

Mech 3801

Chapter 3801 Lucky the Mineral Scanner

"Meow meow."

The sample was too soft and only produced a minor shocking effect. It was likely a third-class exotic with properties related to electricity.

"Meow... meow..."

The next sample caused Lucky to gain a heavy crumbling sensation. This caused Ves to guess that it was a resonating material that could be used to destabilize terrain.

"Meow! Meow!"

Lucky almost spat out the green rock that Ves had fed the cat. The presumed resonating exotic only produced a weak reinforcement effect that was so poor that it should only be found on the cheapest third-class expert mechs!

"Meow meow."

The next sample was much more palatable, fortunately. Lucky experienced an odd multiplying sensation that Ves found difficult to interpret. Did it mean that an expert mech could multiply the attacks launched by a ranged weapon?

A few other samples also produced unclear answers, showing that using Lucky as an identifying machine was far from perfect.

After testing a lot of different unknown exotics, Lucky reacted a lot more enthusiastic than usual when biting into two specific samples!

One of the materials that Ves temporarily called 'Substance 14' made Lucky as eager as when he bit into Celestan Cobalt.

"Is it a first-class exotic?"

"Meow." Lucky nodded.

"Tell me what you have experienced. What is so special about this rock?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"It reacts to energy..."

"Meow meow."

"It destabilizes energy..."

"Meow meow meow!"

"You mean that it makes your electrical systems unstable? And it can do more?"

"Meow!"

"Interesting."

Lucky had eaten a lot of different materials throughout the years. His digestion system and other internal systems were quite robust and could resist the effects of many different exotics that passed through his gullet.

However, Substance 14 was able to make his internal parts feel uncomfortable. Alongside Lucky's guess that it was also able to disrupt energy shields, this resonating exotic was likely a nemesis against electrical systems!

"An expert mech that incorporates Substance 14 should be able to collapse energy shields and cripple technological parts!"

Perhaps the effect might not be strong when used on expert mechs that possessed a lot of powerful protection from the expert pilots, but what about other targets?

It was probably overkill to employ it against regular mechs, but what Ves truly valued was its potential use in disabling large and impactful warship modules!

He could already envision the right sort of mech that could make use of this powerful disruptive weapon system.

"The delivery system is vitally important. A rifle is not enough. It has to be a cannon."

He imagined the birth of a formidable expert heavy artillery mech that was armed with massive, powerful energy cannons!

With each shot, the cannon was able to fire an immensely powerful energy beam that might not be accurate enough to hit mechs in flight but should definitely be able to hit distant starships!

If the enemy vessel was unarmed, then the energy beam empowered by the true resonance produced by Substance 14 should quickly be able to tear through any energy shields if there were any present!

"Many formidable human ships built for combat are equipped with shield generators."

While it may be a bit too extravagant to equip every combat carrier with shield generators, they were quite ubiquitous among fleet carriers, especially in a place like the Red Ocean.

Starships were more precious in the new frontier so their owners were definitely willing to invest in proper shield generators to protect their assets.

There were huge differences in performance between a mech-grade shield generator and a ship-grade shield generator.

The former had to be miniaturized and faced large constraints in power supply and heat capacity.

The latter was able to receive an abundant amount of power from large ship-based power reactors. They also had less concerns about melting because they could dump their excess heat energy into enormous hulls!

For this reason, it took quite a lot of concentrated firepower to overcome a ship-grade energy shield.

If that wasn't enough, a good fleet carrier usually carried many of them, each of which was responsible for protecting a different section of the hull. Breaking one shield generator didn't mean the other ones were affected.

Perhaps the mech that broke one of the energy shields had to repeat the feat multiple times because it couldn't get a good angle to exploit the opening it created!

"If I can design an expert mech that can easily wear down these powerful energy shields, then this layer of protection will no longer pose a hindrance!"

The value of Substance 14 was even greater when there were no energy shields hindering the expert heavy artillery mech.

As long as it fired an empowered resonance beam, the strike could slam into a ship and disrupt any electrical systems that were active in the immediate surroundings!

"This attack will be most effective against surface components!"

Weapon mounts, sensor arrays, communication arrays, maneuvering thrusters, bunker mechs and more could all be scrambled to the point of getting knocked out of action!

Ves hoped the attack would also allow the heavy artillery mech to apply this disruptive effect on the interior of a starship!

Repeated hits might spread the disruption effect and slowly cause a starship to lose functionality as more and more of its systems were stressed beyond capacity.

His eyes glinted as he took one last look at the samples of Substance 14. This was a first-class resonating exotic that he did not intend to sell! Its effects were far too useful!

Aside from Substance 14, another unidentified exotic had also caught his attention.

When Lucky ate the sample, the cat reacted a lot more animatedly than before!

"Meow meow meow!"

"What do you mean? You feel bloated all of a sudden?"

"Meow! Meow!"

"It doesn't calm down? Is it a first-class exotic?"

"Meow meow meow!"

According to Lucky, Substance 19 was not as hard and tough as other first-class materials. However, it was extremely active and produced a sensation that made him feel as if his stomach was being affected by an explosion!

It took a lot of exchanges for Ves to get a decent idea of what Substance 19 was capable of. Even then he wasn't quite certain whether he got it right.

According to his interpretation of Lucky's experiences, Substance 19 was able to amplify the power of explosions to a drastic degree. The increase in explosive firepower multiplied by at least 30 times!

"30 times!"

That was an insane degree of amplification!

If such a measure was ever applied to a missile or an explosive shell, they could turn from regular ordnance into weapons of mass destruction!

If not for the MTA's greater tolerance for high-ranking mechs, any expert mech that was able to leverage Substance 19 to amplify its attacks would definitely be classified as a forbidden weapon!

"Substance 19 is also good for destroying threatening starships!"

This time, its effects were much more direct. Rather than improving a mech's ability to cripple a starship, Substance 19 was able to turn a ranged mech into a powerful siege engine!

"Each serious attack launched by an expert mech integrated with Substance 19 will hit as hard as the main cannon of a destroyer or a cruiser!"

Ves slowly frowned.

From how much Lucky reacted to Substance 19, he suspected that it might even be powerful enough to rival the firepower of a battleship!

"Of course, I'm not talking about the apex battleships of the CFA."

He figured that it might not be out of the realm of possibility that an expert mech augmented with Substance 19 might be able to threaten an alien battleship!

However, Ves found it difficult to imagine that any expert mech could be this powerful.

The Gauss Baron that the Golden Skull Alliance once confronted in battle was the quintessential expert heavy artillery mech in his eyes.

Although it was a dwarven mech, it contained all of the classical elements that defined this mech type.

Yet even the Gauss Baron was unable to fell any of the Larkinson Clan's capital ships. In the end, the expert heavy artillery mech finally met its end at the hands of the Dark Zephyr.

Ves looked at the chunks of minerals that haphazardly rested inside a simple metal box.

"Is this... an ace-mech grade resonating exotic?"

Certain exotics produced effects that were so powerful that ordinary expert pilots weren't able to resonate with them. They were far too powerful and could easily overwhelm a pilot that did not possess the required strength to leverage their power.

There were other exotics that were more gentle towards expert pilots but did not demonstrate their full potential until the individuals were powerful enough!

Whether Substance 19 fell into one of these categories, Ves wasn't sure. He simply didn't possess the right tools and know-how to classify this unidentified material properly.

After he moved on to investigating the remaining unidentified exotics, Ves had gained a clearer impression on what they offered.

He became even more convinced that they were resonating exotics that were just waiting to be used by the right expert pilots.

Substance 14 and Substance 19 were by far the most powerful of this batch of materials. If Ves was able to make use of them in his own work, then the strength of his clan would definitely rise by another notch!

"I can't use them immediately, though."

That was the problem that many people faced when they stumbled upon rare and powerful resonating exotics. Ves might have to wait years if not decades in order to find an opportunity to take advantage of these newly-discovered wonder materials!

He turned to the mining director who had remained by the side as Ves and Lucky examined the different samples.

"It's too abnormal for so many different types of resonating exotics to emerge in a single site. It is especially weird that each of these resonating exotics happen to produce wildly different effects when incorporated into expert mechs. There should be a greater story behind this appearance."

"I agree as well sir, but..."

"Have you mapped out the placement of all of the deposits in and around this mining tunnel? Let me take a look."

The mining director fiddled with his comm and projected a map of all of the mining tunnels underneath Violet Ridge.

The man zoomed in until the map depicted the right tunnel. An overlay soon came into view that showed where all of the exotics were found.

Initially, Ves wasn't able to see any pattern. The exotics were all spread across a vague cube.

Perhaps that might mean that something in the center may have produced all of these resonating exotics, but the mining teams had already excavated the entire middle!

Ves suddenly gained another idea.

"Please filter out the resonating exotics by strength. Remove the weaker ones from the map."

"Okay, sir."

A lot of areas dimmed, but the remaining ones still didn't produce any clear patterns.

"We haven't registered any solid data on the unidentified exotics." The mining director said. "If you can supply us with the basic details, I can update this map to better meet your demand."

"Let's do that, then!" Ves' eyes lit up.

He utilized his implant to make a lot of notes about the unidentified substances that he had previously examined.

Once he conveyed the relevant information, the mining director adjusted the settings so that the projected map only displayed ten or so mineral deposits that contained the stronger and more valuable resonating exotics!

"Jackpot!"

This time, the distribution of exotics followed a clearer pattern!

Ves expected to see a cone that might point straight upwards or downwards.

What he got instead was a diagonal pattern that he could extrapolate into a line that sunk deeper into the crust of Iron Crusher!

"Meow!"

Both Lucky and the mining director were taken aback at this sight.

Ves on the other hand reached out with his finger and traced the line pattern until it passed through unexcavated terrain.

"This... looks as if something has pierced through the surface of this moon!"

Chapter 3802 Major Digging Operation

The line that Ves drew from the placement of powerful exotics in the mining site was not that precise.

The deposits weren't aligned in a perfect line. Ves figured that even if a mysterious object had crashed through the surface of Iron Crusher and penetrated deeper into the crust, millions of years must have passed since this probable event.

That was more than enough time for tectonic activity and other events to disturb the placement of the soil.

Fortunately, Iron Crusher happened to be a relatively stable moon that was spared from too many disturbances. The deposits of high-value exotics hadn't shifted all over the place, causing this obvious clue to disappear entirely due to the passage of time.

From the moment Ves had discovered the remarkable pattern, he smelled he had stumbled upon a remarkable occurrence.

While his judgment could be wrong, he would rather err on the side of caution and make additional preparations before he was willing to pursue this matter further.

For this reason, he ordered all of the personnel working in this mining tunnel to halt their current duties and make different arrangements.

"Stand by and wait for orders! Bring in additional mining machines! Wait for the arrival of additional reinforcements!"

After consulting with General Verle through his comm, Ves decided to call in Commander Casella Ingvar and a batch of her Living Sentinels.

Other mech units were also being readied, but not all of them could fit in the mining tunnel at a time. They remained on reserve in case anything happened that the Sentinels couldn't handle.

Personally, Ves didn't think the additional help would be needed. The Living Sentinels may not be the Larkinson Clan's premier mech legion, but it happened to excel in defense.

The newly fabricated Rigid Walls and Rigid Spines were suitable mechs to be deployed in this situation. There were just enough of them to form a shield wall that could plug the tunnel and prevent anything waking up from running out and causing chaos.

"They're solid machines that can take a hit and keep going."

They were also melee mechs that could control their actions quite well. As long as they maintained their shield wall formation, they were unlikely to produce an excessive amount of collateral damage that might collapse the tunnel or destroy whatever was buried on the other end!

Soon enough, the reinforcements arrived. Over a dozen mechs awkwardly flew through the tunnel that had not been designed to accommodate combat mechs.

The silver-and-green coated mechs unquestionably announced their allegiance to the Living Sentinels. Their thick and armored frames reflected their focus on static, defensive combat.

While they were far from the best mechs to deploy in a typical open environment like a space battle, the current circumstances were vastly different.

In a confined environment like the interior of a mining tunnel, the mobility of faster and more maneuverable mechs such as the Ferocious Piranha and the Valkyrie Redeemer hardly played a useful role.

Defense and resilience were much more relevant in this setting. Few mechs were better suited to hold the line and block any ancient horrors from spilling out into the open than the Rigid Walls model.

Designed by Sara Voiken, the Rigid Wall was her opening gift to the Larkinson Clan. It was not a flashy mech, but it didn't need to be. The difficulty of piloting it was low, making it easy for any decent mech pilot to perform effectively.

The mech essentially functioned like a moving wall. Though it was merely a medium space knight as opposed to a heavy one, it possessed enough armor and defensive systems to withstand a large amount of punishment.

Paired with both a physical tower shield and a fairly potent energy shield generator, the mech enjoyed multiple layers of protection, especially against attacks coming from the front.

Sara's touch was evident in how well the Rigid Wall model was rated to resist physical attacks.

The brown coating that decorated the lower legs of the space knights was her signature look. They symbolized the solid nature of the mechs and revealed a hint of her ambitions.

As long as the potential hostiles buried underneath this moon only relied on their bodies and other physical means to do damage, the Rigid Wall mechs should be able to hold the line even if they were floating in vacuum!

In case a threat did emerge, then it was up to the Rigid Spines to smash the threats. Their long spears were especially designed to poke through the gaps in the shield wall and impale anything that was attempting to get through.

The red coating that adorned the speartips was Dulo Voiken's signature look. They represented the considerable threat of his mechs once they stabbed their weapons forward.

The combination of both mechs provided a lot of reassurance to Ves. Aside from their superior defensive traits, they also possessed living traits that Ves had especially added to their designs.

The glows of both Qilanxo and the Solemn Guardian flooded the mining tunnel. This caused a lot of Larkinsons in the vicinity to feel both safe and determined to complete their mission.

"I will stab whatever spooky alien crap is out there with my new spear."

"Hah! Don't discount the power of my Rigid Wall! My sword is not for show!"

"Shh! Our commander is coming!"

Soon enough, the newest expert mech of the Larkinson Clan arrived.

Everyone could feel the invisible presence that the Minerva exuded. A small part of Commander Casella's willpower spread throughout the surroundings and seemed to keep track of everything around the masterwork expert mech.

Inside an armored shuttle that was being used as a small observation and command post, Ves grinned at the Sentinel Commander's arrival.

"Commander Casella, it's good to see you here again. I'm sure you've been told why you are here. We have stumbled across a clue that suggests a relic of the past might be buried further underneath the soil. We have no idea what we will find if we keep digging, but in case anything dangerous is ahead, it is best to receive advance warning. What is the current range of your Command Field?"

"I can currently extend my Command Field to a radius of 8.12 kilometers, sir."
Commander Casella answered.

"That... is hardly an improvement compared to before."

"I feel compelled to remind you that maintaining my Command Field at maximum range is extremely strenuous. I cannot maintain this state for long. In addition, I will receive so much input that my sensitivity towards whatever is around me will drop. If this mission drags on for hours or days, I will have to minimize my consumption. It is best to settle for a range of 300 meters."

"That's too short." Ves frowned and fell into thought. "Let's do this. You can keep your Command Field at 300 meters. Every fifteen minutes or so, I would like you to expand its range to 5 kilometers. I only need you to perform a quick sweep in the surroundings in order to check whether you have stumbled upon anything remarkable. Can you do that, Commander?"

"...I cannot say how effective my Command Field is at detecting threats and other unusual presences underneath the ground, but I will do my best, sir."

"Don't worry." Ves replied. "I am not depending completely on your detection capabilities to scout the way ahead. The Worker Bee mining mechs possess relatively decent mineral scanners and I have also called in a bunch of other mechs to produce more observation data."

A few more mechs arrived. Ves had requested the presence of a couple of new Light Hunters in order to lend their excellent sensors to this endeavor.

While their passive sensor systems didn't function as well as Ves wanted in this confined setting, their Samasel Orb was capable of peering through meters of solid matter.

Ves planned for the Light Hunters to be on the lookout in rotation so that they could activate their power-hungry active scanning systems on a periodic basis.

This was not the extent of the extra help that Ves had requested.

The final reinforcement entered the mining site. The entire place suddenly brightened up to a considerable degree as the warm and lively Everchanger inspired a lot of trust and confidence in the Larkinsons!

"Venerable Joshua!"

"You called, sir?"

"Please approach my shuttle. I need to fiddle with your expert mech for a moment."

The Everchanger slowly arrived next to the shuttle.

Ves soon emerged from the hatch and floated to the forehead of the large mech. He already carried a few pieces of equipment on his Unending Regalia and used them to remove the decorative luminar crystal that functioned as the Everchanger's third eye.

After prying this piece out, he carefully installed a high-tech component into the socket.

Joshua was already familiar with this small but powerful module. He found it rather odd as it was surprisingly effective, so much so that Ves treated it like a treasure.

"You should already know how to operate the Odineye. Just in case, be careful about its power consumption. It is an extremely advanced sensor module and its hunger for energy reflects its effectiveness. While your Everchanger possesses a much more potent power reactor compared to your previous mechs, it is a bit too much to set the Odineye at full strength all the time. Keep it at low power most of the time but try to extend its range as far as possible. You should coordinate the timing with Commander Casella's efforts so that you can cover for each other's gaps."

"Understood."

Once all of the mechs had completed their preparations, the digging action commenced.

A small procession of Worker Bee mechs efficiently went to work. They dug in a diagonal direction downwards with their specialized mining tools.

All of the soil and rock they dug up went straight into their bellies. Once the mining mechs were full, they flew outside the mining site in order to dump the excavated materials elsewhere.

The speed and efficiency of the digging action left much to be desired, but Ves prioritized caution. He did not want to use one of the larger tunneling machines that violently dug through the relatively soft soil of this moon.

Who knows whether the phenomenon that produced all of the resonating exotics had become fragile after millions of years.

"Meow."

Ves instructed Lucky to take part in this operation as well.

It was too risky to employ Lucky as a forward scout, but there should be no problem letting him perch on top of a Worker Bee.

With his senses for minerals, Ves hoped that his cat would be able to pick up anything strange that the other scanning methods had missed.

As the hours went by, nothing happened. The Worker Bees had extended the depth of the mining tunnel by several kilometers, but no one found anything unusual.

Despite the best efforts of the Minerva, the Light Hunter, the Everchanger and Lucky, none of them found anything abnormal.

They hadn't even found any additional deposits of resonating exotics.

While they did stumble upon a few more remarkable minerals, none of them showed any signs of being related to the mysterious phenomenon that presumably punched into the moon.

Ves knew he had to be patient at this time. He had no idea how deep he had to dig in order to find a result.

Iron Crusher wasn't that big of a moon, but with the angle of the mysterious phenomenon's passage, the Worker Bees might be required to dig hundreds of kilometers before they stumbled upon anything special!

"It's a good thing that this isn't my first major digging operation." Ves whispered.

He still remembered the good old days when he was a simple mech designer who inadvertently got involved in a competition to mine the most Rorach's Bone from the Glowing Planet.

"Now that I recall, the Glowing Planet was a rogue planet that soared through the Komodo Star Sector. Garimel II also used to be a rogue planet before it got captured by the blue supergiant star. Will we find similar fossils to the one buried underneath the Glowing Planet?"

Chapter 3803 Starving Prophet

A day went by without yielding any fruitful results.

Despite all of the uplifting glows, it was hard for the more impatient Larkinsons to maintain the belief they were engaging in a productive mission.

The digging pace was as slow as ever as the Worker Bees did not dare to extend the tunnel too quickly. They remained as careful as ever in order to give all of the different detection methods time to investigate what was up ahead.

Since Ves wasn't sure whether the angle they were digging in was completely correct, he regularly paid attention to the scanning results from the Minerva and the Everchanger.

Though Commander Casella wasn't able to translate her impressions into a precise map, it was enough for her to give him a summary of what she detected around her expert mech.

The Everchanger played a more useful role in this setting. The Odineye was a powerful active sensor module that happened to be decently effective at penetrating its sights through the soil.

Still, neither of the two expert mechs detected anything unusual even after the mining mechs advanced dozens of kilometers underneath the surface of the moon.

Ves had remained fairly close at hand. He had rebuffed every request to stay away and made sure the armored shuttle he was on kept pace with the main group.

Of course, he did not object to placing his shuttle well behind the mining mechs and the Sentinel mechs.

The Everchanger was close at hand most of the time. With the protection of an expert mech, Ves did not think that anything could stop his vehicle from evacuating if anything went wrong.

A part of him even wished an incident would happen just so that he could break the monotony. The lack of results was beginning to wear down his patience!

The mining director who had taken charge of this special mining operation also started to entertain a few doubts.

"What if an alien starship sunk into this moon but managed to lift off shortly afterwards? We may be following a trajectory to an object that has already made its way out. Even if it is still there, so many changes must have taken place underneath the surface that the moon may have pushed it far beyond our range."

Ves crossed his arms and continued to monitor the incoming observation data with just as much diligence as before.

His irritation notwithstanding, he still did not relax in any way. If he was able to fabricate a mech for one straight week, he could remain alert and continue to stare at boring sensor readings for hours on end.

"The cluster of resonating exotics is an incredibly odd and unnatural occurrence." Ves stated. "Humanity has only encountered a few cases like these, and many of them are created by obvious external factors. I don't believe this instance is any different. Whether the cause of all of those resonating exotics has left or not, I still don't want to give up our search too soon."

"What if we are heading in the wrong direction, sir? The line you drew yesterday might not match reality. Not only might we be heading down in the wrong angle, the passage of the source may not have been straight in the first place."

Ves slowly nodded. "All of those possibilities are valid, but that does not mean that I am ready to give up. I first want to know whether going any deeper at this angle will yield any results before I am ready to consider alternatives."

Unfortunately for the Larkinsons, the second day yielded no results either.

They began to pierce through several distinctly different layers that consisted of different matter, but none of them were particularly interesting to the Larkinsons.

It became increasingly more troublesome to dig deeper. The Worker Bee mechs had to transport the excavated soil all the way up to the surface in order to avoid clogging up the increasingly longer tunnel.

In addition to that, reinforcing the tunnel walls became more cumbersome as well. While collapses wouldn't doom everyone, they were highly inconvenient and could massively slow down their current progress.

"How much further do we need to dig?!"

Morale wore down as well. The clansmen became increasingly numb and no longer held any bold expectations about whatever treasures they might find.

Even Ves had to decide whether it was fruitful to continue digging so deep. Would it be better to go back to the resonating exotics cluster and branch out from there? Perhaps the source he was looking for may have veered to the side.

"I need more information."

He directed his attention to the Everchanger. The mech had remained active for many hours at a time. It only went offline to replenish its energy cells and give Joshua a break.

Ves thought about all of the prime abilities that Joshua had created with the design spirits that he was acquainted with. He possessed a strong talent in befriending other entities!

He opened a new communication channel.

"Venerable Joshua."

"Yes, patriarch?"

"What do you think about this operation so far?" Ves asked.

"You're the boss. It's not my place to say whether we should be doing this. I don't know how long this will take, though. Will we continue to tunnel through the soil until we emerge on the surface again?"

"I don't know, Joshua."

Since the trajectory sunk into the moon at an angle, the Larkinsons did not need to dig through the most difficult core of the satellite in order to reach the other side.

However, Ves did not want to waste too much time here. He did not think an object that had passed thousands of kilometers of increasingly more dense matter would have stayed put in the middle if it reached such a depth!

He needed to change the game.


"Joshua. Can you switch the Everchanger's glow to that of Ylvaine and request his guidance?"

"Will do, sir."

It took no effort at all for the Everchanger to adopt a completely different glow than before. The green mech took on a holy aura that only grew stronger as Joshua summoned up his full willpower in order to form the deepest connection to Ylvaine that he could manage!

Nearby Larkinsons grew hopeful again. They hoped that the so-called 'Great Prophet' might offer them a quick way out by pointing out the direction that they should actually be digging towards!

However, as two solid went by, neither Joshua nor the Everchanger showed any changes.

Ves could sense that Joshua, the Everchanger and Ylvaine were being quite active, but that was not enough to yield a good result. 

Eventually, Joshua stopped resonating with his mech. The pure white corona around the Everchanger dimmed to a faint level.

"I'm sorry, sir. I tried my best, but Ylvaine can't help us this time." Joshua apologetically answered. "There are too many reasons why he can't find anything. We don't know what we're looking for. A lot of time must have passed as well. So many different things have happened on this moon that looking for our target is like finding a needle in a haystack!"

Ves grimaced. "I understand. I had those suspicions well, but it is still unfortunate to hear that Ylvaine hasn't been able to find any clues."

The Great Prophet was not a god. He was just a design spirit that had grown rather slowly compared to his more popular peers.

Though the population of Ylvainans had slowly grown in the Larkinson Clan, the amount of mech pilots able to provide spiritual feedback only amounted to a few hundred individuals!

This was not a healthy base to supply spiritual feedback to a design spirit. Although Commander Taon Melin was an expert candidate, the Ylvainan champion was too weak compared to an expert pilot.

Trisk, who emerged much later than Ylvaine, was already starting to catch up due to serving as the design spirit of the Dark Zephyr!

Venerable Tusa was able to provide spiritual feedback at quantities that surpassed millions of regular mech pilots!

Not only that, but the quality of his spiritual feedback was also higher, which allowed Trisk to begin evolving to a higher state.

"I really haven't done much justice to Ylvaine." Ves belatedly realized.

He couldn't help it. He was too busy. Not only did he have a lot of projects on his mind, he also had to cater to many different parties and interest groups.

His collection of design spirits was increasing every year and it became increasingly more cumbersome to give each of them his personal attention.

That didn't excuse his negligence towards Ylvaine.

Though Ves and Dulo Voiken had designed the Transcendent Charger in order to diversify and ready the Eye of Ylvaine for future expansion, nothing would change in the short term.

The lack of mech capacity in the fleet meant that it was impossible for Ylvaine to gain more sources of spiritual feedback!

"Maybe... I should figure out a way to incorporate Ylvaine in a commercial mech." Ves considered.

That was a substantial break from the past. Just like the Superior Mother, Ylvaine was a picky design spirit.

Only sincere adherents to the Ylvainan Faith gained his approval and support.

The mechs designed with Ylvaine in mind also had to be designed with Ylvaine in mind from the onset. The religious design spirit did not like it when he had to share space with others.

The only exception to these rules was Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger. Neither of the two possessed authentic ties to the Ylvainan Faith and only got away with becoming friends with Ylvaine because of their insanely high compatibility with every form of life!

"I can't use Joshua and the Everchanger as examples." Ves regretfully concluded.

Designing an Ylvainan mech that was both useful and commercially viable was impossible.

It wasn't like this in the past. Back when he was on good terms with the Ylvaine Protectorate, the state and its people had embraced his Ylvainan mechs.

, c`o`m Sadly, its government had turned away from the Hexers and embraced the Fridaymen as their new backers. Though the decision made sense, Ves had learned an unforgettable lesson from this betrayal.

Now that the Friday Coalition was about to win the Komodo War and take over the entire star sector, there was no chance in hell that the Ylvainan Protectorate would open up its mech market to the Living Mech Corporation!

Without this massive spiritual feedback channel, Ylvaine's growth had only grown slightly for several years. It should not have been a surprise that the Great Prophet didn't possess enough power and ability to provide Ves with the guidance that he needed to solve the current mystery.

He wasn't satisfied with the current situation any longer! Making Ylvaine stronger benefited Ves and his entire clan because they would gain access to a more effective early warning system if this happened!

Outside of looking for threats, a stronger Ylvaine could also provide a lot more hints if Ves ever wanted to find anything important.

"What can I do to strengthen Ylvaine?"

Ves knocked his fist against the side of his helmet a few times. He tried to come up with numerous solutions, but none of them were obviously good.

"I am not going to encourage my own men to convert to this faith!"

What else could he do, then?

"Should I try and spread the Ylvainan Faith among other people?"

Ves... deeply felt repelled by this idea. He disliked religion and never fully bought into Prophet Ylvaine's claptrap.

As far as he was concerned, the original prophet was just a charlatan who happened to be spiritually gifted. This endowment caused his persuasion to skyrocket and allowed him to convert much more people into his cult than normal.

The old charlatan died for a good reason and Ves did not want to play a part in spreading further superstition!

This left him in a difficult spot. He didn't want to spread the Ylvainan Faith among his own people and humanity in general. None of them deserved to dedicate their lives to false beliefs.

"That's pretty much all of humanity. Who else can I hoodwink, then?"

He suddenly came up with a strange idea.

"Wait a minute... there are more people than humans in my fleet. Aren't there a lot of alien captives aboard the Dragon's Den?"

A highly unorthodox idea emerged from his mind.

Chapter 3804 Empty Tunnel

Ves had generated plenty of radical ideas in his life, but this one was definitely one of his more extreme ones!

If anyone heard that Ves wanted to spread a human religion among aliens, they would think he was bonkers!

"It is indeed a crazy idea!"

This was an especially mad endeavor when pretty much every alien hated the human race.

Humanity had brought nothing good to their lives.

During the Age of Conquest, humans learned to treat aliens as their prey. That mindset hadn't changed all that much during the Age of Mechs.

Perhaps many humans born long after the glory days of the Age of Conquest had softened up their stance towards aliens, but all of that had started to make way for a renewed sense of conquest since the opening of the Red Ocean!

At least the aliens in the Milky Way had millenia in order to reconcile themselves with humanity's dominance.

The aliens in the Red Ocean were quite different! They were experiencing the full brunt and brutality of humanity's hunger for expansion!

The pakklavons, the puelmers, the nunsers and even the space whales were experiencing the calamity of their era!

Death and extinction loomed over their heads, and it was the humans that were responsible for destroying everything they held dear.

Perhaps the only alien race that actually benefited from humanity's entry into the Red Ocean was the voribugs!

The damn space bugs were so tenacious that they were bound to arrive and proliferate in the Milky Way sooner or later!

"It's too bad the voribugs aren't intelligent and rational enough to thank humans for giving them access to a much larger hunting ground!"

If the bugs were actually intelligent enough to hold a conversation with, Ves would not hesitate to convert them to the Ylvainan Faith!

In any case, the rise of human civilization led to a direct drop in the quality of life of every alien that got in its way.

The pakklavon race already lost all of their territories by now. All of their major planets had been scoured from life through massed orbital bombardment and sweeping mechs.

The refugees that had eventually ended up in the hands of the Larkinson Clan had every reason to hate their captors. The mercy that Ves had provided to them was probably unappreciated by these resentful bird aliens.

Therefore, pushing a human religion onto them was indeed a crazy idea!

From what Ves understood about the pakklavons, they were all aliens who were clever and sophisticated enough to stand by their principles.

They were just like humans in that sense. Though there were undoubtedly idiots among them that could be fooled, far too many of the aliens hated humans to the core.

"Can I even convert them all to the Ylvainan Faith?"

The important distinction here was that the aliens sincerely needed to believe in the Great Prophet and the content of his scriptures. Just forcing them to read the translated texts that Ylvaine had left behind was not enough. They needed to believe in the prophet and what he stood for with their heart and soul!

"This is going to be difficult!"

Ves might be the Devil Tongue, but he had never attempted such a ludicrous challenge. Perhaps he would have to pull out all of the stops.

From using glows to starving the captives until they started to study the scriptures were just a few of the measures that he could think of. He was sure that a professional such as Calabast could come up with many more ways to 'convert' the pakklavons into Ylvainan believers!

"What then?"

Just believing in Ylvaine was not enough. The spiritual feedback provided by ordinary humans was miniscule, and Ves did not expect that to change for the pakklavon race.

?? n?? - ? o? ?? , ?`?`m There were only two possible ways to raise the amount of spiritual feedback they could provide to Ylvaine.

First, he could attempt to put them into mechs and hoped that the aliens succeeded in interfacing with the machines.

This was obviously an impossible idea. Bird brains worked differently from human brains! At the very least, Ves needed to get his hands on a neural interface that worked specifically for the pakklavon race, but what kind of neural interface specialist would be so bored to develop such a component for an alien race that would soon go extinct?

Second, he could try and turn them into strong believers before helping them break through. Ves had already taken the first tentative step towards doing so by implanting two different pakklavon individuals with a budget version of his companion spirits.

"This will take a long time to bear fruit, though."

How else could derive more spiritual feedback from the aliens?

"Maybe... I could get them to worship Ylvainan totems?"

Ves thought for a moment. The word 'totem' originally stood for a sacred object that was used for worship purposes.

Though he hadn't specifically studied whether humans could provide a greater amount of spiritual feedback to design spirits if they worshiped in front of totems, Ves had a hunch that this might be correct. It was easy to form a connection to the right spiritual entity if the totem pointed out the exact direction!

"I should look into this once I get back to the fleet." Ves promised.

Solving Ylvaine's chronic lack of spiritual feedback was a long-term problem that could not be remedied in an instant.

What Ves was actually concerned about was finding the source of the resonating exotics cluster!

The lack of results did not diminish his confidence that there had to be a hidden surprise on this moon.

"It is just harder to find, that's all."

The problem was that the Larkinson Clan would have to stay for months if not years in order to comb through the entire moon. Even if it was smaller than a normal terrestrial planet, searching through Iron Crusher's entire surface and interior required far too much work!

There was no realistic way for the Larkinsons to find the needle in the haystack if the only search method was to pull out each individual strand of hay at a time.

"I need to come up with a better search method!"

There had to be more effective and efficient ways to find the source of the weirdness that his clan had discovered.

For now, Ves was inclined to let the digging continue for a few more days, but he feared that the chance of finding anything odd had already vanished.

Part of that had to do with the uncertainty of whether they were digging in the right direction. The longer the distance, the more that tiny deviations in the angle of descent caused the mining team to miss the mark!

The Larkinsons had no time to dig apart half the moon. Ves planned to return to Davute in a couple of months at most so he could start a few new endeavors and facilitate the next round of mech designs. ,c`o`m

"It's not even necessary for me to find this supposed source." Ves shook his head.

The continued lack of results had tempered his eagerness a bit. Now that he was able to think calmly about this situation, he realized that he had become unusually fixed on discovering a novelty.

His adventurous urges were acting up again. Rationally speaking, there was no reason why he should value this opportunity. It was not necessary for the Larkinsons to seek out this weirdness. Ves would be completely okay if he just focused on fulfilling more attainable goals such as filling up the cargo holds with valuable exotics.

"I don't want to give up so soon, though."

His intuition hinted to him that his suspicions might have merit. As good as they were, it was a pity that they weren't developed enough to give him an accurate direction of where he needed to go. He wasn't Ylvaine, after all!

Intuition couldn't accomplish much if Ves didn't possess enough information to string a few clues together.

"Can I rely on my other design spirits?"

Ves soon dismissed this question. None of his other design spirits were expelled in finding treasures or other unknown curiosities. Ylvaine was his best bet.

"Damn. I need to think about this more."

After seeing that the deep tunneling operation was unlikely to make any discoveries for the time being, Ves ordered his armored shuttle to ascend and return to the initial cluster where all of the resonating exotics were buried.

At this time, a lot more Worker Bees were working in this area. They were digging through soil and harvesting every piece of resonating exotic in their bodies!

Ves had ordered the clan to hurry up with mining all of these valuable substances. This was because he didn't know whether there was a strong threat buried underneath this moon.

If the Larkinsons inadvertently woke up a monstrous beast, everyone would have to evacuate Iron Crusher as soon as possible. It would be an enormous regret if the mining teams had to leave all of their valuable gains behind!

At this time, the Larkinsons had already brought much of the recovered materials to the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Even if we have to cut and run right away, we'll still be able to leave this star system while earning a profit."

That said, Ves wasn't satisfied with winning a small prize. He wanted the jackpot and did not want to rest until he solved Iron Crusher's biggest secret!

Seeing that searching and scanning the surrounding terrain did not yield any good results, Ves turned his attention to the valuable materials themselves.

"Please bring over all of the samples of all of the resonating exotics that you have found." Ves requested the mining director.

"We have stored the containers with the samples elsewhere. It will take a moment to bring them up to you, sir."

"I can wait." Ves simply replied and closed his eyes.

He quietly brainstormed and tried to understand the situation of the moon a bit better. He only stopped once a series of floating boxes had entered the interior of the shuttle.

Ves picked up the first type of resonating exotic that he had come into contact with in this star system.

"Hulivaster. The stealth resonating exotic."

Its effects were fairly clear and its potency was within the boundaries of a second-class material.

"How did the MTA manage to find out its properties?" Ves wondered.

There had to be a way to understand resonating exotics on a deeper level and determine where they came from. Resonating exotics were distinctly different from regular exotics but were far more difficult to decipher.

"Can I resonate with this rock?"

He tried his best but did not spark any reactions, as it should. He had attempted to resonate with different materials in the past and always failed.

Ves questioned whether there was more behind the resonating exotics. Could he get in touch with the source of these special qualities through a different method?

"Blinky!"

Mrow!

"You try and see if you can make anything happen. Try your best to elicit a reaction from this rock!"

Mrow?

Blinky tilted his purple head as if he was wondering whether Ves had gotten the wrong cat. Lucky was the undisputed mineral connoisseur in the clan!"

"Lucky is a different kind of cat from you." Ves argued against his own companion spirit. "Lucky is better suited to solve material issues while you are more capable of handling spiritual matters."

In other words, Ves was getting desperate and just thought about letting his companion spirit inspect the samples of ores that the Larkinson had collected.

After a bit of preparation, the Star Cat slowly approached the chunk of Hulivaster and tried to touch it, only for the rock to go through Blinky's body.

Mrow mrow mrow!

"You didn't find anything noteworthy for me to know? This isn't enough! There has to be a better way to manipulate these rocks!"

Ves didn't know what to do aside from fooling around with the samples of the excavated resonating exotics.

From their spread pattern, it looked as if they were originally together but blasted apart after an unknown source had crashed through this moon.

He suddenly froze.

"Wait a minute..."

When he looked towards the local map where all of the different resonating exotics were originally found, he tried to imagine that these materials had flung in each direction due to a destructive explosion.

"Maybe... an explosion that is big enough to shatter an alien starship!"

What did that make these quantities of resonating exotics? They might be the remains of an alien relic from the distant past!

"What... if I stick them all together again?"

Chapter 3805 Exploration Puzzle

There was little reason to think that sticking all of the resonating exotics back together would produce a special result.

It was like throwing in a bunch of random materials in a barrel. Without processing them in a specific manner such as fabricating a new mech, there was no reason to believe that anything desirable would happen.

In fact, the opposite was more likely to happen. A few resonating exotics were quite active and energetic. That was manageable under ordinary circumstances, but if Ves forcefully blended them together, all of them might interact with each other in such a fashion that a destructive amount of energy might get unleashed!

Every manual and instruction on exotic materials always included warnings about recklessly putting different energetic exotics in a single place.

While it was possible to neutralize the negative effects of many of them by blending them into specific alloys whose formulas had been perfected over many years, this was clearly impossible to do for Ves.

Not only did resonating exotics behave differently from normal exotic materials, half of the different types of resonating exotics excavated underneath Violet Ridge were completely new to humanity!

Ves did not know the details of the unfamiliar materials at all. How could he or any other human possibly know how to blend them together in a stable alloy? It was folly to think that he could blend all 49 types of resonating exotics in a way that did not lead to the entire mountain range getting blown to pieces!

"What else can I do, though?"

He did not have many other ideas at hand. While he had already ordered his clan to begin additional digging operations, he had little confidence that tunneling in a handful of other directions would yield any results.

At least there was solid logic behind the decision to dig in the original direction. There was no clear reason why digging in the other direction would allow the Larkinsons to bump into anything remarkable.

Ves didn't care too much, though. The Andrenidae was filled with mining mechs and mining machines. This was the benefit of owning a capital mining ship. The Larkinson Clan had lots of manpower and mining assets to spare!

Aside from that, there was nothing stopping him from putting all of the resonating exotics together and seeing what would happen.

At most, he needed to implement the proper safety precautions and make sure that he nor anyone else was near this potential disaster zone.

In the interest of controlling the environment, Ves instructed a mining team to excavate a large chamber to the side of the key mining tunnel.

Although it would have been safer to conduct this little experiment on the surface of Iron Crusher or in deep space, Ves speculated that he shouldn't go too far away from the original site of the resonating exotics cluster.

If anything important happened but quickly fizzled out due to being at the wrong place, Ves would definitely regret it if the event could only be triggered once!

Although there was a risk that the entire attempt would produce an explosion that might affect the nearby tunnels, the Larkinsons had already made sufficient precautions.

Many mining mechs and mining personnel retreated from the vicinity. More combat mechs were brought over to Violet Ridge, but they mostly remained on standby on the surface.

Ves had also instructed the original mining team to suspend their apparently fruitless attempt to dig all the way to a completely different side of the moon and return to the surface.

The only mechs that remained in the vicinity was their escort. The new Living Sentinel mechs along with the Minerva and the Everchanger ought to be able to handle themselves. They were all sturdy enough to withstand most accidents as long as they kept a respectable distance.

The armored shuttle carrying Ves, Lucky and a team of console operators had retreated as well, though not too far. Ves did not want to miss what might happen. If anything spiritual occurred, then his perception and expertise were crucial to understanding what was happening!

"Will that happen, though?" Ves wondered.

There was no evidence that it should. While he had encountered plenty of evidence that certain alien races in the Milky Way had become proficient in manipulating spiritual energy, he had yet to encounter the same in the Red Ocean.

"Maybe what happens next will surprise me. Or not."

That was the enjoyable part about all of this exploration. He could never guess what he might stumble upon next.

Once he and his men confirmed that everything and everyone was in place, Ves commenced the experiment.

He decided to start small and cautiously press small samples of different resonating exotics together. He did not bother to think too much about matching their sizes, shapes and energy levels or anything.

He just wanted to see whether putting them all together would produce a favorable response. He could figure out his next course of actions from the initial outcome.

"Commence the test." Ves ordered as he observed the data presented by the projected screens.

The method he devised to put all 49 samples together was relatively simple. Ves had brought in a precise gravitic manipulation device that was able to precisely manipulate different objects through manipulating gravity.

At first, nothing happened.

"Most exotics and resonating exotics do not produce violent reactions when put into close proximity with each other." The mining director stated. "However, we should be seeing signs of elevated activity as the active materials subject each other to different effects that will probably alter their states."

Ves nodded in agreement. He knew more than enough about materials science to know that this was an inevitable outcome.

In fact, this was one of the methods in which humanity and other races continually developed stronger warships and other assets over time.

Brilliant scientists continually experimented with combining different exotics together in different proportions and methods. Most alloys that they created through trial and error ended up as flawed and inferior products that had no value.

However, as long as they made enough attempts and figured out a few clues, they would eventually be able to win the jackpot and end up inventing a completely new alloy formula that offered superior toughness or other desirable properties!

What Ves was doing at the moment was far from that. He just pressed different rocks together without any attempt to refine the resonating exotics before alloying them together.

That was an advanced step that he would only think about doing after he obtained an initial result.


"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"We are not measuring any significant rise in energy activity. The resonating exotics that we have put together have all remained stable."

"What?!"

Ves stopped his meandering thoughts and focused on the present. He observed all of the sensor readings and saw that the resonating exotics indeed did not produce any odd reactions.

The fact that over 14 different samples and counting did not produce any notable outcomes was already weird in itself! The situation was too normal! 

Everyone slowly began to take this experiment seriously as the odd pattern continued.

Previously, many Larkinsons thought that this little experiment was bound to end up in an explosion as all of the energetic exotic materials couldn't stand each other's presence any longer.

Instead, the valuable and remarkable mineral ore samples obediently pressed together as if they were ordinary rocks when the Larkinsons knew they were clearly not! Perhaps a few instances of no elevated activity was within the realm of possibility, but the chances that so many resonating exotics just happened to get along with each other was no longer a natural result!

This was especially the case when the introduction of each potentially-unstable material reacted differently to all of the other ones that had been added earlier.

The current outcome was as illogical as locking a Fridayman and a Hexer in the same room only for the two to hold a tea party instead of a death match!

It was like flipping a coin and having it land on heads over 500 times!

At this time, no one doubted that they were on the right track now. Perhaps the entire effort to dig a tunnel that stretched on for a hundred kilometers had been an enormous waste of time.

The true solution of the puzzle had been in front of their noses all this time! If Ves had not thought about randomly putting the samples back together, who knew how much time and effort they would have wasted on a useless diversion!

"These puzzles are too troublesome." Ves said in an exasperated tone. "If someone or something deliberately set this up, then I would definitely want to kill this fellow!"

"I imagine that this is how many exploration missions proceed. There are many difficult phenomena that are impossible to crack without figuring the right solution. We are lucky that we have found a direction that may lead us to our goal."

"Let's not get too excited." Ves cautioned. "Nothing has actually happened yet. If this continues, then what will be the point of putting all of the different types of resonating exotics together? No activity is worse than too much activity!"

Though he grew increasingly more worried about the continued lack of disturbances, he suddenly grew more reassured when the final pieces were just about to press onto the amalgamation of different samples.

"Sir! Our sensors are finally detecting signs of instability!"

"Let me see the data!"

Ves carefully glanced at all of the sensor readings and discovered that the situation finally changed when the sample that contained Celestan Cobalt had come close.

He manually took control of the gravitic manipulation device and slowly pulled this particular rock away from the rest.

The sensor readings calmed down to their ordinary levels again. It was as if merging over 40 different resonating exotics was just another tuesday!

Even a fool would be able to recognize that Celestan Cobalt was special in this instance!

"Let's set this piece aside. Proceed with merging the remaining samples."

He had deliberately set an order where the least powerful and reactive materials went first while the more active ones came afterwards.

Powerful materials such as Substance 14 and Substance 19 joined their other brothers, but unlike their potent properties, they completely remained silent and obedient when remaining in close proximity with many other resonating exotics!

"People will hardly be able to believe that we are able to put 48 resonating exotics together without producing a catastrophic explosion."

"We aren't finished yet. The key material still needs to be added."

The final moment arrived when the hand-sized sample of Celestan Cobalt slowly floated over to the 'ball' of other samples.

This giant ball began to shake as they reacted towards the approach of Celestan Cobalt in different ways!

A few exotics heated up. Others vibrated as if they turned into turbines. The entire collection looked as if it turned into a powder keg that was on the verge of exploding!

When the Celestan Cobalt finally inserted itself into a cavity that the gravitic manipulation device had deliberately created, everything seemed to freeze in time.

The people in the armored shuttle held their breaths.

Lucky's glowing eyes shone brighter as the cat grew intensely curious at what might happen.

Ves stiffened his body in case a powerful explosion might occur.

The Rigid Wall and Rigid Spine mechs had all formed a tight shield wall in front of the entrance of the giant testing chamber.

The Minerva and the Everchanger all glowed brightly in case they needed to take action straight away.

After this inexplicable moment passed, the Celestan Cobalt and all of the other samples of resonating exotics suddenly shone and merged together in a completely unexpected fashion!

"What is happening?!"

"We are detecting a huge energy spike!"

"This doesn't make any sense! Why are they melting together when they haven't been subjected to a lot of heat?!"

"Detecting dimensional fluctuations! The space around the site has grown unstable!"

"The gravitic manipulation device has broken apart!"

"Why did it get destroyed?!"

"It... it... the device got torn apart by a spatial anomaly!"

"What spatial anomaly?!"

"It appears... to be a portal, sir!"

A portal!

Chapter 3806 Smooth Shell

A portal!

A portal had appeared in the testing chamber!

Ves and many other Larkinsons became incredibly attentive as they observed all of the samples disappearing in place while a small portal emerged in their place.

This was a completely unprecedented phenomenon that none of the Larkinsons had ever dealt with! How could they know that bringing together all of these special materials together would produce such an improbable result?

What happened could not be explained by conventional human science!

None of them would exhibit as much surprise if the portal showed up after piecing together all of the parts of an alien machine.

Yet what actually happened was that the Larkinsons put many pieces of raw, unprocessed ore together without putting any thought into the sizes, shapes, proportions and other properties of the experimental materials!

There was no point in asking how or why this could possibly occur. What Ves really wanted to know at the moment was whether the portal was stable and where the opening led to. An unknown party must have definitely formed this arrangement in advance!

"Why? Is it safe? Can we expect anything unpleasant to emerge from the other side?"

Just because they managed to make progress didn't mean it was good. Who knew if the spatial portal was connected to a Had they inadvertently opened up a gate that led into the middle of the blue supergiant star?

Dozens of seconds went by as the people in the armored shuttle as well as the Larkinsons working aboard the capital ships of the clan analyzed the sensor readings as quickly as possible.

Who knew how long the portal would last. They needed to figure it out quickly and decide whether to do anything quickly.

"Send in a probe! We have a few on hand, right? Just shove them in so that we can take a look on the other side!"

Fortunately, the Larkinsons had made adequate preparations so there were definitely plenty of bots and other devices on hand.

A dozen probes of different shapes and sizes soared to the middle and passed through the portal.

As expected, the Larkinsons immediately lost contact with them, but their operators had already accounted for that. The probes received different instructions that dictated what they should do in the event they became disconnected.

Ves waited impatiently for the initial wave of probes to turn back.

Whether they could come back or not was still in question. Either way, the Larkinsons would have a better understanding of what they faced.

Half a minute later, a head-sized probe flew back. Not only did it come back intact, it also brought valuable footage and other sensor readings!

"Retrieve the data from that probe but keep it on a self-contained system! No one is allowed to access them unless you have received express permission! Bring the probe to safety but make sure it is isolated from everything else. If

that thing brought back any space germs or anything, the Larkinsons had to make sure these hazards didn't jump to the expeditionary fleet."

To be honest, neither Ves nor the others expected a spatial portal to appear all of the sudden. It didn't make sense! What they had done was far from building an entire beyonder gate!

"Sir! The portal is slowly beginning to destabilize."

"How fast is it decaying?"

"We cannot say as we do not know at what threshold the portal will collapse, sir. According to our hasty calculations, the portal will only be able to last for 96 hours at most."

"That long?"

"This is only assuming the portal will remain active until all of the available energies have dried up. We cannot make any accurate estimations about the threshold until the portal disappears, but it should show increasingly more unstable signs when it comes closer to collapsing.

"I see."

No portal could last forever without receiving enough support to maintain its existence.

Ves suspected that he could prolong or create a new portal if he brought in additional samples of all of the resonating exotics.

The question was whether it was worthwhile for him to do so. He had already ordered his men to ship many tons of ore to his fleet.

Did he have to order his subordinates to bring them all back again?

Ves was unwilling to do so if it meant burning away much if not all of the valuable resonating exotics that he obtained.

Many of them were completely new and unfamiliar to the rest of humanity. If he submitted large quantities of undiscovered exotics to the MTA, he would gain a large amount of MTA merits for his services!

In fact, even if he could only get tens of thousands of MTA merits at most, it was still worthwhile to give up a proportion of his total loot. Ves needed to make sure he stayed on the good side of the Association, and the best way to do that was to behave as a model mech designer who was eager to make contributions.

Did he have to give all of that up just so that he could form a stable portal to whatever was on the other side?

"Let's wait and see."

Ves stuck to his cautious approach and did not send any actual humans or mechs over to the other side.

In fact, the portal was so small that mechs couldn't even fit through the spatial anomaly.

Human-sized figures should be able to pass through, but Ves did not want to risk any of them getting lost for no reason because they failed to map out all of the dangers.

This was why learning what was on the other side was so important!

After enough time had passed to indicate that no other anomalies or dangers would emerge for the time being, Ves turned his attention to the data retrieved from the returned probes.

He did not know what he might find from the data, but he tried to keep it as confidential as possible in case there was anything controversial.

Ves moved to an enclosed compartment of the armored shuttle and waited until he received a data pad that stored a copy of the probe data.

He switched it on and authenticated his identity before he went straight to the optical footage.

Apparently, the other side of the portal was doused in darkness. The only source of light came from the probes themselves. The flood lights attached to their chassis illuminated a large and empty space that did not look that different from the tunnels and caverns dug by the Worker Bee mechs.

Ves immediately grew suspicious.

"Where the hell is this place? Is this space located on another part of this moon?"

The footage didn't last too long as the probe that made this recording only circled around for a short time before passing through the portal which thankfully looked identical to the one that the Larkinsons had created.

At least this short trip confirmed that anyone entering the portal could get back. ~~the~~

Although the visual footage did not reveal anything about the space on the other side of the portal, the probe contained many other sensor systems that might be able to tell another story.

Ves manipulated the data pad and accessed the other data feeds.

"Vacuum. No air."

"Complete darkness. No light."

"Virtually no particles floating around."

"There's gravity! The downward force is consistent with Iron Crusher's weak gravity!"

Ves slowly concluded that this mysterious space might not be as far away as he hoped. The most obvious answer was that this site was just an underground cave situated elsewhere on the moon.

The data gathered by the different sensors revealed more little details that strengthened this idea.

"I need to see what is actually out here!"

The data gathered by the first probe yielded no further results. Part of that was because the probe was tiny and weak. Another part of that was because the environment on the other side was subjected to a moderate degree of interference!

"This is not the sort of interference produced by artificial jamming." Ves furrowed his brows. "It's the sort of effect that appears when lots of energetic exotics or other abnormal terrain features are present."

He fiddled with the data pad and switched to the footage of the other probes. These ones had been programmed to take wider circuits before passing through the portal again.

One of them circled at a radius of 100 meters.

Another one circled at a radius of 250 meters.

The next one circled around at a radius of 500 meters.

This went on and on until the probe that circled around for 1.5 kilometers finally observed something else than darkness.

"That's... soil!"

An unnaturally smooth and stable wall of soil came into sight in the distance.

While the probe did not stray any closer, Ves was able to freeze the footage and zoom in so that he could observe this terrain feature in detail.

"This... is artificial."

While there were certain anomalies and natural processes that could have created such an exceptional sight, these were extremely low-probability events.

The most likely answer was that someone or something had dug up this soil and created this smooth wall!

As the probe ignorantly flew its circuit without making any attempts to explore the new terrain features, Ves was able to see that the smooth wall continued to look this way in every direction.

He froze the footage and accessed the other data gathered by the probe. On a hunch, he put them together and created a terrain model that roughly showed what the probe had observed with all of its sensors.

A slightly curved wall came into view. It looked like an elongated piece of egg shell.

This was only a small portion of what the probe had observed.

"If this oval wall is present in every other direction... how big is this space?"

Ves adjusted the model so that additional lines appeared on the projected model. They basically followed the curves of the 'egg shell' and went all the way around until an ovoid came into view!

This egg-shaped space was enormous. Assuming that his extrapolations were accurate, the cavern was over 22 kilometers long at its greatest length!

"What the hell is out here?!"

Ves quickly switched to the footage and data gathered by the other probes. While they traveled further from the portal that they had emerged from, they encountered nothing but darkness and smooth soil walls.

He still wondered why and how such a big space could remain stable for so long. Shouldn't the walls have cracked or collapsed due to lack of support? How much time had passed since this space came into existence?

After a bit of time, Ves received a second data pad that contained the data retrieved by the probes that returned later.

He quickly accessed the footage of the one that had arrived last and sped it up. The probe actually couldn't traverse a perfect circle because it would bump into the soil wall if it proceeded any further.

The stupid probe simply flew in parallel to this enormous surface before it finally began to circle around to the other side.

At a certain point, the footage began to reveal a hint of grey!

"Something is there!"

Ves held the data pad closer to his face as he watched the grayish shape grow bigger and brighter.

Once the probe came close enough, Ves completely froze as he took in the dramatic sight.

An enormous skeleton came into sight!

Not just that, but the part of the skeleton that the probe managed to capture with its sensors looked like a long spine that stretched all the way into the darkness.

The size of this skeleton was enormous!

Assuming that it was relatively complete, Ves immediately dismissed the possibility that it belonged to a humanoid species.

The shape of these bones looked so similar to that of an iconic group of species that Ves did not doubt his current guess!

"These are the bones of a giant whale race!"

In fact, Ves already had a more precise guess in his heart.

The only species that could carve such a smooth oval underground cave was the phase whale!

Chapter 3807 In Darkness

After confirming that the data retrieved from the probes did not contain any galaxy-shattering information that could completely break humanity's understanding of reality, Ves emerged from the enclosed compartment and shared the data to a select group of clansmen involved in the current operation.

"What is this cavern? It's so big! Our previous sweeps should have detected it already if it is located close to the surface."

"This... hardly any mining machine could have done a perfect job of excavating such a smooth cavern. It doesn't look like it has been dug by any machine at all. Is there even another entrance or an exit besides this spatial portal?"

"These whale bones look enormous. If they correspond to the phase whales as we have guessed, then the entire skeleton must be over 12 kilometers in length."

"That's larger than a CFA battleship!"

"What monster did we stumble across?! No phase whale encountered by humanity is this long!"

More and more astonishing observations and guesses circulated among the excited clansmen as they let their imaginations go wild.

They never expected that this impromptu exploration initiated by Ves would uncover such an enormous discovery!

Discovering a whole phase whale skeleton was a stupendous find, especially considering that phase whales were individually the most powerful alien race in the Red Ocean!

The natives of the Red Ocean had always feared or revered the phase whales. It couldn't be helped. Once these powerful alien creatures leapt up from the gas giants they grew up in and entered the stars, they could overwhelm entire alien warfleets with their mastery of phasewater and bioengineering!

The only reason why the phase whales were not regarded as an existential threat by the other natives of the Red Ocean was because the race kept to itself most of the time.

The phase whales rightly or wrongly considered themselves to be the strongest and most superior species around. As long as everyone else got out of their way, they had little reason to pay attention to the tiny ants who mostly relied on giant metal constructs to compensate for their inherent weaknesses.

"Phase whales are also known for another important fact that may be relevant to our situation." Director Ranya Wodin reported as she stood in front of Ves. "The aliens are able to harness phasewater in ways that are more advanced than anything we have witnessed before aside from beyonder gates. They are known to create entire pockets of space that are almost completely isolated from the rest of the main plane of existence. The records we have access to do not convey any details, but they suggest that phase whales have built up a lot of space pockets over the years."

"Are you suggesting this is a space pocket? How come it is affected by Iron Crusher's gravity?"

The woman shrugged. "I can't explain that, Ves. Maybe your hypothesis about it being a cave that is located on another part of the moon is right, but I cannot imagine that the arrogant and powerful phase whales would utilize their powers in this fashion. It makes much more sense that this is a pocket space that has previously been undiscovered. It explains how it has been left undisturbed for such a long time."

"We will find out soon enough. We are already sending in additional probes as well as communication beacons, positioning devices and drilling bots to the phase whale cave. If this place is an entirely different pocket space that is isolated from the rest of reality, then we will find out soon enough."

Director Ranya and a team of exobiologists had come over shortly after discovering that there was a giant whale skeleton on the other side of the portal.

The Lifer biotech experts did not possess any in depth knowledge about the phase whale race. Hardly anyone understood them considering how difficult it was to find them let alone capture or interact with the powerful aliens in any meaningful fashion.

However, they were able to combine their own expertise with the public information available from the MTA and the galactic net to make all kinds of inferences.

Director Ranya, who decided to wear an organic protective suit for this visit, was brimming with excitement!

"This is a discovery that can further humanity's understanding of phase whales to a substantial degree!" She gushed like a teenager who met an idol in the fleshed. "Even though it appears that this dead phase whale has aged for millions of years, its skeletal remains can tell us so much about their diet, their growth pattern, the effect of their phasing powers on their enormous physique and more. Right now, we urgently need to retrieve recordings of the front half of the phase whale skeleton!"

"Our next wave of probes are already on their way. I'm just as curious as you to see what it looks like." Ves said.

The initial portal generated by putting a lot of different samples together had a finite lifespan. In order to make the most out of this temporary window in a giant phase whale sanctum, the Larkinsons brought all of the small-scale probes and other autonomous devices that they could send on short notice and crammed them through the portal.

Hundreds of probes and other devices flooded the cavern on the other side. While the portal made it impossible to send wireless transmissions from one side to the other side for unknown reasons, the clansmen solved this problem easily enough by bringing over a thick cable and passing one of its ends through the murky portal.

This simple trick was enough to establish real-time connections between the Larkinsons and their investigation tools.

A lot of data poured in as the probes scoured every part of the cave they could access. The ovoid space was enormous, but the abundance of probes meant it did not take a lot of time to sweep through most of the areas.

The only problem came when the probes attempted to explore the front side and more specifically the giant skull of the phase whale skeleton.

As soon as the probes flew closer, they began to experience more and more interference and other disturbances.

It was as if the probes were entering an anomalous region!

Even though the devices were all designed to be relatively tough and resistant, they became increasingly unable to hold themselves together as they neared the skull of the giant creature.

As soon as they moved a bit too close, the transmissions cut off. The Larkinsons were unable to regain contact with the devices anymore.

"Send in another probe at the missing one's position! I need to see what has happened!"

When another nearby probe closed in on the location where the communications break had happened, Ves and the others saw that the probe that they had previously sent in was still active!

"According to its pre-programmed instructions, it should turn around and go back in the event it has lost contact. We are unclear why it is not returning."

"If it has lost functionality, then it should have crashed to the bottom. Why is it stuck in place?"

This was weird. The probe's anomalous behavior couldn't be explained according to common sense. The only viable answer was that there was an unknown field close to the front half of the phase whale skeleton that distorted the surrounding space to such a degree that the probes acted as if they had become paralyzed!

The Larkinsons didn't give up at that. They sent a few more probes forward at different angles, only for them to all freeze in the same disturbing fashion.

Probes mounted with larger and more powerful sensors and scanning systems maintained their distance but tried to record as much data as possible.,c`o`m

Several of them even shone bright spotlights forward in an attempt to illuminate the darkness and make the distant whale skull visible, but to no avail!

The space further forward had become so messed up that the darkness couldn't be dispelled anymore!

In the hours the portal remained alive, the Larkinsons didn't give up attempting to get a decent sensor reading on that whale skull.

Groups of engineers arrived and cobbled up improvised and improved probes on the spot. These devices passed through the increasingly less stable portal and tried out several ways to break the invisible blockade or achieve their goal from a distance.

Ves held out the most hope for the probe that extended a hollow tube from its chassis. As long as the main body remained in the safe zone, it shouldn't be affected by whatever weirdness messed up the probes up front. At least that was the theory.

Ultimately, this attempt was a bust. The tube that was supposed to relay light and valuable data back to the main body inexplicably failed!

At first, they stopped transmitting data through the solid transmission lines.

Then, the end of the tube seemed to encounter an unknown danger that actually cut it off!

When the probe retracted its hollow tube, the Larkinsons saw that it looked as if the tip had been cut off in an incredibly smooth fashion!

"This looks familiar!" Ves gasped. "Isn't this the same kind of cut that had produced that strange space rock that we picked up shortly after entering the Garimel System?"

Back then, Ves and his staff speculated that the space rock could have only been cut in this fashion by manipulating space.

Now that he and his clan had actually found a giant phase whale skeleton, his earlier guesses were no longer spurious.

The Larkinson Clan had proved that at least one phase whale had definitely visited this star system and manipulated pockets of space for unknown reasons!

Ves widened his eyes.

"Wait a minute! We calculated that the space rock originated from Garimel I more than a hundred years ago or so. This is a completely separate occurrence from what we've stumbled across!"

According to several clues, the discovered space pocket along with the phase whale skeleton had lingered for millions of years. They were ancient beyond belief.

The two occurrences were unrelated, at least on the surface.

However, they possessed several similarities.

The way the phase whales of the distant past formed this underground space pocket led Ves to believe the mysterious space rock had also been affected by the same phenomenon.

If his guess was right, then a phase whale must have created another space pocket in the vicinity of Auralis!

Ves didn't know why the alien would do this. He also couldn't figure out the purpose behind the creation of such a remarkable place.

Was it a sanctuary?

A vault?

A playground?

Whatever the case, the Flagrant Vandal combat carrier that was assigned to inspect the first planet from the giant star might be able to stumble upon traces of phase whale activity!

"What are these phase whales doing here?" Ves questioned with a frown.

There must be a reason why at least two phase whales visited this star system.

"I need more data."

The investigation continued. The probes functioned well enough in the less dangerous spaces in the phase whale cave to retrieve lots of data, but Ves wasn't interested in the tail end of the giant creature's skeleton.

He and many other Larkinsons were hoping to glimpse the crucial skull and front of the once-might creature!

Any beast that had lived long enough to reach this size was an exceptional space creature beyond doubt!

Not even the Titania could match the size of this enormous phase whale!

Ves harbored a few doubts, though.

"According to numerous sources, phase whales only grow until their bodies reach between 1 and 2 kilometers in length.

How come the public database never mentioned that phase whales could reach such a stupendous size? Had all of the elders and most powerful individuals among the phase whale race so withdrawn in their own artificial enclaves?

Their current infestation methods weren't working. Ves knew he needed to send a more substantial scout when he next opened the portal.

"Should I... send in my mechs?"

Chapter 3808 'Royal Tomb'

The portal eventually fizzled out after more than a day.

Fortunately, it clearly grew less stable in the last few hours of its existence. The Larkinsons had plenty of time to retrieve their bots, drones, probes and other equipment.

They only left a few key devices such as a positioning device and transceiver in the hopes that they could locate the ovoid space if it happened to be located elsewhere on the moon.

The search failed to turn up any results. The Larkinson Clan had deployed thousands of mechs in order to carpet search the entire surface of Iron Crusher.

Each of the mechs kept their sensors and communication equipment tuned for the powerful bursts of signals that the beacons left behind in the giant phase whale cave were transmitting on a non-stop basis.

"There are at least three possibilities why we have failed to detect the signals after sweeping across the entire surface of this moon." Calabast spoke to the group of people who had gathered in a conference room aboard a combat carrier that was hovering right beside Violet Ridge.

"The first possibility is that the signals are being blocked by the interference produced by the phase whale skeleton or highly energetic exotic materials."

"The second possibility is that the 'Royal Tomb' is situated so many kilometers underground that the power of the transmitters that we have left behind are unable to penetrate through so much soil."

The Larkinsons had already taken to calling the ovoid cave the Royal Tomb due to the presence of the giant phase whale skeleton. Just looking at it gave everyone a sense of the sheer amount of power and prestige the phase whale must have enjoyed back when it was alive.

Even though the cave was completely devoid of decorations or monuments that could provide hints about the identity of this remarkable phase whale, the immense size and hardness of its remarkably intact skeleton already conveyed a powerful message by itself.

Only a sovereign among phase whales could grow this big and strong!

"The third possibility is that we are dealing with a genuine phase whale enclave. In other words, an artificial three-dimensional pocket of space that the phase whales are known to 'carve' out of our main dimensions and set aside in a different part of reality. The exact science of it is so mind boggling that only the astrophysicists working for the Big Two should be able to understand this phenomenon."

Silence fell in the conference room as the gathered Larkinsons and other guests took in the words. The suited figures all looked as if they were out of their depth. None of them had ever expected to encounter a find as dramatic as a mysterious cave which housed a gigantic phase whale skeleton!

Ves, who sat at the head of the table, broke the silence.

"I think it is safe to say that the so-called Royal Tomb is situated in a real pocket space or space pocket. Regardless, there aren't many powerful whale species in the Red Ocean and the phase whales are the most ubiquitous among them. They are also known for messing with space. The biggest source of doubt is the sheer size and length of the skeleton, but just because humanity has never registered one this big does not mean the phase whale race is unable to grow so big. They are masters of biotechnology and it is not out of the realm of possibility that they can alter their bodies to expand their size, isn't that right, Director Ranya?"

The leader of the Larkinson Biotech Institute nodded.

"From what we know from various different sources, the phase whales are all individualistic as well as highly intelligent sentients. Combining these two traits means that they all tend to develop their own unique biological enhancements. One phase whale might choose to cover his body with armor. Another may decide to increase her stealth capability. There are others that have decided to transplant biological weapons across their bodies in order to turn themselves into giant killing machines. Perhaps the one in the Royal Tomb simply focused on size above every other consideration."

"A creature whose size is equivalent to that of humanity's largest battleships also comes with the downsides of a vessel of this scale." Ves said as he glanced at the projection of the pocket space and the parts of the skeletons that the probes managed to record. "Such a creature must be incredibly sluggish, incredibly heavy and incredibly difficult to feed and sustain."

The suited form of Ranya nodded in agreement. "The bioengineering challenges the phase whale had to solve must have been immense. There is a reason why bioships of this size and scale are extremely rare. Everything must be stable, interconnected and within balance in order for such an immense living creature to stay alive. The Titania took more than six millenia to reach a length of over 5 kilometers, and that was through natural growth. Though these two existences aren't comparable, you can imagine the difficulty of growing a vastly more immense body."

Creatures didn't grow huge without good reasons. While there were certainly advantages to expanding the scale of a body, the cost and effort required to keep everything in working condition grew exponentially greater.

Not even a race as advanced as the phase whales should have much reason to turn into an immensely slow and inflexible giant.

"All of this sounds nice, but what do you Larkinsons intend to do?" Marshal Ariadne Wodin asked as she sat at his immediate side.

Although this discovery belonged to the Larkinsons, their clan was currently traveling alongside their allies.

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan must have noticed the movements below the surface of Violent Ridge, so they had to be informed about this development sooner or later.

Even if they could not provide any substantial help in this exploration, they could at least provide additional security in case monsters emerged.

They also employed scientists and other specialists that were more than willing to lend their expertise to the Larkinson Clan.

The Glory Seekers and the Crossers all wanted this exploration to succeed and yield valuable results. The Larkinsons had already agreed to give them a modest share of any loot they could retrieve from the Royal Tomb.

Ves pointed at the projection of the Royal Tomb and its 'resident'.

The giant skeleton was notably incomplete as the front half was obscured by mist. None of the probes had managed to get a good look of what was in front.

"Now that we have found out that we can open a temporary space portal to this apparent pocket space, we intend to form another one that is larger and will hopefully last longer than the first one. Our goal is to form a gate that is large enough to haul away any of the giant phase whale bones inside this Royal Tomb. I don't think I need to explain to you how valuable these bones are. Their properties should definitely be exceptional enough to make powerful mechs or starships. Even if we do not make use of them ourselves, we can auction them off for an insane profit!"

A part of the probes and bots that entered the first space portal had tried to examine the accessible parts of the skeleton as much as possible.

While the investigation methods weren't powerful enough to decipher everything that Ves wanted to know, the initial details revealed that the bones were as hard and tough as first-class materials!

Just using them to form the internal frame and armor system of a mech was enough to construct a quasi-first-class mech!

With the size and quantity of all of the backbones in the Royal Tomb, the Larkinsons could build an entire mech regiment's worth of bone mechs if they managed to retrieve all of those valuable bones!

"Retrieving those bones will not be easy, sir." Director Ranya warned. "All of our bots have tried to pry away the smallest back bone at the end of the skeleton, to no avail. We have tried to cut, burn, freeze, pull and crush the whale bones, but none of our attempts has succeeded in leaving behind a mark. The skeleton is tougher and harder than we can handle. In addition to that, we believe it is protected by a subtle force field or other phenomenon that the phase whale may have set up before he perished."

Patriarch Reginald frowned. "These bones will make for excellent materials for my future expert mech and ace mech. We cannot leave them behind. If those bots do not have the power to bring the phase whale bones back, then we should bring in the big guns. Send in our mechs. If that isn't enough, then send in our expert mechs."

"And if that isn't enough...?" Ves asked.

"This creature is dead, Ves. No protective measure is invincible. We have so many powerful means of attack at our disposal that I will not accept an outcome where we will suffer a defeat against an inanimate alien corpse!"

"It's not exactly a corpse. At least, it isn't whole." Ranya pointed out. "Have you ever wondered where all of the tons of phase whale flesh has gone? If this creature died in this chamber, there should still be traces of all of its biomass. Assuming the interior has remained as calm, stable and in vacuum for all this time, the phase whale's fleshy body shouldn't have disappeared."

That was indeed an incongruity that Ves was wondering about all this time.

"What if other phase whales stripped away the flesh before deciding to bring their 'king' to this star system in order to entomb its skeleton?"

"Maybe the giant phase whale decided to burn his flesh."

"Could other phase whales have visited the Royal Tomb after the giant creature's death and tampered with its remains?"

There were way too many questions and far too few answers. There was simply too little data to provide them with reasonable explanations of what took place in the past.

It wasn't really important to them anyway. They weren't historians or archeologists who were hoping to expand humanity's insight into the history of the phase whale.

They just wanted to plunder as many gains from the Royal Tomb as possible!

None of the people present in the conference room held any respect or reverence towards the long-dead giant phase whale. Its skeleton was a gigantic treasure in their eyes and they would not rest until they managed to get all of the giant bones into their possession!

Retrieving even a portion of them would be difficult, though.

"Let's leave aside the question where all of the creature's flesh has gone." Ves said as he focused on his main priority. "We need to form and enact a plan to retrieve the bones. I agree with Patriarch Reginald that our previous hardware wasn't strong enough to separate the giant back bones. We need to send in our mechs in order to exert more power onto the skeleton, but to do that we will have to form a space portal that is large enough to accommodate not only our machines, but also the giant whale bones if we succeed in dislodging them from the greater whole."

Ves turned towards a scientist. "How many materials do we need to sacrifice in order to form a large-enough space portal?"

"We have made nonstop calculations based on the data of the first space portal, but we cannot give you any solid answers, sir. According to our estimates, you will need to use up at least 70 percent of the quantity of resonating exotics that you have mined from this site."

"Seventy percent?! That's too much!"

Those resonating exotics were precious as well! Ves could not bear the thought of throwing them all away on a venture that was not guaranteed to succeed.

The phase whale skeleton was so tough and immovable that maybe their strongest mechs could not budge its bones!

Chapter 3809 New Conditions

The giant phase whale skeleton was a tantalizing but confounding find.

On one hand, its exceptional hardness and origin meant that it could probably be used to build exceptionally tough and strong assets.

On the other hand, the skeleton was mysteriously suspended in the middle of the giant cavern while remaining absolutely unassailable.

If the giant phase whale or whoever set up this tomb arranged all of these additional protections, then profiting from this find might be harder than everyone thought.

This was why Ves and many others were hesitating whether they should expend a lot of valuable resonating exotics just to open a giant portal.

Assuming that it was not possible to break apart the giant whale bones into more manageable pieces, the portal needed to be substantially larger than a mech. This required the usage of a much greater quantity of resonating exotics!

In an instance where they might not necessarily be able to retrieve any valuable plunder from the Royal Tomb, Ves had to make a difficult gamble and hope that he had made the right decision.

As Ves continued to mull over what he needed to do, another scientist offered another option.

"We may not need to make use of so many resonating exotics to open a large portal, sir." She said. "We hypothesize that the use of phasewater can amplify the space portal and make it both larger and stable."

"What?!"

Ves grew skeptical. "Are you sure about that? All of the phasewater our clan has gained is locked in our vault. How can you know that this is possible when you haven't performed any experiments with this substance?"

The scientist projected a bunch of diagrams. "We have examined the initial space portal carefully and noticed many signs that match the known applications of phasewater. Due to this, we have formed a hypothesis that states that putting the resonating exotics together actually imitates the act of using phasewater to open a portal."

"This... actually sounds plausible."

This possibility brought up a lot of questions. Why would the phase whale responsible for setting up the tomb create such a strange way of marking and opening the space pocket?

Shouldn't the phase whales inherently possess the possibility of going in and out without relying on all of those strange materials?

Ves, Calabast and many other Larkinsons could already smell that there was something fishy about this entire situation. The entire circumstance was set up in a way that opened up a chance that a group of non-phase whales might stumble upon the resonating exotics cluster and subsequently think about putting them together to open up this hidden pocket space!

Then there was the inability to reach the front half of the giant phase whale skeleton. None of their previous methods succeeded in giving them a solid glimpse of the giant creature's skull.

This was an important matter because the head of the phase whale was by far the most important part of the intelligent creature!

Not knowing what was going on over there represented a massive risk! Who knew if anything dangerous might emerge from that area if they began to disturb the skeleton.

All of these unknown dangers and challenges presented the Larkinsons and their allies with many difficult choices.

Ves was reluctant to use up a large amount of resonating exotics or any quantity of phasewater without a strong guarantee that the venture would pay off for his clan.

What if the second opening of the space portal yielded just as little results as the first time?

What if all of their attempts to cut apart and take away a few bones ended up in abject failure?

What if their activities in the Royal Tomb inadvertently triggered a prohibition that caused the space portal to collapse, thereby trapping every mech and mech pilot inside for eons?

All of these questions and more plagued Ves and the other decision makers to the point of paralysis. None of them wanted to make a decision that could end up wasting a lot of valuable resources or killing a lot of good men for no good reason.

Doing nothing or leaving was the safest choice. They might miss out on obtaining huge benefits, but they did not have to risk any lives and valuable resources if they did not mess around any further.

"Let's adjourn this meeting and continue to analyze the data." Ves eventually suggested. "The main reason why we cannot move with confidence is because we don't have enough clues to know how to meet our goals. We need more

time to gather more insights and achieve a breakthrough in our understanding of the Royal Tomb and its giant resident."

The meeting eventually ended. Those who were physically present left the compartment while those attending through virtual means disappeared even faster as their physical projections switched offline.

Only Patriarch Reginald lingered for a moment.

"Professor Benedict has told me that the phase whale bones can be used as a replacement for many of the armor and structural components of our upcoming Mars Project. They are superior in almost every way." The powerful expert pilot told Ves. "As I have stated earlier, I cannot accept the decision to turn away from this opportunity to harvest the best materials for my next expert mech."

Ves grimaced. "It is not that simple, Reginald. There are treasures that we can only look at but not touch. I'm afraid that this skeleton might be the latter. From what I've learned about the phase whales, they are incredibly powerful and advanced and have been so for many eons. The skeleton we have found is protected by means beyond our comprehension. I am afraid that only first-raters have the means to profit from this find."

"We will not give up this easily, Ves. When I look at the footage of this once-mighty phase whale, I feel the power and dominance of a peerless fighter and destroyer. There is nothing greater to me than using its very bones as the carrier of my own will and strength!"

The sheer desire and obsession radiating from Patriarch Reginald told Ves that the man would not take no for an answer!

This was annoying because Ves came under even greater pressure to move forward.

Although he liked to take a gamble every now and then, this entire situation stank. The phase whales or whoever was responsible for creating the Royal Tomb made numerous deliberate arrangements for specific reasons.

Ves had been fooled multiple times throughout his life. Each time, he stepped forward in haste without bothering to scout the situation properly.

He may have made a lot of mistakes back then, but he learned his lessons and understood the value of information.

This was why he did not want to move forward until they actually figured out what kind of arrangements the phase whales had made with regards to the space pocket.

"We will keep you informed as soon as we have formulated a solid plan to enter the Royal Tomb once again." He said.

"Do not take too long."

Once Patriarch Reginald disappeared, only Lucky and a few guards were left. ~~ç`e`m~~

The cat showed no interest in the previous discussions. He instead spent most of his time chewing on the minerals he received.

Of course, Ves did not hand over any further resonating exotics to his cat. Lucky had to make do with pieces of ore mined from the other parts of the Violet Ridge Mountain Range.

"Meow."

"Stop complaining. The more resonating exotics you eat, the less materials we have left to open another space portal!"

Ves thought about all of the problems he heard and what he could do to solve them. There were too many challenges and many of them were way beyond his capacity to solve.

It couldn't be helped. He was a mech designer, not a scientist who excelled in exploring the traces of advanced alien races.

His comm suddenly chimed.

"Huh?"

When Ves noticed who was calling him, he did not hesitate to accept the call.

The projected form of a familiar friend came into view.

"Jovy! I haven't heard from you in a while!"

"I have been busy these past few months." Jovy replied with a mild smile. "Our previous agreement has set off a lot of waves. I also had to undergo a lot of preparation before my superiors deem me ready to take you up on your offer. The good news is that our wait should soon come to an end. We are currently waiting for another ship to arrive. Numerous important people are on their way to witness the procedure that you have planned and take care of other matters."

The MTA Journeyman was being deliberately vague. Whoever the MTA was sending to the expeditionary fleet must be important or possess special identities.

Ves knew there was little point in asking for more details. He would find out soon enough anyway.

"I see. That is good news, Jovy. I already finished my 'design' of your companion spirit a while ago. I have a feeling that this isn't the reason why you are calling me today, though."

Jovy's expression turned serious. "That's correct. As you can imagine, we have been monitoring your clan's actions all of this time. Your remarkable discovery has not gone unnoticed to us. We have even slipped through our own investigation probes through that temporary space portal. The phase whale enclave you have stumbled upon is of great interest to a couple of departments within our Association. There are calls within our halls that we should claim the entire gigantic skeleton right away."

"What?! This is our find! If you mechers want this skeleton, you should have sent your own ships to this star system. Since you didn't, we have the right to claim our own discoveries!"

"That is not entirely true, my friend. Some discoveries are too great or dangerous to be left at the hands of more ordinary people."

Although Ves was reluctant to move forward with trying to retrieve the phase whale skeleton, he did not want the MTA to swoop in and steal his rightful treasure!

There was much about the phase whale skeleton that fascinated him! The mech designer in him was already drooling about making use of the remains to create fantastic works.

Just like Patriarch Reginald, he was eager to take advantage of the bones to develop superior mechs.

He also had a powerful feeling that these bones might possess additional qualities that were highly relevant towards his design philosophy.

If the bones still had traces of life, he might be able to extract the most powerful spiritual ingredients that he had ever encountered up until this point!

Although size was not necessarily an indicator for power and sophistication, a phase whale that had grown all the way to the size of a modern CFA battleship must have far surpassed the Titania in strength and intelligence!

How could Ves possibly roll over and let others harvest the fruit of his own efforts? It wasn't fair!

"I understand how you feel, Ves. Not everyone within our Association has disregarded your interests. My fellow Survivalists and I have pushed back on the decision to take this discovery out of your hands. Along with the support of a few other supportive factions, we have succeeded in preserving your opportunity. You still have the right to continue your explorations and attempt to extract the bones from the phase whale enclave."

This... was good news!

It sounded like becoming an associate of the Survivalist Faction was not an empty gesture. Becoming a part of this club provided him with actual support from within the Mech Trade Association!

"Then... the phase whale skeleton is still mine?" Ves cautiously questioned.

Jovy responded with a rueful smile. "Yes... but not without conditions. You have two weeks to learn and retrieve everything you can from the phase whale enclave that you have discovered. After that, regardless of any success or failure, the site and everything inside it will be ours."

"Two weeks? That's too short! Can't you give us additional time?"

"I'm sorry, Ves, but that is the most that we can do. You don't understand the meaning of obtaining the skeleton of such an immense phase whale skeleton. In fact, even if you manage to pull it out entirely, we still have to insist that you surrender the majority of it to us. It has immense research value to our Association."

"That..."

Ves became speechless. This was brazen theft. Although he understood that the MTA could do whatever it wanted, he did not feel good about this intervention!

Thankfully, Jovy softened the blow with his next words.

"We will not ignore your contributions, Ves. We will award you with 15,000,000 MTA merits for making this discovery and allowing us to take possession of most of the giant skeleton. We will allow you to keep 10 percent of all of the bones that you have managed to obtain. If you make any additional findings, we will grant you additional rewards."

"10 percent..."

This was a pitiful proportion, but Ves understood that it was already a huge concession on the part of the MTA.

If the mechers wanted, they could just take over the phase whale enclave by force without paying any attention to his needs!

A sense of helplessness filled his body.

Chapter 3810 Tough Bones

Two weeks!

The MTA ultimately gave Ves and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance two weeks to make as many gains as possible from the Royal Tomb.

After that, the entire space pocket and its contents were none of their business anymore.

Ves felt incredibly sore about the entire situation. If the Simile Halifax wasn't following around the expeditionary fleet like a stubborn barnacle, the MTA probably wouldn't have moved so quickly in claiming his discovery.

"Getting too close to the MTA is not always good!" He reminded himself.

The Mech Trade Association had its own interests in mind. His own wishes and desires always took a backseat in the face of one of humanity's most powerful organizations!

It was because of the immense strength of the MTA that Ves did not even think about defying or protesting the MTA's tyrannical directives. A mere Journeyman was not qualified to voice his complaints.

The good news was that the Survivalists stood up on his behalf. Even if they ultimately granted him a few minor concessions, some progress was better than no progress!

Of course, Ves only had Jovy's word to go by. Who knew what really took place behind closed doors. It could be that his friend was exaggerating the role of the Survivalists so that he would think more favorably about the faction.

He shrugged. That wasn't something that he could investigate. All he could do was make the best out of the cards he had been dealt.

"I better make sure the MTA is far away from my fleet the next time I find such an amazing discovery." He resentfully muttered under his breath.

After he reluctantly settled his roiling feelings, he passed on the news to the others.

Naturally, their reactions weren't any better than his own, but they too had the good sense not to fight against this development.

How could they fight against the MTA when their voice was even smaller than that of Ves? They had no hope of overturning this new development!

When Ves called his wife in order to discuss the news with her, she did not exhibit a strong reaction.

"With a discovery of this magnitude, what did you think would happen?" She stated as she held their daughter in her arms. "Phase whales are the strongest native alien races of the Red Ocean. The Big Two has to leverage a large amount of firepower to defeat individual whales. Now that we have found the remains of what might possibly be the largest and strongest phase whale to ever exist, the findings that the MTA can make from this immense skeleton will surely facilitate the war effort. In comparison to all of these major gains, whatever you plan to do with those bones is not important!"

"Whale!" Auralia cutely yelled! "Big whale!"

Gloriana smiled at her daughter. "Yes, sweetie. Daddy has found a big whale, though it is long dead."

The couple moved on to discussing their next moves. Ves hoped that his wife could give him another perspective on the problem.

"Given our failed attempts to retrieve samples of the giant skeleton, it is clear the phase whales have implemented special means to preserve it. I am not sure about this, but all of the years that have passed since then may have weakened the protective measures. If this is the case, then we have a chance of breaking through them. We can do this in two ways. We can either decipher their mechanisms and unravel them or we can rely on brute force to overcome the remaining barriers."

"These are my thoughts as well." Ves nodded. "Personally, I don't have much hope for cracking and dissolving the mysterious protection methods. We are way out of our depth. I can barely figure out a minute portion of luminar crystal technology. There is no chance we have the expertise and knowledge to figure out phase whale technology!"

That left the only viable option, which was to bring in the strongest and heaviest equipment and hope they were powerful enough to chip away the bones from the suspended phase whale skeleton!

Of course, Ves and his men could also attempt to dislodge the skeleton from its place and drag it through the portal whole!

Ves didn't think this was easy, though. The Skeleton occupied the exact middle of the Royal Tomb and appeared to be fixed in place through unknown but undoubtedly powerful means.

The married couple discussed potential methods to harvest portions of the skeletons.

"It is clear that the skull of the phase whale skeleton is where the protection is strongest." She told him. "That is where the interference is strongest and also where the phase whale has developed the most when it was still alive. Our best chances of obtaining any harvest is to cut off the furthest end of the spine. The last vertebrae are probably the most vulnerable bones of the entire skeleton. Although they are not much compared to the total remains, don't forget that they are already large and heavy on their own. We can retrieve more than enough bone to construct a handful of high-quality mechs with all of the tons of bone material that we retain after handing over the rest to the MTA."

"I am not satisfied with taking off the tip, but I'll take it if we can't cut off anything further." Ves sighed. "Do you have any ideas on what kind of means we should use to cut the furthest vertebrae? The best idea that I can come up with is to send in the First Sword and hope that its Decapitator sword is sharp enough to cut through the part that connects the vertebrae together."

Gloriana responded with a skeptical expression. "You are seriously underestimating the phase whale skeleton if you think that has a chance of working. I have studied the data and analysis on the composition and hardness of the bone. It is harder than Unending alloy, you know that? Even if a thousand of the new Redaxe mechs chop at the skeleton with their powerful axes all day, the bones will not even show any traces of damage! In fact, their axes will break long before anything can happen to the skeleton!"

"Normally, you're right, but expert mechs don't play by the same rules as ordinary machines. The First Sword possesses the most potent cutting power of any single machine in our possession, and the reason for that is not because it is strong or possesses the sharpest mech sword, but because it is empowered by true resonance! I am hopeful that the reality-distorting effects of the First Sword's cutting power can exceed whatever hardness and protection is keeping those bones together."

Gloriana still didn't lift her pessimism. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON

"Okay. Let's assume that this is possible. What then? Have you seen the size of those bones? We are talking about a spine that has kept together a biological whale body that is probably as large and heavy as the most powerful CFA battleships in service today! The First Sword may be larger than a human body but its scale is insignificant compared to an organism of this size! I am afraid the First Sword must hack its sword hundreds of not thousands of times in order to cut the furthest vertebrae, and those happen to be the smallest ones of the entire skeleton!"

He sighed. She was right about that. All of the recordings and sensor readings made it clear that not a single part of the bone remnants was of a manageable size!

"If we can't cut off even a single whole vertebra, then we can take a step back and chip away as many 'bone flakes' as we can in the time we have available."

This was an awful-sounding plan, but what else could his men do? The damn phase whale had grown too damned big before it perished!

"You need to form a better plan than hoping that the First Sword can chip away at the surface of the vertebrae, Ves. This is hardly an approach that instills confidence."

"Then maybe we can make use of our other mechs. Our ranged mechs can all switch their luminar crystal weapons to slicer beams. If we bring in enough mechs and have them fire at the same part of the skeleton all day, the vast quantity of concentrated attacks may overwhelm the damned bones!"

"That sounds more viable, but you will be taking a great risk if you proceed with this plan." She responded. "What if the portal destabilizes faster than we expected? What if the attacks trigger a dangerous defense mechanism that instantly crushes everything inside the Royal Tomb? You are risking the loss of thousands of mechs and mech pilots if you have miscalculated."

"I know. This is why I am not going to open up a portal right away. I am hoping that we can all study the data and brainstorm better solutions in the next few days."

"How many days?"

"I truly don't know." Ves shrugged.

They discussed a few more suggestions, but none of them sounded any better than hoping that a literal miracle could magically dislodge the vertebrae from the rest of the giant skeleton!

Once they finally ended the call, Ves fell into thought.

Cutting off the vertebrae was only one of his goals.

He also had other goals, and he had a feeling that he could only fulfill them if he was able to reach the head of the phase whale skeleton!

"How can we possibly reach the front half of the skeleton?" Ves wondered.

The interference and increasingly more violent hazards posed a lethal threat to any mech that attempted to go forward!

Phase whales, especially the older and more mature ones, grew to become stupendously powerful creatures that could challenge the Big Two's best war assets and not get instantly crushed!

Even if the skeletal remains were only covered by a fraction of the power of the phase whale at its height, that was still far in excess of what the entire expeditionary fleet could overcome.

"This is an engineering problem." Ves stated. "That means that it is possible to engineer a solution. We just have to be inventive enough."

A two-week time limit was tight but not unreasonably so. The mechers granted the Larkinsons and their allies enough time to try out a few hopeful solutions.

If those attempts failed to yield any positive results, then chances were that any subsequent solutions were unlikely to do any better.

In that case, it might ultimately be a good idea to cut their losses and settle for the 15,000,000 MTA merits as their principal gain from this exploration.

Ves ruefully smiled. "It hurts to miss out on an insanely strong biomaterial, but 15,000,000 MTA merits is not a trivial sum! I can do a lot with this much merits!"

Though he felt inclined to save them all up, he could choose to exchange them for many useful benefits.

He could get his hands on high-tech goodies such as teleportation devices and first-class augmentations.

He could obtain new perks or extend his current ones.

He could exchange additional PPs.

He could request permission to access and make use of restricted technology.

He could solicit an MTA mech designer to contribute to one of his mech design projects.

In other words, there were so many benefits that he could exchange for that Ves should not be dissatisfied with the MTA's reward at all! His excursion to the Garimel System and back would definitely be profitable in the end!

"Those bones, though..."

Ves really did not want to miss out on those powerful phase whale bones. They beckoned to him. It was as if he was Lucky staring at a pile of first-class exotics. He could not resist the call to retrieve enough quantities of bone to make fantastic mechs out of this exquisite biological material!

"Phase whale bone will be my second Unending alloy if I have anything to say about it!" He vowed to himself!