attention to spare on intruders, but Ves wasn't in a hurry to advance.

"Let's wait until the cyclopes do their jobs."

*Chapter 2947: Inhuman Brutality*

What the hell did the Supreme Sage make?!

When Ves hesitantly decided to send out a tiny stealth drone in order to scope out what was happening up ahead, he and his team became shocked at the carnage taking place up ahead.

The fifty humongous humanoid monsters had seamlessly split into two separate mobs before they barged into the fortified research labs occupied by the two different groups of soldiers.

Then, the monsters started to murder the recuperating soldiers with absolute dominance!

Ves had already figured out that the humans who had entered the lab long before he came along had developed a pattern of sorts.

From their fortifications and the way they retreated instantly after a certain amount of time suggested that they were operating under some sort of unknown rules.

Regardless of what was going on, neither side expected to be assailed by a band of marauding one-eyed giants!

"The timing is especially bad for them." Ves observed with a grim expression. "We happened to unleash the cyclopes just as they were removing their suits of combat armor and taking a well-deserved break."

Under normal circumstances, soldiers would have never let down their guard that quickly. This was why Ves could tell that they had developed a pattern of sorts over time. Just like how he had trained the ultralifers to obey the instructions of the living statues of Lufa without question, the pinnacle lab somehow trained the soldiers to fight each other on a regular basis without venturing any deeper into the facility!

"How brilliant!"

Though Ves still lacked a lot of information, that didn't stop him from using his own perspective to judge the overall situation.

The Supreme Sage was not an absent-minded thinker. That was for sure. He had to have foreseen at least some parts of the scenario taking place today.

If he truly performed an experiment that could theoretically allow him to escape his looming mortality, then he should have taken failure into account. As long as the

situation was salvageable, it became paramount to preserve as much of the lab as possible from the hungry locusts who sought to devour everything that was necessary to bring the Supreme Sage back to life.

Yet something had gone obviously wrong. The soldiers had been stalled but not stopped. Ves had seen no signs that anyone or anything was actively working to restore the Supreme Sage to life.

In the end, the living gem that managed to capture a remnant of the Supreme Sage's spirit had to rely on a foreigner of all people to get the ball rolling!

"What the hell is going on?" He asked for the umpteenth time.

Loud roars rang through two different spaces as the human-like monstrosities shrugged off every form of small arms fire while they mauled their puny human opponents with their prodigious raw strength!

Ves, Lucky, Dr. Perris and his honor guards watched on with horror as they observed the ongoing massacre via projection.

They never realized that the one-eyed monsters they had ignorantly released from their cultivation tanks were this powerful!

Having briefly studied the research files on Project Cyclops, Ves already had an expectation on how well they would perform in combat, but the invincibility and brutality these biological products displayed at the moment surpassed anything he imagined.

Their thick, muscular bodies resisted both kinetic and energy attacks with the resilience of actual biomechs. Even if someone managed to penetrate the thick and leathery skin layer, the flesh underneath was extremely dense and could take a lot of pounding before they started to break.

Their large size and stature gave them a decisive scale advantage over the human soldiers. Perhaps these cyclopes might not fare well against actual biomechs, but as long as they were confined in spaces that were just large enough for them to maneuver comfortably, they were in their element!

One cyclops furiously kicked a soldier armed with a hefty machine gun. The victim launched into the distance and collided against the far wall! The kick had already caused the front of the combat armor to get crushed, so the poor sod had already died by the time his body soared away!

Another cyclops cruelly picked up a pair of soldiers that had failed to suit up in time. Their unarmored bodies got squashed as the giants squeezed their soft flesh into mush.

A hungry expression appeared on the humanoid monster's face. The creature stopped and ignored all of the fire pouring in its direction in order to bite and chew the bodies as if he was enjoying a well-deserved break!

Copious amounts of human blood splattered from the monster's mouth. Red dyed the humanoid beast's chin and chest.

Another group of soldiers managed to retrieve a bunch of plasma grenades and rocket launchers from an armory. Under the direction of an officer, they all unleashed their arsenal at the nearest cyclops!

"WHUAAAAAAA!"

The enormous lab room shook as the giant beast in question was the first to suffer a severe injury!

The rocket launchers hadn't hurt the beast that much. The creature's dense but cushy flesh was so resilient that it was easily able to withstand explosive damage.

The plasma grenades accomplished more. The superhot matter that splashed over the arm of the cyclops burned so hot that the arm began to grow limp!

The soldiers finally saw hope of winning this battle!

"These beasts can be beaten!"

Unfortunately for the human soldiers, it took over a dozen plasma grenades to disable a single limb.

Before the troopers could throw a second batch of plasma grenades, the injured cyclops went mad! Though one of the monster's arms turned into a burned and blackened mess, that didn't stop the cyclops from charging forward and bowling in the loose formation of soldiers!

A lot of armored and unarmored figures were flung away. Some even had the misfortune of getting crushed under the monster's feet!

The cyclops grabbed one soldier by the feet before subsequently using it as a floppy club to batter against any human within reach!

The one-sided butchery unfolding in front of everyone's eyes was so terrifying that the soldiers simply couldn't take it any longer. Many of them had stopped firing their weapons as their fears took over their senses.

Some ran away screaming, only to get caught by the giants who were blocking the only way out.

Others collapsed to their knees, becoming completely unresponsive until a giant hand lifted them up in order to serve as snacks for the voracious monsters.

The smarter ones pressed their weapons against their heads, deactivated the safety settings and pulled the trigger. These people were at least spared from spending their final moments in agony.

So much blood poured out of the brutality taking place in the two research rooms that they began to resemble a charnel house.

Despite the fact that both groups of human soldiers had quantity on their side, the power disparity was simply too great. They needed at least four times as many soldiers as well as favorable terrain in order to resist the cyclops invasion!

The two battles ended quickly and without any chance for the defenders to mount a comeback.

"Project Ammit."

"What?" Ves briefly turned to Dr. Perris.

"Project Cyclops is a derivative of Special Project 'U'. It is a lesser product that nonetheless incorporates many powerful innovations, if to a lesser degree. Project Ammit is supposed to enable high-speed regeneration and energy absorption through consumption of high-density bionutrients."

Ves remembered reading something like that. Still, the sight of artificial monsters snacking on human bodies as if they were snacking on barbecue meat generated a lot of revulsion in his heart.

Humans weren't food! This was one of the most fundamental principles of human civilization. Neither humans, aliens or artificial species should ever have human flesh in their diets!

"I don't think these cyclopes can derive any useful nutrients from human bodies." He frowned. "Unless they are heavily augmented, those soldiers can't contribute much to those monsters aside from providing simple elements and a marginal amount of energy."

There was little to no rational reason for these cyclopes to engage in man-eating. The controversy this act generated would generate so much backlash if done in public that not even a figure as great as the Supreme Sage could remain unaffected!

Dr. Perris looked more and more sickened at the sight. "I don't think the Supreme Sage deliberately programmed them to devour human flesh. Project Cyclops has never been finished and the bioprogramming of these humanoid giants still needs more refinement."

As Ves glanced at the projection of a cyclops roaring like a maddened lion in front of a cowering group of soldiers who had lost all of their fighting will, he felt that there was something profoundly wrong about Project Cyclops from the beginning.

Battle bots simply didn't act like primal beasts and eat the opponents they were instructed to kill! What was happening was completely beyond the pale and should never have been allowed under normal circumstances!

Ves didn't know what to make of the creator of these dangerous creatures.

On one hand, the Supreme Sage exhibited excellent research capabilities and was capable of making thorough plans.

On the other hand, he willfully engaged in reckless experimentation and showed a complete disregard for the intrinsic rights of human beings.

To the Supreme Sage, nothing was inviolable! Even the remains of honored expert pilots were nothing but another source of experimental material in his eyes!

Was this the end state of every researcher who delved into the field of biotechnology?

Ves no longer had to wonder why the Life Research Association was such a depraved state. Though it was ostensibly well-run on the surface, the renowned biotech experts that the people willingly accepted as their rulers were all immoral bastards at heart.

While it was true that politicians and administrators also had their flaws, the temptations they faced were relatively mundane. Ordinary corruption was far less severe than experimenting on expert pilots and creating humanoid organic products that ate human bodies for fun!

"What do we do now?" Dr. Perris asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure it would be a good idea for us to go forward. Let's just sit here and see what these one-eyed giants will do next."

Many of the cyclopes started to move around in order to eat the bodies on the ground. They did not miss any opportunity to consume flesh. In fact, some of the cyclopes started to compete against each other for the opportunity to take a bite out of a body. The creatures seemed to have forgotten their bioprogramming and roared against each other before they came to blows!

The punches and other violent moves they unleashed caused the lab room to become more disordered! The fighting humanoid beasts exerted a lot more strength against each other than they did against the humans. To them, their own kind was much stronger and more difficult for them to overcome.

Fortunately, not every cyclops had lost its sense. A handful of them had stepped out and began to scour the remaining corridors and lab rooms for any other humans.

A small number of soldiers and scientists were stationed elsewhere and had managed to escape the initial massacre for that reason. However, that didn't stop the cyclopes from hunting them down and killing them anyway!

"Aaaahh! Get away!"

"Don't eat me! I don't taste good!"

Out of safety considerations, Ves and the rest of his team withdrew all the way back to the lab room where Project Cyclops was housed. Ves and Dr. Perris accessed the terminal yet again and began to study the research documents with much more care.

"What is the purpose of these creatures?" Ves wondered. "Are they simply meant to serve as lab guards, or is there more to them that I'm missing at the moment?"

Yet no matter what document they skimmed through, they never found anything that explained the full purpose of these hungry human beasts. The Supreme Sage simply treated their creation as a side project!

*Chapter 2948: Following Instructions*

"What is the point of biomechs?"

"Pardon, sir?" Avalon Perris looked confused.

"Seriously speaking, why would people want to field biomechs when there is always a chance they can turn into beasts?"

The woman frowned as she turned to Ves. Though she still felt disturbed by the massacre she had just witnessed, she did not lose her pride as a biomech designer.

"Sir, biomechs have almost never gone rogue. While I cannot rule out the possibility that a handful of isolated organic machines have gotten out of control, it is always the fault of their creators. They overestimated their capabilities and engaged in experiments they did not fully comprehend."

Ves gestured at the empty cultivation tanks. "Like the Supreme Sage?"

"Don't lump the Supreme Sage with those incompetents! This is completely different! Project Cyclops is still incomplete and the unfinished specimens need a lot of debugging before they are ready for use. I think the performance they have shown so far is quite decent considering their current state. Besides, out-of-control machines are not a problem that is exclusive to biomechs and other bioproducts. Mechanical battle

bots are also prone to behaving outside of their parameters if their programming is tampered with. There is no difference in this regard."

Ves didn't agree with this assertion, but this was not the time to hold a debate over this issue, so he declined to argue any further.

To be honest, the more he stayed in this state, the sooner he wanted to leave it all behind. While Dr. Perris was right that machines could be subverted, at least the deviations still fell within an expected range.

It was a lot harder to predict what would happen when it came to organic products coming to life!

Once they grew a mind of their own, their complex biology and brain structure affected them in many different ways.

Biomech designers and beast designers liberally spliced both human and alien genes together in order to develop a new species that was capable of performing different jobs.

The problem with this was that it was difficult to determine the exact roles of every single gene. Perhaps one gene allowed an organism to develop a thicker skin, but it could also cause the creature to develop a hunger for human skin!

Genes also interacted with each other in many different ways, some of which couldn't be modeled. This was also one of the underlying reasons why so many powerful leaders went mad during the Age of Conquest. The geneticists who cooked up radically new gene templates never bothered to test their innovations over long periods of time.

The market for genetic modification was so competitive back then that the regulations at the time were wholly inadequate to ensure that the industry leaders performed their due diligence.

This example illustrated the many dangers of messing with the building blocks of life. Unlike mechanical creations, living organisms possessed a lot more depth.

"The cyclopes are doing something." Dr. Perris noted as she looked at the footage transmitted from the spy drones their team had deployed.

The monstrous humanoids had already cleaned up all of the bodies by stuffing them into their apparently-functioning stomachs. It did not matter if they swallowed entire pieces of hard bone metal armor. None of the tall beasts appeared to be suffering from any stomach aches.

Apart from hunting down the stragglers that were spread elsewhere on this floor, the cyclopes hadn't done anything else for a time.

Only after they eliminated the final straggler did they begin to follow a new set of instructions. The fifty cyclopes all gathered together again and moved to a specific corridor. Once they arrived in front of an entrance, they stopped and turned as silent as statues.

The transition from rampaging and maneating beasts to completely silent and frozen bioproducts was uncanny. Ves wasn't sure which of these two facades reflected the unfinished creations better.

"I think we need to move forward." He said. "The way ahead is clear now. The opposition... has been taking care of, so we don't have to worry about tipping off our presence in this lab."

The cyclopes had been quite thorough in that. They not only 'removed' every human in the lab aside from his own men, the giant humanoids also wrecked all of the organic machines and equipment that didn't belong to the pinnacle lab.

The team of Larkinsons cautiously advanced forward and got closer to the bloodstained decks and the stinking detritus that were too small to eat for the big monsters.

Both Ves and Dr. Perris decided that they weren't in a hurry to advance all the way towards the entrance to the next floor. They instead opted to enter every lab room in order to check up on the research projects they hosted.

Different from the lab rooms of the previous floors, the ones they just entered all showed signs of human activity.

The scientists that had intruded into the room had forcibly taken or disassembled some special lab machines. Some of the storage tanks containing valuable specimens had been torn apart. Even the local databases showed signs of tampering and intrusion.

Fortunately, the research data was still intact. The ones that came before showed at least some restraint.

The various experiments on this floor were mostly related to Special Project 'U'. Ves and Dr. Perris encountered various studies where the Supreme Sage sought to improve various capabilities related to large organic products.

They clearly found references that also tied back into Project Cyclops.

None of the research projects he stumbled upon impressed him in any way. They weren't relevant to his core interests and he didn't see how he could use any of it in his own work.

Though Dr. Perris was much more fascinated at the high-level projects that the Supreme Sage engaged in, much of it was too complicated for her to work with. The

sheer amount of high technology involved in the advanced studies was so excessive that she didn't have any hopes of completing any of the projects without access to the right specialty machines!

Ves didn't want to get too distracted at this time. The current floor may have been cleared of human threats, but who knew if those cyclopes would snap and treat Ves and his men as their next meals!

"Don't forget about our main goal. We may have gotten closer to the core of the pinnacle lab, but it's clear that this floor doesn't contain what we want."

If the pinnacle lab had five floors in total, then they were merely on the fourth. The one above them ought to be the most central and heavily-guarded location. There was a significant chance that Ves would be able to access Special Project 'V' and be able to retrieve the serum produced by the Supreme Sage if he moved again!

Yet before he moved past the waiting cyclopes and entered one of the teleportation portals that connected to a different floor, he took some time to study the possessions of the soldiers who previously occupied this floor.

It was not easy to retrieve any useful information out of the broken parts. The giant one-eyed monsters had eaten a lot of bioequipment and crushed everything else that they didn't want to consume.

Ves carefully poked a pile of scattered flesh with a spare rod until he managed to fish out an amputated forearm.

A set of enormous teeth had sheared the limb off its original owner. Ves guessed that the individual in question ended up in the stomach of a cyclops while this loose arm coincidentally fell to the ground.

"Yes! I knew it! This guy still wore a biocomm at the time of his death!"

He clearly spotted a slender bone-like bracelet wrapped around the wrist. Once Dr. Perris pulled out the biocomm with a disgusted expression, she carefully attempted to access the device.

Though both Lucky and Ves possessed advanced hacking tools, none of it was very effective against biological devices. Aside from being able to hack simple bioproducts whose bioprogramming closely mirrored that of regular machines, many other devices were simply too different!

This was why Ves had little choice but to wait for Avalon Perris to issue her judgement. She turned the biocomm around a couple of times while she attempted to access its contents with the help of her cranial implant.

She shook her head. "I don't specialize in biohacking, so it is considerably challenging for me to access the data stored in this device. I can already tell you that this is a military-grade biocomm, and not a regular one either. It has already wiped all of its data once it realized that its carrier has likely died."

Ves and Dr. Perris continued to search around. They found more biocomms and other small devices, but their security measures were so thorough that it was impossible to retrieve any useful data from those devices.

Perris finally managed to achieve a breakthrough when she found a broken biocomm. Though the device had been snapped in half and couldn't be booted up anymore, Perris was still able to access some surface-level data from an organic component that acted as a temporary cache.

While the data stored on the chance should have been wiped out as well, this routine somehow failed to activate when the biocomm got snapped.

"Look at this, sir. I think we can determine the identity and allegiance of these soldiers."

From what little data that Perris managed to pull out, the owner of the biocomm was a soldier who quit the military and joined a private military corporation that answered directly to the conservative faction.

Every soldier who died in this lab room used to be tasked with guarding the scientists who were digging around on this floor. It was only later that they encountered invaders who entered the pinnacle lab from another entrance.

"Poor fellows." Ves shook his head. "These soldiers fought and died for a cause that isn't related to them in any way. No matter who manages to retrieve all of the research data and abscond with the serum produced by the Supreme Sage, none of it will benefit the average Lifers."

Despite being responsible for unleashing the monsters that cruelly killed them all, Ves sympathized with the plight of the soldiers. They were just following orders and acting like any pawn should act.

Years ago, Ves used to be in the same position as these slain soldiers. He suffered so much during the Aeon Corona Mission that he developed a strong desire to never serve as a pawn to anyone else ever again!

Fortunately, he succeeded. By breaking away from the Bright Republic and founding a nomadic clan, it was no longer mandatory for Ves to rely on any state and its rulers.

Of course, the Larkinson Clan was still far from becoming a completely independent entity. It still relied way too much on states for manpower, resources and revenue.

The expeditionary fleet in its current state was not fit enough to become completely self-sufficient. Ves still needed to obtain several critical capital ships and expand some of the neglected aspects of his organization in order to achieve an acceptable degree of self-sufficiency.

Until then, Ves would still remain vulnerable to the whims of others. The situation he was currently in was a direct consequence of that, but he wasn't complaining too much right now because he still had hope of leaving this planet with the most valuable prize on the planet in his possession!

"We've learned enough. Let's go. According to the scattered data we've managed to retrieve, the core labs are located on the next floor."

They moved to the entrance of one of the teleportation portals that led up. This unfortunately brought them closer to the unmoving cyclopes, who remained unmoving while they stood on two sides of a corridor.

It was quite eerie to walk between the giant figures. Their mouths and chests were still stained with dried, coagulated human blood.

When they finally reached a teleportation portal, it didn't activate as normal.

Instead, it expanded in size. Even though the active energies in middle looked increasingly unstable, the portal diameter had grown so big that Ves already had an idea what would happen next.

"Move out of the way!"

The Larkinsons stepped to the side just in time for the cyclopes to come close and pass through the expanded gateway one by one. As these bloodied giants entered the next floor, Ves knew he didn't have to worry about bumping into any hostile humans when he followed suit.

The only downside was that he wouldn't be able to distance himself from the maneating monsters!

"What are these giant beasts doing? What is their mission?"

*Chapter 2949: Impregnable Citadel*

The next floor already turned into a warzone by the time that Ves and his team passed through the portal.

Different from the last floor, the conservatives and radicals stationed a lot more soldiers here. Whereas the fourth floor was more of a sideshow to them, they correctly recognized that the third floor was the most critical one!

"All of the special projects in this pinnacle lab should be situated in the center of this floor." Ves predicted after reading through the scattered intelligence that Dr. Perris managed to retrieve from a number of broken devices.

Dr. Perris already started to step forward, but Ves quickly held her armored body back. "Wait! Don't go forward yet. The fighting hasn't abated yet. My long-range sensors still detect signs of fighting in the distance."

The third floor was apparently a lot bigger than the other floors. While not every research project housed here was critical, they all required a lot of space. This was where the Supreme Sage largely worked on wonders that were even bigger in scale than Project Cyclops.

Speaking of those huge monsters, his sensors could clearly pick out the sounds of human soldiers fighting back against the inhuman giants!

From the intensity of combat his sensors managed to pick up, Ves quickly figured out that the cyclopes had a much harder time getting through the human lines this time!

He even managed to pick up a lot more painful roars that couldn't have originated from anything else but the giant humanoid monsters.

"Damn, are the cyclopes losing?"

Ves never thought he would be cheering on the side of biological monstrosities trying to kill every human in their way, but right now he really wanted the latter to die. As long as at least one human managed to go back and tell their bosses about the presence of the Larkinsons in the forbidden lab, then he and his entire clan would become doomed!

After he continued to listen for another minute, he couldn't hold back his curiosity any longer. He ordered his honor guard to release some spy drones in order to check the situation up ahead.

The tiny drones quietly flew forward and crossed a lot of distance before they managed to reach a fortified lab room occupied by a much larger infantry troop.

Unlike the soldiers from before, these ones were able to put up a much greater resistance!

"Those are elites!"

Unlike the regular soldiers on the fourth floor, the infantry soldiers assigned to the third floor were clearly the best of what the factions had to offer. They were not only considerably better armed and armored, but the elite troopers also exhibited more grit and discipline in the face of the giant monsters!

"It also helps that they were able to detect the advance of the cyclopes at least a minute in advance."

The position occupied by the soldiers was close to a large straight corridor which the powerful humanoids had to pass through. This not only gave the humans plenty of time to man their defenses, but also allowed them to fire all of their weapons at the advancing bioproducts!

In fact, numerous bodies already littered the deck as the elite soldiers coordinated their fire and specifically concentrated on disabling the legs of the advancing monsters!

Plenty still made it to the other side. Once the cyclopes reached the defensive lines, they charged into the bone metal fortifications, only to crash into a large energy shield. Though the large monsters quickly overloaded the shield by pounding on it with their fists, the defenders brought out the heavy weapons that they had long put into storage.

Grenades, rockets and more exotic weapons began to deal heavy damage to the rampaging giants. Some weapons even drenched the cyclopes with corroding acids that happened to work particularly well on the creatures!

Yet despite all of this resistance, the might of these big humanoids was still very formidable!

No barrier stopped them for long. The physical might of the giants was too great. They broke every energy shield and climbed over every solid barrier in order to reach the defending humans.

Elites or not, every soldier that failed to fall back quickly turned into cyclops food!

The same spectacle was taking place in another location. The soldiers of the opposition faction were not as well-equipped as their conservative counterparts, but they had the edge in numbers.

It was a pity that they still fell short against their current threat. Most small arms fire did nothing against the giant humanoids, so much of the firepower went to waste.

Trying to fight the cyclopes was no different from fighting a mech! It simply wasn't feasible due to the enormous scale disparity!

No matter how many clever tactics the resisting soldiers pulled off, the simpler and less coordinated cyclopes simply relied on their raw might in order to overcome all resistance.

Soon, more and more bodies entered the stomachs of the giant humanoids. Though most of the elite soldiers bravely managed to fight to the end, their valor did not avail them anything as they simply died without giving their opponents any significant trouble.

The cyclopes were slowly regenerating the damage they incurred from their assaults. Ves and Dr. Perris was quite impressed at the speed at which they healed their wounds, though hardly any of it had anything to do with consuming human flesh.

"The biomass they are ingesting can hardly supply the nutrients required to restore this much damage. They need to access a better source in order to sustain their restoration process.

Strangely enough, that was exactly what the cyclopes were doing. While some of the big monsters split off from the main group in order to hunt down the stragglers, others were moving to a specific storage room that contained a lot of feeder stock and other nutrients.

The giants quickly feasted on the high-quality supplies. Their ability to digest all manner of materials came very handy at the moment. Soon, cut and blackened flesh regenerated into pink and sensitive tissue. The healed portions obviously weren't up to par yet, but that would change in time.

Once the cyclopes finished all of these chores, they moved out and picked up their dead comrades. Once two of the creatures grabbed onto a single dead companion, they slowly brought the dead cyclopes to the entrance of the core section of the pinnacle lab.

There, they waited. Both the surviving and fallen cyclopes were parked before the enormous gates that were large enough to fit in several mechs with room to spare!

Once Ves confirmed that advancing forward was safe, Ves cautiously led his men forward. They looked at the remains of the hard-fought enemy soldiers and imagined how it would have been if they were the ones who had to resist the cyclopes.

"Sorry fellows, but you're in the way."

Ves didn't bother to stop to examine the remains of the dead this time. Though Dr. Perris tried to salvage some data from a broken biocomm as she walked, the information she learned was not very comprehensive.

"You're right, sir. This is indeed the main floor that the two opposing sides have been focusing upon." She said. "The conservatives and the opposition have been fighting against each other for several weeks while trying to force their way into the core area."

"Did they succeed?"

"No. The defenses of the core area are on a whole other level. The labs we have visited so far are mostly side projects. While I can't say that they are irrelevant, the Supreme Sage won't feel very upset if something happens to them. The special projects housed behind these massive gates are different. The defenses surrounding this core area are practically like a citadel. The degree of firepower the invaders have to leverage in order

to breach the main gates is so much that there is a substantial risk the entire floor will break. This is why the two sides gave up on trying to breach the core area by force."

As Ves and his team arrived at the front of the gates, they clearly perceived its formidable nature. It was taller than several biomechs and just as thick as one! So much hard bone metal material had been piled onto the gate structure that Ves wasn't even sure his own mechs could breach this obstacle!

"How do we get past?"

The cyclopes apparently didn't possess the right key. They were standing close to the gates, obviously wanting to go deeper, but lacked the access to go any further.

Ves pulled out his Supreme Comprehension gem and shook it a few times.

"Hey, can you unlock these gates? They're kind of in the way."

The gem shook a bit but did not tug him in any direction. It acted as if it had no clue what to do in this situation.

"You can't bring us in? Why not? I thought this was supposed to be your lab!"

The living gem grew angry all of the sudden and shook with rage.

After a minute of attempting to communicate, Ves realized why the gem acted in this fashion.

The spiritual remnant locked inside the gem may have come from the Supreme Sage, but it lacked a lot of pieces of the great researcher!

One of them was the method of opening the enormous gates. Ves pressed the gem against the surface of the barrier, but it didn't work this time.

"Damn. How will we get through this time?"

The gates stumped the factions for a long time. Ves didn't think he'd be able to decipher the right method by himself.

Ves suddenly turned to look at his shoulder. Throughout all of this time, Lucky had been lounging on the shoulder of his combat armor like it was his personal chariot.

Lucky lazily yawned as he completely disregarded the difficulties that Ves was facing at the moment.

"Lucky?"

"Meeeoow?"

"Your sick days have expired. It's time to get to work!"

"Meeoow!"

Suffice to say, it took quite a bit 'convincing' in order to gain Lucky's cooperation. The cat reacted very grumpily at Ves, but he had already recovered enough by now to phase his body for a brief moment of time.

Ves handed the living gem over to Lucky. "Bring it to the other side and work together to find some kind of override. I bet it's a lot less troublesome to open the gates from within this citadel.

Lucky held the gem between his teeth with a resentful expression before he turned intangible and phased through the giant gates.

More than ten minutes passed before the gates suddenly shook.

"Back off! I think it's opening!"

Ves and his team hastily moved back as the gates slowly slid open. The entire hall seemed to shake a bit as a lot of force was being channeled to make an opening.

The cyclopes that had been waiting around finally moved again. They picked up their fallen comrades and silently passed through the entrance to the core area.

Ves and his men had to stand aside in order to avoid getting stepped on by the giant humanoids.

Once the cyclopes moved past, Ves moved forward as well.

The interior of the core area had a very different atmosphere. The lighting was dimmer but the scale of the entire area was larger. The ceiling almost wasn't visible to naked eye anymore because it reached an incredible height. The corridor he had just entered was so wide that it could easily fit a multitude of mechs standing side by side.

"What a big area." Dr. Perris gasped.

Ves tried to seek out his pet. "Ah, there you are, Lucky!"

The gem cat had practically emptied his entire reserves of the day from the way he collapsed on the deck. Ves carefully picked his body up and placed his pet back on his previous perch.

"You've done your job. You deserve a very welcome rest."

"Meooooow..."

The living gem on the other hand became more energetic than ever. It eagerly bopped up and down as it led Ves deeper into the core area.

Eventually, he reached the end of the corridor. Two enormous entrances were situated on the left and right sides.

The cyclopes were patiently standing in front of the left entrance. Clearly they were waiting for someone to open the way so they could get inside.

Ves carefully looked in this direction before shaking his head. He turned around and approached the enormous entrance situated on the right side of the corridor.

"This should be the lab section where Special Project 'V' is housed."

"What makes you think that, sir?" Dr. Perris asked.

"Those cyclopes over there are associated with Special Project 'U'. They have no relations with life-prolonging treatment serum. Besides, I can already tell that what I'm looking for is behind these gates."

"How?"

"I can sense it." He grinned.

#### *Chapter 2950: Impasse*

After reaching the end of the gigantic corridor that into the depths of the pinnacle lab, Ves finally saw hope of fulfilling his goal.

Pulling all of the valuable research data from the local databases was never his original goal.

Sure, Ves became pleasantly surprised when he found out that the Supreme Sage worked on a method to produce a specific formula of high-grade life-prolonging serum.

As a mech designer and owner of a powerful factory ship, he knew the power of being the producer of a good that was in high demand.

The prices of his mechs were more expensive than other products that shared a similar production cost. This was because the overall value they provided to his customers was greater.

While it sounded nice for a customer to own an LMC mech, the downside to that was that the person in question had to fork over considerably more money to fulfill this need!

The same dynamic applied to high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum, but at least a million times worse.

Demand was incredibly high. How could it not? Even if the potential customer base was limited to those who already enjoyed two rounds of life-prolonging treatment, that still amounted to billions of humans across the galaxy!

Human space was unimaginably big and encompassed a lot of star systems. Though the amount of elites who were wealthy and capable enough to secure life-prolonging treatment was only a fraction of the whole, added together they formed a huge customer base.

The Big Two, who ostensibly possessed a stranglehold on the market for high-grade serum, could never meet the huge demand for its key product!

In fact, if Ves was in their shoes, he wouldn't try his best to ramp up production either. Increasing supply only led to falling prices, which meant that the Big Two would have to work a lot harder while earning less money per vial. No self-serving organization would do such a thankless job unless they had a greater benefit in mind.

This was why anyone who wanted to live longer in this day and age had to stay in the good graces of the MTA and CFA. The two dominant human organizations might not be the current rulers of human civilization, but no one doubted their crown.

The vast support they received was undeniable! By offering a way to extend people's lives as well as other incentives such as granting plenty of autonomy, the Big Two forged an unbreakable network of states and powerful players that unquestionably supported the current order.

If not for the irresistible attraction of life-prolonging treatment serum, many rulers who presided over powerful states would never tolerate the hegemony of the Big Two so much!

With such a good arrangement, the Big Two shouldn't be in a hurry to expand the production of life-prolonging treatment serum. There was no great incentive to find an alternative production method that possibly made use of more abundant ingredients.

This was why Ves persistently questioned whether Special Project 'V' was the exception rather than the rule. Could the formula used to produce the batch of serum on the other side of massive gates be closely related to the standard one that was currently in use by the Big Two?

Ves didn't know, and that bothered him. The reason why he doubted this possibility was because there were many other possible reasons why the MTA wanted the Supreme Sage to succeed.

Perhaps the Big Two's traditional production method began to run its course due to exhausting its original supply of raw ingredients.

Perhaps the MTA and CFA changed their strategy and wanted to make life-prolonging treatments more accessible.

Perhaps the upper hierarchy of the powerful organizations wanted to shower more benefits to their descendants.

Whatever the reason, there was always a good use for additional batches of serum. If the Big Two wasn't afraid of losing their monopoly, then Ves could easily imagine that they were willing to offer casual support to the Supreme Sage.

After all, as a researcher who was not officially a part of the MTA, if any of his misdeeds such as the defilement of expert pilots came to light, he would bear all of the blame!

In the meantime, the mechers and fleeters would just whistle innocently as they joined the crowd of people who condemned the heinous experiments.

Ves shook his head. "I'm obsessing way too much over this issue."

The fact that the truth continued to elude him frustrated him beyond belief. He was so close to discovering a profound secret, yet the lack of solid information prevented him from solving his doubts on this massive conspiracy!

He slowly placed his palm on the surface of the massive bone metal gates. Taller, heavier and thicker than anything he had seen on this planet, he estimated that not even an expert mech could breach through it without risking total destruction!

"How can I pass through this barrier?"

He briefly glanced at Lucky. The cat had practically dozed off by now. His brief phasing attempt had already drained his spirituality for the day.

Ves would have to wait at least a couple of days before his gem cat regained enough energy to phase through another thick barrier.

That took way too much time!

He did not forget that the conservative faction and the opposition factions had both intruded on this pinnacle lab for quite some time. The cyclopes may have slaughtered all of the soldiers on this floor, but Ves was sure that more troops would be pouring in sooner or later.

"We can't afford to linger too long in this place!"

That reminded him of the massive open gates behind him. The way into the core section of the pinnacle lab was open to everyone now that his living gem had opened the way inside.

Ves was tempted to ask his living gem to close the entrance, but he held back from doing so. He was afraid he might lock himself inside the core area if he did so. With the firepower at his disposal, he didn't fear getting assailed by a squad of reinforcing soldiers. Even if more troops arrived, the maneating giants would not stand by and allow unauthorized intruders to barge into areas where they didn't belong.

"We need to solve this problem quickly. As long as we can get in and out quickly, it won't matter if the entrance behind us is still open."

He shook his Supreme Comprehension gem again. "Hey, tell me how to get past this gate. I only need you to open one more barrier."

His gem shook side by side, which meant it answered with a rejection.

"What do you mean by that?" Ves growled.

He was so close to his goal now. His spiritual senses could literally perceive a strong and concentrated source of life energy on the other side of the gate in front of him. There had to be a way to get inside!

Yet as Ves continued to quiz the living gem, it continually rejected his request.

"Is it because you forgot how to get inside?"

The gem nodded, but Ves wasn't too sure about that answer. He narrowed his eyes.

"Are you withholding something?"

The gem shook for a moment before trying to lead him to another place. The gem encouraged him to move to the opposite side of the corridor. Ves and his team carefully walked past the rows of bloodstained cyclopes and stopped before another gate.

Ves didn't feel any strong concentrations of life energy behind this massive barrier. "What I want isn't behind this gate."

His gem moved a few times. Ves interpreted its meaning as best he could.

"I see. Your goal isn't the same as mine."

This was a problem. Ves wanted to harvest the fruits of Special Project 'V' while this intelligent gem sought to come back to life.

Ves made a guess. "Is your body behind this gate?"

The gem flew up and down so vigorously that it was clear that Ves hit the nail on the head!

The Supreme Sage never wanted to die. It was already a miracle that Lucky managed to capture a remnant of his spirituality into a gem, but this was no pleasant way to live for anyone. A figure as powerful as the leader of the LRA probably regarded his current form to be a shame!

If Ves was in the ancient man's shoes, he would have wanted to get back his human body as well. Perhaps this was why the cyclopes cleared the way to this core section. They were programmed to assist the Supreme Sage's restoration to the best of their abilities.

It was a pity that their might wasn't good enough to get past the final gate. They could punch the surface all they wanted, but the barrier was so thick that it would only get dented after hours of pummeling!

The enormous humanoids would likely run out of energy long before they could get all the way through!

"Sir?" Dr. Perris hesitantly asked as she eyed the moving gem. "Is it really possible for you to..."

He recalled he never gave her an explanation about this matter. "This isn't a regular gem. There are a lot of secrets involved with this, so please refrain from masking any further. Just be aware that anything can happen."

"I... see..."

The woman had received so many shocking revelations today that one more impossibility hardly fazed her anymore. She turned numb as she got lost in her own thoughts.

Ves turned his attention back to his gem. "I think we have a problem here. If you get past this gate and manage to get what you want, what will I get in return? Will you help me open the other gate and allow me to take away the life-prolonging treatment serum that you have produced?"

The gem eagerly nodded, but Ves wasn't fooled!

"Don't you see the problem here? If I give you what you want, what guarantee do I have that I get what I want?"

They were at an impasse. Whomever went first had no obligation to return the favor. Ves did not believe that he could force the Supreme Sage to help him obtain the high-grade serum. At the same time, if Ves obtained his loot first, why should he bother bringing someone powerful back to life who happened to know some very important secrets?

Their interests no longer aligned at this time!

"Damnit, Lucky. Why are you so slow in recovering your strength?"

"Meowwww..." The cat blissfully dozed.

Then again, there was no guarantee that Lucky would be able to retrieve the serum if he was at full strength. The security measures had to be extremely high and life-prolonging treatment serum was so spiritually powerful and energetic that he wasn't sure whether his cat could even phase it through the vault door!

Ves began to develop a headache. There was no easy solution to this difficult impasse. The lack of trust on both sides prevented them from putting much faith in each other's promises.

The living gem had spent enough time around Ves to know what kind of person he was like. At the same time, Ves had explored enough about the pinnacle lab to know that the Supreme Sage was anything but a simple researcher.

As Ves continued to mull over the situation, the living gem in his grasp vibrated in a peculiar way.

Soon enough, the deck underneath his armored boots shook as numerous tall and heavy forms began to move.

A cyclops in front of him turned around and stepped close.

Another cyclops walked up from behind and blocked the way back.

Numerous other blood-stained giant humanoids flanked Ves and his team from different directions. Their dangerous posture signalled that they were no longer overlooking the presence of the Larkinsons anymore!

"Sir, the cyclopes! They're turning against us for some reason!" Dr. Perris exclaimed as her legs started to shake!

Ves glowered as he noted the changes. It was incredibly frightening to be at the center of attention of these murderous monsters!

His honor guard had already lifted up their rifles, but everyone knew that their weapons wouldn't be able to put any dent in these powerful humanoids.

Even so, Ves did not believe he lost all of leverage.

He materialized Amastendira for the first time in a very long time and pressed its muzzle straight onto the gem in his grasp!

"Do you think you can do what you want!? Once I break this crystallized shell of yours, there is no way you'll be able to make it back to your body! Only I can ensure that you will be able to transfer!"

The two had entered into yet another standoff! This time, neither side was under the illusion that they were on the same side anymore!