

Mech 3831

Chapter 3831 Exploring Purgatory

Purgatory was a paradise.

An alien paradise.

That was what Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson thought as his Dark Zephyr flitted from asteroid to asteroid.

Each of the ones he visited were occupied by different numbers of fish-whales. The more desolate ones only contained a few hundred of the beasts while the more populated ones easily held hundreds of thousands if not more of the massive creatures!

The more fish-whales he encountered, the more he wondered how these creatures even kept themselves fed.

Though his Dark Zephyr had spotted plenty of areas that contained alien flora, none of them contained any beasts as far as the sensors could tell him. Even if the fish-whales were herbivores, there were way too many of them for the plants and forests to keep their bellies full!

So far, Tusa had only spotted one of the means the fish-whales sated their hunger.

They grouped up with each other and targeted any of their fellow brethren that looked a little weaker than the rest. As long as the conditions were right, the hungry fish-whales did not hesitate to gang up on their target in order to secure their meals by force!

The disturbing part of this process was that any of the attackers that sustained serious injuries often turned into an extra snack for the fellow victors!

"What a cruel and vicious race!" Tusa sneered.

Though his initial explorations did not leave him with a lot of respect towards this primitive and unintelligent race, that slowly changed as he examined the circumstances on the other asteroids.

The initial ones he explored were all filled with large populations of fish-whales. Many of them tended to cluster at certain locations, though he did not know why at first.

Up to tens of thousands of the fish monsters milled about at certain spots. The elite fish-whales generally kept the stupider and more unruly white fish-whales under control, but with so many aggressive creatures concentrated in specific areas, fights were bound to happen!

Venerable Tusa actually looked forward to these frequent incidents. As long as his Dark Zephyr flew close enough, its passive sensors could record a lot of useful data from the various bouts.

Of course, the ordinary brawls between the grunt fishes weren't worth his time. The white fish-whales were too ordinary to catch his attention.

What Tusa was keen to observe was the other varieties of elite fish-whales.

He and many other humans had long suspected that the fish-whale race had more subspecies than three different colored variants.

Now, his Dark Zephyr obtained conclusive proof that what the expeditionary forces encountered had only exposed a fraction of the diversity of this race!

He had spotted plenty of new varieties among the crowds of grunt fishes on the most populated asteroids.

The one subspecies that caused him to feel a bit of alarm was when he stumbled upon the fattest fish-whale he had seen so far! The yellow monster looked as big and massive as a heavy mech, but that wasn't all. The new variant also stood out because it possessed more eyes than the other fish-whales!

Twelve big eyes were placed around its body, providing the fat, yellow fish-whale with all-round coverage.

Initially, Venerable Tusa thought he had kept a safe distance from the cluster of fish-whales that he was studying.

The yellow fish-whale soon proved him wrong by locking on to the expert mech with its dark eyes before spitting a powerful jet of liquid straight towards the Dark Zephyr!

"Damnit!"

Venerable Tusa did not expect to encounter a fish-whale with a ranged attack. All of the ones he had seen so far only used their physical bodies to attack their enemies. The yellow fish-whale's actions completely caught him off-guard for a moment, so much so that his Dark Zephyr had to adopt an awkward posture in order to get out of the way of the surprisingly accurate ranged attack!

The fast jet did not soar up forever. Eventually, the low gravity of the asteroid exerted its effect and dragged it down until it hit the empty rock.

The sizzling and other disconcerting reactions showed that the yellow fish-whale attacked by firing a jet of corrosive liquid!

Though Tusa did not think that the corrosive spit could burn through the Unending alloy plating his expert mech all at once, the more vulnerable components could easily be taken out. He would have to end his scouting mission early if all the sensor arrays got taken out at once!

"You can't take me by surprise anymore!"

Now that Tusa became fully aware of the threat posed by the yellow creature that he had taken to calling the spitter fish, it was trivially easy for his expert mech to evade the follow-up attacks.

The Dark Zephyr nimbly weaved and dodged as Tusa sought to test the spitter fish's combat capabilities.

Though Tusa did not dare to go too close and get surrounded by all of the grunt fishes, he did his best to explore the spitter fish's strengths and limitations.

After dodging a few volleys, he gained a good measure of their threat.

"This spitter fish is like a cannoneer mech. It can't spit that fast, but each hit can disable a mech! The accuracy and precision of its attacks aren't bad either."

The biggest constraint of the spitter fish was that its spit could only reach so far. They arced back to the surface of the asteroid after flying a moderate distance.

This meant that ranged mechs could easily eliminate this spitter fish by hovering beyond its maximum range!

However, the spitter fish appeared to be well-gearred towards resisting ranged attacks. Their large, meaty bodies were able to absorb a lot of hits.

"Is this all you got?!"

Perhaps the yellow fish-whale took offense at Tusa's impertinence, because it suddenly spat a different glob of spit that happened to be glowing like a green lightbulb!

As soon as this bright green jet launched in the direction of the Dark Zephyr, the hundreds of white grunt fishes that accompanied the spitter fish abruptly left their positions and followed the path of the glowing spit!

"Yikes! It's time to leave!"

The Dark Zephyr was a poor whale-killing mech. It did not carry a long and massive whale-cutting saber like the Bolvos Rage. Though its knives were still deadly enough to carve up the grunt fishes, their killing efficiency was too low against these monsters!

Tusa had no qualms about running from the provoked fish-whales. His job was to scout and collect valuable observation data. Fighting only inhibited his purpose.

After stumbling upon the spitter fish, he encountered several other rare varieties among the clusters milling about on different continents.

He encountered a purple fish-whale that was three times the size of an ordinary mech and possessed a huge maw that it used to the fullest extent.

The biter fish was able to use its strong and huge maw to bite through weaker opponents or grapple onto stronger opponents!

Whenever the latter happened, the victim stuck between its jaws became completely vulnerable to the attacks of other friendly fish-whales!

"Can't let them get close."

Tusa also encountered an even deadlier green fish-whale. He called it the warp fish because of how actively it made use of phasewater to perform a variety of abilities.

The warp fish was able to form a space barrier to block the attacks from a hostile spitter fish.

The warp fish was able to warp the surrounding space so that its allied grunt fishes were able to reach their opponents faster.

The warp fish even exhibited the ability to form a small localized spatial disturbance that inflicted moderate internal damage onto the hostile spitter fish!

As soon as the massive yellow fish-whale got hit by the last attack, it practically lost its ability to spit more attacks.

Unfortunately for the warp fish, the spitter fish got the last laugh. The fat yellow fish self-destructed, spraying whatever corrosive acid it contained onto the surroundings!

Many grunt fishes died a painful death as their bodies upon contact!

The Dark Zephyr managed to capture all of this, causing Tusa to become more and more vigilant towards the fish-whales.

"These elite variants really shouldn't be underestimated."

The scouting mission continued. The Dark Zephyr encountered a few more varieties, but they were too sparse for Tusa to feel concerned.

It was only when his expert mech approached the largest central asteroid that the Dark Zephyr paused.

Tusa did not dare to get any closer. According to the long-ranged sensors of his expert mech, the central asteroid contained over half a million fish-whales, and that was only the ones that were visible from one of its sides!

His instincts screamed as he thought about getting closer.

Though his expert mech also spotted signs of artificial structures and strange terrain features, Tusa did not want to provoke this massive nest. Who knew whether there were stronger fish subspecies on this massive landmass that could pose a threat against expert mechs?

"This must definitely be a key location to the fish-whales!"

The expert pilot did not think he would be able to gain anything further without crossing a dangerous line, so he resolutely pulled out his expert mech and explored a different asteroid instead.

The other ones were much more reasonable in comparison. After exploring enough of them, the sights he encountered suddenly changed.

The asteroids he explored next no longer contained as many fish swarms as before.

It wasn't uncommon for Tusa to encounter tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of fish-whales at the previous locations.

Now, his expert mech hardly spotted concentrations that surpassed a thousand fish-whales!

"What is going on?" Venerable Tusa wondered.

The fish-whales he encountered next were no longer distinguishable by their colors and sizes.

Instead, they became more... individual. They came in different shapes and sizes. Many of them boasted multiple colors, some of which were shaped in patterns.

It was like looking at many different cat breeds at once!

Due to all of the uncertainty, Tusa did not dare to stray too close to these individualistic fish-whales. Who knew what powers they possessed?

In fact, his instinct already told him that numerous perceptive fish-whales already caught sight of his expert mech!

They simply did not bother to take action because the Dark Zephyr maintained a lot of distance from their location.

"I'll go now."

Tusa learned his lesson and made sure his Dark Zephyr stayed further away from the fish-whales.

It wasn't until he explored an adjacent asteroid that he finally encountered a drastic sight.

"These... these are structures!"

Massive structures the size of starships or greater were clustered on various points of the asteroids.

They looked like they were big enough to house phase whales, so Tusa immediately guessed they were created by the same party responsible for making Purgatory.

What reinforced this suspicion was the fact that many of them looked aged and derelict. Many of the structures actually looked like ruins. The fish-whales that claimed these territories basically squatted on them without doing anything further.

The more intact structures were more interesting, though. Tusa spotted plenty of activity from them and the individualistic fish-whales that roamed around them looked healthier and stronger.

As Tusa continued to explore this interesting landmass from a distance, he suddenly encountered a sight that subverted his expectations.

Tens of thousands of mono-colored fish-whales had departed from a nearby asteroid and flew over to the lab asteroid!

It did not seem as if they were paying a friendly visit to their neighbors, and what happened next proved Tusa right!

"They're attacking each other!"

Guided by the glowing spit launched by the yellow fish-whales, hordes of white fish-whales descended upon their individualistic cousins!

The defenders were not caught off-guard and already formulated their own response.

Some of them launched plasma bolts. Others utilized phasewater to slow down and debilitate the attacking fish. A few even launched fleshy bombs that fractured and struck the surrounding grunt fishes with damaging spikes!

Tusa became completely shocked by this instance of fish-on-fish warfare!

"It's... it's a civil war! The fish-whales are divided!"

Chapter 3832 Targeted Evolution

Venerable Tusa made a discovery that could completely change the Golden Skull Alliance's perspective on large pocket space that it had stumbled upon.

The fish-whale race not only turned out to be much more diverse than everyone initially thought, they also appeared to be divided into several hostile camps!

Since no one was here to view the amazing sight of fish-on-fish warfare, Tusa took it upon himself to name the different fish-whale groups. This not only made it easier for him to categorize his new discoveries, but also allowed him to communicate his findings more effectively after he returned.

The original fish-whale group that Tusa encountered during his initial exploration run resembled that of a hive. The group bred a huge number of cannon fodder that were clearly intended to be cheap and expendable. The differently-colored elites were a step up from the plain white cannon fodder and possessed the ability to direct and take charge of all of the grunts.

However, while Tusa had yet to encounter a fish-whale that was clearly in charge over the elites and the rest of the group, it was easy to infer that such a super fish-whale existed. His best guess was that the 'queen' or whatever resided in the middle of the central landmass. There were so many fish-whales over there that it was probably the center of the high-ranking fish-whale's 'kingdom'!

"I'll call you guys the Swarm Kingdom."

The Swarmers as Tusa called the group of attacking fish-whalers truly emphasized quantity over quality. Even their elites such as the sergeant fishes, assassin fishes, spitter fishes, biter fishes and warp fishes were getting their fish-butts kicked by their opponents!

The individualistic fish-whales that were defending their landmass against the Swarmer incursion displayed a lot of individual power.

Each of them looked and fought in different ways, so much so that their actions lacked coordination. Despite the lack of unity, the individualistic fish-whales still managed to hold their ground by relying on their vastly superior combat prowess!

For example, one bulky fish-whale boldly flew forward to meet the incoming Swarmers. Just before it made contact, hundreds of dark and vicious bone-blades sprouted from its body.

Blood sprayed and splattered across an expanding space as the bladed fish-whale unceasingly shredded dozens of grunts at a time!

Venerable Tusa looked on with astonishment at how this amazing creature displayed killing efficiency that was far above his own!

Although his Dark Zephyr was a far more superior duelist, his expert mech only possessed two thin knives after all. Let alone shredding dozens of grunt fishes at a time, he would already struggle with killing two of the weak white fish-whales at a time!

The Swarmers instinctively reacted to the threat that had entered the midst of their vanguard. Even more grunt fishes sought to surround and overwhelm the bladed fish-whale, but that was exactly where the powerful creature was at home!

No matter how many grunt fishes tried to approach and bite the interloper, the only result they achieved was to get cut up by one of the many blades that stuck out of their target's body!

Even if the bladed fish-whale became surrounded by impaled grunt fishes, the Swarmers following up on behind became stimulated by all of the bloodshed.

Since the unintelligent grunt fishes couldn't get close enough to attack their target, they became overtaken by their cannibalistic instincts and bit at their brethren that had gotten impaled by the many blades!

Their behavior not only finished off the stuck and heavily-injured grunt fishes, but also caused the next wave to accidentally bite and impale themselves on the blades that had previously crippled their predecessors!

This resulted in a new round of cannibalization and impalement. The grunt fishes were so feral and short-sighted that they completely lacked the perspective to realize that this was nothing but a giant that especially targeted all of their shortcomings!

In a span of a minute, over a hundred fish-whales already succumbed in this fashion!

Even though the pressure on the bladed fish-whale was not light, the creature looked large and strong enough to handle all of the pushing.

The bladed fish-whale didn't even have to do anything anymore to kill as many grunt fishes as possible. The killing machine simply floated in place and made sure its sharp and seemingly indestructible blades continued to impale the incoming grunt fishes on a continuous basis!

"This... this is perverse!" Tusa reacted with shock.

Although he was not an exobiologist or anything, he definitely saw that it was not a coincidence that this fish-whale developed such an effective approach against the Swarmers. There had to be a purposeful hand behind this creature's growth or evolution.

When Tusa briefly directed his attention to the derelict but still recognizable giant ruins, he started to suspect that this asteroid likely possessed the means to allow this bladed fish-whale to develop in such a highly-targeted fashion.

As time went by, the main wave of the Swarmers finally approached the bladed fish-whale.

Sergeant fishes began to appear and used their stronger and harder bodies to charge at the obstacle in their way!

Unfortunately, their fate was hardly any different from that of their lesser brethren. The sergeant fishes only managed to push the bladed fish-whale back a bit. Their thicker and denser bodies did not prevent them from getting impaled by the blades that never seemed to break!

Although their larger and tougher physiques allowed the sergeant fishes to cling to life, that didn't stop the surrounding grunt fishes from treating their former bosses as their prey!

Eventually, all of the sergeant fishes that got stuck in place turned into food for their own little brethren!

Nine different sergeant fishes succumbed in this fashion before the Swarmers formed a proper response.

After receiving an unknown signal, the surrounding grunt fishes temporarily lost their bloodthirst and spread away from the bladed fish-whale.

Numerous bodies clung to the massive and deadly individualistic fish-whale. Blood poured out of the victims like a macabre waterfall. It became increasingly harder for the simple grunt fishes to hold themselves back!

However, this brief period of calm was enough for the spitter fishes and warp fishes to get into range and gain a clear line of sight against their target.

A substantial volley of spit jets struck the impaled bodies, causing them to die and melt like butter in a hot oven.

Once the bodies were out of the way, the second volley of spit jets struck the creature's thick and leathery hide without any misses!

The bladed fish-whale was obviously built like a tank, so while it wasn't able to dodge the incoming attacks, its thick and resilient hide did not easily fall apart like the bodies of the weaker fish-whales.

However, the reactions taking place on the surface of the bladed fish-whale's body indicated that the acid was still wearing away at the creature's defenses. When a second volley of spit struck the bladed fish-whale, the monster finally showed an expression of pain!

That was when the warp fishes among the Swarmers made their move.

Strange fluctuations emanated from their enchanting green exterior. The Dark Zephyr's gravitic sensors detected fluctuations that corresponded to the activation of a substantial amount of phasewater!

"Each of those green fish-whales are floating treasure bags!"

Tusa would have been tempted to approach them and assassinate them in quick succession if they were alone.

However, despite the earlier casualties, there were still far too many grunt fishes to allow him to get away with such a suicidal act!

The bladed fish-whale showed why it was ultimately not a good idea to confront so many fish monsters head-on in such a high-profile fashion.

Soon, the warp fishes activated their mysterious phasewater-derived abilities. Most of them seemed to destabilize the space occupied by the bladed fish-whale.

Though the Dark Zephyr did not detect a lot of signs of damage, Tusa guessed that all of the strange spatial disturbances must have messed up the bladed fish-whale internal organs!

At this time, the bladed fish-whale already started its retreat, but it was way too slow and vulnerable against the constant attacks of the spitter fishes and warp fishes!

Just as Tusa thought that the bladed fish-whale would get melted down by getting spit upon a hundred times, the space around the creature suddenly wobbled in a much more serious manner.

In one moment, the bladed fish-whale was out in the open and completely vulnerable to getting attacked from range.

In the next moment, the heavily-injured hero fish returned back among its brothers where a couple of friendly fish promptly brought their comrade away for treatment.

"There's another big fish among the defenders!"

The Dark Zephyr recorded the most powerful phasewater activity to date in a fish-whale that possessed glittering silver scales.

If the Dark Zephyr's sensors weren't wrong, the silver fish-whale's entire body was laced with phasewater!

There was so much phasewater in this remarkable fish-whale's body that it could probably power the warp drive of a capital ship!

"Where are these monsters getting all of their phasewater?!"

The power at the silver fish-whale's disposal exceeded that of the warp fishes belonging to the Swarm Kingdom.

Whereas the warp fishes were only able to attack distant targets by disturbing the fabric of space, the silver fish-whale unleashed a veritable spatial storm!

Hundreds of grunt fishes and several elite fishes tore apart as the space they occupied seemed to fracture for a moment!

Although the effect only lasted a brief amount of time, the outcome was absolutely devastating!

The Swarmer offensive temporarily stalled as thousands of surrounding grunt fishes rabidly turned their attention to the separated body parts and ate as much available flesh as possible!

While this happened, the remaining defenders weren't idle. Those with ranged attack capabilities continually used their means to damage the aggressive invaders.

One fish-whale generated spikes from its back and subsequently launched them at the distant swarm.

Though a single spike was unlikely to take out a grunt fish, as long as it succeeded in making a creature bleed, the victim would soon turn into food for its own brethren.

This was yet another sign that the individualistic fish-whales developed targeted solutions against the Swarmers!

After slaughtering thousands and thousands of Swarmers, the invading force finally reached the surface of the asteroid.

The fighting turned a lot bloodier at this point. The defenders employed many amazing and effective means to slaughter a multitude of grunt fishes, but a few of them started to get overwhelmed as the elites among the Swarmers ganged up on their targets!

The silver fish-whale unscrupulously made use of its phasewater abilities and destroyed hundreds of Swarmers at a time by unleashing deadly, wide-area space storms that none of its opponents could resist!

Another fish-whale with hard, maroon scales breathed fire that was hot enough to burn the grunt fishes that came into contact with the flames.

By relying on all of these wide-area attack capabilities, the Swarmers were quickly being cut down to size.

"It's not enough, though."

The attackers were simply too numerous. Hundreds of bodies were ready to fill in the void left by their brethren and more were ready to follow suit at any time!

Just as Tusa thought the Swarmers were able to break through the defensive line of their opposition, a fish-whale that was larger and more majestic than any other fish emerged from one of the large and more intact buildings.

The newcomer possessed a body that was as large as a small starship and exuded much more power than usual. The creature's rippling azure scales and remarkably bright eyes indicated that it had incorporated much more remarkable enhancements than its smaller comrades.

As soon as the giant fish-whale emerged, the Swarmers finally slowed down their offensive. Their fear and vigilance towards this super enemy was greater than their instinctual urges!

The giant fish-whale slowly opened its maw and began to unleash a wide energy blast that wiped out at least a third of the attacking force at once!

"What?!" Tusa reacted with much more shock than before!

The power exhibited by this giant fish-whale vastly exceeded that of everything else he had encountered before!

Not even the Bolvos Rage was able to wipe out thousands of Swarmers with a single salvo of attacks!

The only enemy in his memory that possessed a comparable amount of combat power was one that still evoked a lot of dread in his mind.

"This... fish-whale king... has the power of an ace mech!"

Chapter 3833 Fish Societies

The battle did not last much longer after the giant king fish made an appearance.

The supremely powerful king fish did not attack as exaggerated as before, but its next moves confirmed to Tusa that the powerful creature possessed enough firepower to match that of a warship or an ace mech!

The only reassurance to Tusa was that the king fish did not possess any extraordinary traits as far as he could tell. The monstrous and utterly unique monarch creature relied on its extraordinary biological properties to fight back against the Swarmers. The Dark Zephyr detected no signs of true resonance or other extraordinary manifestations, which meant that the creature was probably not as difficult to deal with as an actual ace mech.

"It's still a darn powerful fish, though!"

The king fish completely dominated the battlefield as soon as it emerged. It did not appear to be in a hurry to close in on the enemies. Instead, it maintained its distance and utilized various ranged attacks to completely unsettle and disrupt the Swarmers.

In one moment, the king fish launched a strange flesh ball that landed in the midst of the surviving enemy formation like a bomb.

Once the flesh ball fell into place, it exploded and sprayed hundreds of Swarmer fish with poisonous liquid that caused the victims to lose focus and behave more erratically!

In another moment, the king fish exerted its phasewater reserves to tear a space crack in the center of the enemy horde, causing the attackers to get split up from each other!

While all of this went on, the other individualistic fish-whales quickly regained their momentum and beat back the enemies that had gotten close before bombarding the remainder!

"It's over. The Swarmers have lost their only advantage."

When the group of weak Swarmer fish dropped below a certain quantity, they no longer possessed the numbers to overwhelm the defenders.

Nonetheless, none of the grunt fishes or elite fishes showed any hint of retreating! They continued to go forward in order to take down as many individualistic fish-whales as possible. Blood continued to be shed as the two groups of fish did not show any mercy towards each other!

By the time the battle had come to an end, the Swarmer horde ceased to exist. All of their bodies ended up in the bellies of their fellow comrades or fell down onto the surface of the asteroid that they sought to conquer.

The defenders didn't look so good, though. Though they only lost up to fifty or so unique fish-whales, each of them were strong and expensive to nurture. The losses also amounted to a significant proportion of the defenders on this landmass!

In addition to that, the price the king fish had paid to wipe out so many Swarmer fish probably wasn't light. The creature already began to droop as it had just exerted a handful of highly impactful attack abilities.

The survivors soon began to enjoy their spoils. They approached the places where piles and piles of Swarmer fish bodies had fallen and stoically partook in their meals.

Unlike the cannibal fish that Tusa had encountered before, these new ones did not look as if they were letting their baser instincts control their behavior. They looked fully aware as they replenished the energy and body mass that they had lost during the battle!

The king fish ate the most bodies by far. Its huge body and its powerful energy emissions made it clear that it probably needed a lot of resources to sustain its massive body. This might also explain why the rest of the fish-whales did not grow to such an exaggerated size. The resources available on this asteroid might not be enough to sustain another super-sized monster!

"This... is a contest of attrition."

Though Venerable Tusa was not as well-versed in war and strategy as Commander Casella, he still knew a thing or two about warfare.

With everything he had seen so far, he understood that the Swarm Kingdom probably had the initiative in this intraspecies war.

"I have personally seen how the Swarm Kingdom controls at least 9 asteroids. If each of them produces resources, then that means the Swarmers have a massive quantity advantage. They can easily launch attacks on a frequent basis without getting distressed because they can quickly replenish their ranks on account of their abundant territories and huge population base."

The defenders of this asteroid appeared to be following the opposite route. Each of their fish-whales were unique and much more powerful than their Swarmer counterparts.

Given how diverse they looked and how they all grew in unique directions, Tusa dubbed them the Evolvers.

"If there is one benefit to this battle, it is that the weak fishes get eliminated by the Swarmers while the strong fishes survive by virtue of their superior evolutionary direction."

The meat-grinding bladed fish, the wizard-like silver fish, the area-denying fire-breather fish and above all else the king fish that was basically the fish-whale equivalent of a juggernaut each showed that the Evolvers had become highly proficient at slaying their opposition.

Still, Tusa didn't think the defenders of the ruined labs could hold onto their territory forever.

He didn't know how quickly the Evolution Kingdom could replenish its losses from this invasion, but he was pretty sure that the loss of over a hundred-thousand fishes was completely negligible to the much more massive Swarm Kingdom!

Just as Tusa wondered how long it would take for the Swarmers to take over this asteroid, the king fish that had just eaten hundreds of fallen bodies abruptly turned and directed its bright eyes straight in the direction where the Dark Zephyr was hovering in the distance!

Although the Dark Zephyr wasn't under stealth, Tusa had made sure to maintain a healthy distance and minimize the emissions of his expert mech.

The perceptive abilities of the fish-whales that he encountered so far weren't impressive. Though the Evolvers looked more developed than the uniform fish subspecies of their enemies, Tusa saw little reason why they would enhance their observation capabilities considering that the Swarmers were too numerous to hide their movements.

Yet despite all of these considerations, the king fish was much sharper than it looked and stared straight at the distant metal speck!

If this wasn't enough to alarm Venerable Tusa, then what happened next completely changed his attitude towards the powerful king fish.

A strange mental intrusion began to intrude upon his mind. Though it wasn't particularly strong and focused, it reminded Tusa a lot of the glow of a design spirit!

The foreign mental pressure only pressured him for a brief amount of time before it began to communicate a strange word.

WUGEENAE.

Tusa almost jumped out of his piloting seat as the king fish spoke to him from a distance!

The capacity to speak a coherent word was not only a clear sign of intelligence and sentience, but also indicated that the Evolvers probably established at least a rudimentary form of civilization!

If the scariest part about the Swarm Kingdom was its huge population of disposable cannon fodder, then the trait that stood out most from the Evolution Kingdom was how clever they became!

Though Tusa could have decided to stay and make first contact with the king fish, that was definitely not a part of his objectives.

He resolutely turned his Dark Zephyr around and drove it away from the lab landmass as fast as possible!

Tusa quickly felt the alien creature's mental presence fade away. He relaxed but still maintained a bit of vigilance as the asteroid behind his expert mech grew smaller.

It wasn't until he confirmed that the king fish hadn't followed him that he slowed down his expert mech and took stock of the situation.

"There are still more asteroids to explore. How many different fish societies will I find?"

The existence of two distinct societies of fish-whales implied that more groups existed as well.

Although Tusa did not know whether the remaining ones were easy to deal with, he still felt obliged to uncover all of them before he returned to Fort Fishblood. The expeditionary forces urgently needed to gain awareness of all of the different fish-whale 'kingdoms' that populated this isolated pocket space.

"Let's go, then!"

The remaining asteroids did not disappoint his expectations.

While the one he visited next was occupied with clever-looking individualistic fish-whales that probably hailed from the Evolvers, he encountered a completely different group of fish-whales on the subsequent asteroid.

The new group did not display the numbers of the Swarmers nor exhibited the sheer diversity of the Evolvers.

Instead, the fish-whales that occupied the asteroid were relatively few in numbers while looking like different-sized clones from each other.

The third group of fish-whales possessed oval bodies and featured a single uniform light blue coloration. The only way for Tusa to tell them apart from each other was by looking at their battle scars and their sizes.

Although these fish-whales didn't look strong at first glance, the Dark Zephyr's sensors informed Tusa that both the light blue fishes and the asteroid they treated as their territory possessed one extremely important trait.

Both of them contained an abundant amount of phasewater!

The Dark Zephyr spotted visible lakes and pools of water. Small but noticeable quantities of phasewater were deposited underneath. Even now, several light blue fish-whales were peacefully diving underwater so that they could harvest the phasewater generated through unknown means!

"This place is a treasure trove of phasewater!"

With such an abundant supply of phasewater, it shouldn't be a surprise to see that many of the fish-whales in this place accumulated a lot of this precious substance. Each of them looked like mobile phasewater deposits in his eyes!

However, Tusa quickly restrained his urge to dive in and cut them all to pieces. He had already seen how the handful of phasewater fishes among the Swarmers and Evolvers were able to debilitate and destroy enemies by generating artificial spatial anomalies.

Though the blue fish-whales did not accumulate as much phasewater as the king fish of the Evolution Kingdom, there were many among them that possessed similar amounts of phasewater as the silver fish!

With so many powerful 'phasewater wizards' among this group, Tusa had no doubt that the inhabitants of this phasewater-rich asteroid could easily tear entire hordes of Swarmers into pieces!

"This place should not be easy to invade at all." Tusa guessed. "The Swarmers and the Evolvers should both be eying this phasewater asteroid, but the fact that they failed to hold it means that the current occupants shouldn't be weak!"

Having learned his lesson, Venerable Tusa did not dare to look down on these docile-looking fishes and moved on to continue his scouting run.

It soon turned out that the Phase Kingdom as he called it only ruled a single asteroid. The next ones were relatively barren and only contained small and loose groups of Swarmers and Evolvers.

Tusa grew a little bolder and flew his Dark Zephyr closer in order to gather more detailed data on the barren landmasses.

According to the initial results, they contained few resources, few energy sources and no phasewater. None of the fish kingdoms took them seriously.

After exploring a couple more barren asteroids, Tusa neared the end of his scouting run. It wasn't until he visited one of the final ones that he encountered a new group of organized fish-whales.

These ones resembled the Phaser fish as Tusa called the ones occupying the phasewater-rich asteroid.

The biggest difference was that the fourth group of fish-whales were all black.

The Dark Zephyr also did not detect any phasewater in their bodies. The asteroid they were in did not show any signs of being rich in phasewater.

What stood out from the black fish-whales was that they were each brimming with heat emissions. The entire asteroid they were on was a lot warmer than normal as well. There were even specific sites where the sensors detected a lot of energy spikes!

As the Dark Zephyr captured the rich energy signals from the asteroid, the nearest group of fish-whales abruptly moved into action.

They turned their backs towards the distant expert mech and extended organic pipes from their bodies.

Worrisome concentrations of energy welled up beneath these pipes.

"Oh hell."

The Dark Zephyr dodged aside as over sixty laser beams raked its previous position!

It appeared the fourth group of fish-whales were all capable of bombarding their enemies at range!

Chapter 3834 Foreign Landscape

When the Dark Zephyr finally flew all the way back to Fort Fishblood, the rich amount of scouting data and personal notations provided by Venerable Tusa ignited a bomb among the expeditionary forces!

"There are more groups of fish-whales in this pocket space!"

"Are the four 'kingdoms' hostile towards each other?"

"The Swarm Kingdom is much larger and stronger than the other three fish kingdoms. I bet that it has probably overrun a few other groups throughout the history of this pocket space!"

"How can we do anything in Purgatory with all of these scary fish-whales in place? Even if we conquer an asteroid at great cost, the other fish-whales can easily swoop in and push us away!"

The existence of multiple fish kingdoms, each of which were presumably hostile against each other as well as outside intruders, massively complicated the strategic considerations of the human invaders.

The strength of a couple of thousand mechs was wholly insufficient to take over the entire pocket space, let alone conquer one of the key landmasses of the different fish kingdoms!

The observations made by Venerable Tusa had indeed brought the clarity that everyone in the Golden Skull Alliance wished for, but they also painted a terrible picture of this phase whale enclave where different varieties of fish-whales had long run amok.

New plans had to be made and everyone needed to pursue clearer goals. Right now, none of the mech pilots stationed in Fort Fishblood knew what they were even doing in this dangerous place.

If the four kingdoms all combined their forces and attacked the human invaders all at once, then there was no hope of winning or maintaining control over the mysterious alien gate!

After a few hours, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance convened a virtual meeting in order to discuss the latest findings.

The people attending the meeting were located on different sides of the active spatial portal. Although the Larkinsons had tried to establish real-time data transmissions by extending a solid data cable through the gate, the attempt failed because electronic signals simply didn't get past the spatial portal for some reason.

They also tried establishing communications by shipping over a quantum entanglement node to Fort Fishblood.

However, by the time the sensitive device reached the other side, it promptly squealed an alarm.

It turned out that the entangled particles that enabled instant communications across vast distances had somehow lost their connection to their counterparts stored in a distant server operated by the Comm Consortium!

"How can this happen?" Ves frowned when he learned of the news. "Our quantum entanglement nodes didn't malfunction when we passed through the beyonder gates a year ago. It is as if this alien portal is doing its best to cut off any possible contact between the two spaces!"

The inconvenient circumstances left the expeditionary forces with little choice but to temporarily recall the key leaders in the field. Passing through the portal was quick and convenient and Fort Fishblood would be fine without them during this calm period.

Even if the Swarmers came to launch another attack, a messenger could easily convey the news and recall Commander Casella Ingvar and Patriarch Reginald Cross back to Purgatory.

As the different people arrived at the virtual meeting, Ves turned to Venerable Tusa who had done a good job at collecting all of the interesting data.

"Before we begin to discuss our upcoming plans, I would like to hear your personal thoughts on what you have witnessed. We have all watched the footage from your expert mech but only you got somewhat close to these different fish-whale groups. First, have you detected signs of sentience or coherent thoughts from each of the distinct groups that you have encountered?"

The light mech expert pilot looked thoughtful.

"I can tell you that the king fish that attempted to contact me through his mind is definitely an intelligent bastard. I only briefly touched the alien fish-whale's mind, but I did not get the impression that I had made contact with a primal beast that is driven by its instincts. I felt I made contact with a very powerful and purposeful sentient alien. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I had contacted an actual phase whale!"

Given the size of the king fish, it was not a surprise that Tusa would develop this impression. The capabilities that this remarkably powerful creature had shown so far closely matched that of the phase whales described in the MTA's database!

"What of the other fish-whales of the 'Evolution Kingdom'?"

"I can't really confirm it since my expert mech kept its distance during the sole major battle that I've witnessed, but they all look smart in their own way. I never got the sense that they were driven by their instincts unlike with the Swarmers."

The Golden Skull Alliance pretty much accepted all of the names that Venerable Tusa had come up with to classify all of the different groups and fish he encountered.

Ves and the others were too lazy to come up with their own names. Though the labels invented by Tusa sounded a bit too simple and direct, they did their jobs and allowed everyone to be on the same page.

"Have you come across any fish-whales among the Swarmers that show signs of actual intelligence?"

"Not directly, Ves. The elite fish-whales commanding the grunt fishes are all smarter and more cunning, but they don't hesitate to fight to the death without thinking too much. I suspect that the Swarm Kingdom is set up like an insect hive. There has to be at least one queen among them that directs all of the Swarmers."

The threat posed by these extremely numerous fishes was already substantial. Now, Tusa indicated that there might be a mastermind that completely treats the Swarmers as its chess pieces, which massively boosted their danger factor!

"What of the fishes of the other two kingdoms?" Ves asked.

Tusa shrugged. "I can't say for certain whether the fishes from the Phase Kingdom or the Hot Kingdom are intelligent or not. If I have to guess, I would say that the fishes from the two kingdoms probably aren't that bright. I never saw anything that showed that they were as individualistic or willful as the Evolvers. They don't look as mindless as the Swarmers, though. It could be that there are smarter fishes in the two kingdoms that I haven't found. I only got to see the king fish in the Evolver Kingdom because it had to use its power to wipe out the attacking fish-whales."

"Could there be an equivalent of the king fish among the other three kingdoms?" Commander Casella wondered. "I have seen how the king fish commands the respect and obedience of its fellow Evolvers. It may be a unique creature, but we have already speculated that the Swarm Kingdom is likely ruled by a powerful hive queen figure. Maybe the Phase Kingdom and Hot Kingdom are ruled by similarly powerful figures. It would explain why the Phaser fish and the Heater fish stay put in their territories without causing any chaos."

There was no hard proof of her assertions, but Ves and several other people were inclined to favor this theory. It made sense given that the fish-whales were inherently hierarchical. The bigger and stronger fish-whales always called the shots!

Ves turned to Director Ranya Wodin.

"You and your exobiologists have studied the fish-whales recorded in the footage as well, right? What is your professional opinion?"

"We know too little about the fish-whales, sir. I would caution you about making too many assumptions based on shallow observations and assumptions about living organisms that do not always apply. Do not forget that the fish-whales are not a natural species to begin with. My geneticists and other specialists have already studied the DNA of the different Swarmer subspecies that we have defeated. We have detected clear signs of artificial splicing and tampering in their genetic codes, though many of them have already mutated after many years of natural selection. The point that I am trying to make is that the fish-whales may behave completely differently due to deliberate tampering."

Though Ves understood the point that Ranya was trying to make, he did not think his instinctive judgment was wrong in this case.

Besides, it was best to assume that each kingdom was led by an intelligent super figure, because that was the worst-case scenario to the expeditionary forces.

Dealing with a stupid enemy like a horde of uncontrolled Swarmers was much easier than fighting against a small group of observant and thoughtful Evolvers!

"Now that we have the lay of the land, what is next?" Marshal Ariadne Wodin impatiently asked. "None of these kingdoms are easy to deal with. No matter how big they are or how many fish-whales they have, each of them have shown much more combat strength than we handle even if we commit all of our mech forces. They are all the equivalent of miniature states and cannot be defeated by a couple of mech divisions."

"There are asteroids that are less populated than others. We can try to conquer them first."

"What would be the point in that? There isn't any phasewater or other valuable resources in those places. The good stuff should all be located in the hearts of the fish kingdoms. They also happened to be the most well-defended landmasses."

There was no chance of getting a bargain in Purgatory. The expeditionary forces had to make difficult choices if they wanted to obtain better plunder from this space pocket!

Ves drew everyone's attention again.

"There are at least three major objectives worth pursuing in Purgatory. First, we should study, decipher the mechanisms and try our best to gain control of the relic space gate. The good news is that it has already fallen into our hands without provoking the Swarmers any further. The bad news is that this alien tech is extremely advanced and abstruse. Our science teams will require a lot of time to make any gains from their examinations, and even then it is unlikely that their harvest will be great."

It was better than nothing, though. The Golden Skull Alliance's continued access to the organic alien space gate at least gave everyone a reason to stick around.

"Second, the Dark Zephyr has detected a gigantic amount of phasewater in the asteroid that we are calling the Lake Continent for convenience. There are many pools of liquid water on this asteroid and each of them contain varying quantities of phasewater at the bottom that the Phaser fish-whales can casually harvest at their leisure!"

His eyes and those of several others turned red at the thought. All of that phasewater was completely wasted on the fish-whales! They could be put to much better uses if they fell into the hands of the Golden Skull Alliance!

Ves swept his gaze around the virtual conference room. "We cannot pass up this opportunity to plunder barrels worth of phasewater. An opportunity like this is extremely rare in the Red Ocean. This is the clearest and most certain way we can massively accelerate the growth of our organizations!"

The Larkinson Clan could easily transition from a small organization into a mid-sized player in the Red Ocean if they managed to retrieve this much phasewater!

However, he wasn't satisfied with this prize. He was greedy for more.

"As for our third objective, those abandoned labs occupied by the Evolution Kingdom should contain a lot of remnant phase whale technology. No matter whether we can use the alien devices and knowledge or not, we can definitely profit from them in various ways as long as we can gain access to those giant labs!"

Venerable Tusa grew more disconcerted as he listened to his superior. He couldn't hold his opinions back any longer.

"I'm sorry, Ves, but aren't you being too delusional right now? I just visited those places and they are all defended by lots of powerful fish-whales! There is no way we can defeat any of the groups alone, let alone several of them in a single campaign!"

Ves grinned and chuckled. "I knew that one of you would voice your doubt. I understand your concerns, but who said anything about fighting these fish-whales ourselves? I invited my good friend Calabast to this meeting to formulate a strategy on how we can achieve our objectives while paying the least amount of cost."

Calabast stood up and asked a simple question to the attendees.

"Have you ever heard of a strategy called divide and conquer?"

Chapter 3835 The Four Kingdoms

Ves became fascinated by the internal situation in Purgatory.

The phase whale enclave had fallen into ruin, but the native life forms that originally resided in it had thrived during their long-term isolation.

Cut off from the rest of the galaxy, these out-of-control test subjects or former slaves or whatever turned the largely self-contained field of large asteroids into their own little world.

Few overt traces of the phase whale race remained. Aside from the ruins on the Lab Continent, the other landmasses contained no obvious artificial traces.

None of the asteroids appeared to be normal, though. Ves and many other science-minded individuals wondered how this pocket space maintained equilibrium.

There was no point in thinking too much. There was no way that the science teams at his disposal could figure out how Purgatory worked and how it interacted with energy and matter.

These were profound questions that could only be solved by greater forces such as the MTA that was definitely paying a lot of attention to Purgatory.

What Ves and the others should focus on instead was attaining more modest goals such as plundering the Lake Continent of all of its phasewater!

If not for the fact that there were lots of powerful phasewater-augmented fish-whales on that landmass, the expeditionary forces would have departed already!

As Calabast commanded everyone's attention during the virtual conference meeting, she projected a map of Purgatory.

Compared to the previous version of the map, this one not only showed the asteroids in greater detail, but also featured overlays that cleverly conveyed additional information.

Important elements such as phasewater deposits, energy sources, fish-whale concentrations and their estimated combat power could all be viewed in the glimpse of an eye.

Anyone who looked at the map would notice that there were four distinct asteroids that were occupied by four groups of distinct fish-whale groups.

"Before we discuss our strategy, let us take stock of the 'natives' occupying this newly-discovered pocket space." Calabast said as she gestured towards the map. "Thanks to the observation data brought by Venerable Tusa, we know that there are 23 major asteroids floating in a spherical space. These asteroids are all of substantial size. The smallest one can fit a city while the largest one can easily be regarded as a true continent. Each of them is occupied by different fish-whales though not all of them are treated as important. As far as we can tell, the landmasses of value are all divided among four fish-whale 'kingdoms' that all possess the strength to defend their own territories."

Nine continents began to glow in red.

"Let us begin with the most familiar group of fish-whales to us. The color-coded fish-whales that we have encountered and killed en masse are much more numerous than we feared. They also happen to occupy almost half of the landmasses in Purgatory, granting the so-called Swarmers an abundant amount of room and resources to breed a lot of fish-whales. While we can only make inferences based on limited sensor readings, we estimate that the Swarm Kingdom contains as much as 12 million fish-whales, a significant proportion of which are located on the Central Continent!"

Everyone looked shocked.

"Twelve million!"

"There's no way we can defeat that many fish-whales by ourselves. Our mechs will wear out and our energy reserves will run dry before we have killed a tenth of this amount!"

Calabast remained unfazed despite describing an alien group that possessed as much combat power as a small state.

"Based on what we have observed and what we can infer, the Swarm Kingdom is overwhelmingly made up of non-sentient drones that act more as elements of a superorganism than self-contained life forms. The most common white fish-whales essentially cannot think for themselves and need to be led around in order to accomplish greater goals. While the existence of an intelligent queen has not been definitively proven, based on various behavior patterns such as sending out an attack horde on a suicide run against a rival kingdom, we are 90 percent certain that there is at least one guiding intelligence among the Swarmers."

The Swarm Kingdom was the most dominant group in Purgatory. The other kingdoms could not come close to matching the numbers of this huge fish-whale group!

"This kingdom is not without flaws, however." Calabast smiled. "The vast majority of fish-whales are in an inactive state when they are not being guided. We believe the guiding intelligence is limited by how extensively it can reach, communicate and issue orders to other Swarmers. Otherwise, the activation of the ancient alien gate and the appearance of a human fighting force on one of its continents should have attracted an immediate response from these opponents. Despite setting foot on Purgatory a day ago, the neighboring hordes of fish-whales have not shown any sign of exploring our beachhead or launching an all-out attack to repel the foreign invaders from their realm. A human state would never be so complacent."

The Swarmers easily had the numbers to push the human invaders back to the other side of the portal, but they continued to act stupid. Either the guiding intelligence was playing the long con or there were severe deficiencies in the operation of its kingdom!

"Although we should always be on guard for a sudden change in awareness and behavior from the Swarmers, we should not let that stop us from taking advantage of them whenever possible."

Calabast turned to the second fish-whale kingdom that Tusa had encountered. The map no longer highlighted the continents occupied by the Swarmers and instead lit up two floating asteroids.

panda novel "Let us move on to the Evolvers. You can clearly see that their numbers and their amount of territories are much smaller compared to the Swarmers. The Evolution Kingdom should not have been able to compete against the millions of cannon fodder that their enemies can throw at it if not for several extenuating circumstances."

The map zoomed in to highlight the numerous giant phase whale-scaled structures.

"There is enough evidence to suggest that these structures used to be a place of importance to the alien creator of this pocket space. We know that the phase whales are obsessed with bioresearch, so it is not a stretch to think that one of them is engaged in research in those structures. Since the fish-whales are clearly an artificial race, we can assume that these labs birthed the race that has survived in Purgatory up until today."

The labs had to be valuable for the Evolvers to fight so hard to retain control over the Lab Continent!

Calabast tapped her fingers against her wrist. "The value of these structures and whatever functions they have retained is quite evident, then. The king fish or other intelligent Evolver fishes have not only managed to get a part of these labs to work, but also utilize them to bestow targeted and powerful biological augmentations to the members of the Evolution Kingdom. We can conclude that the style of the Evolvers is the opposite of that of the Swarmers. Each of them are presumably intelligent and each of them possess significantly more combat power than many Swarmers put together. Their society is also closer to that of the civilizations that we are familiar with. This is an important trait and will play a key role in the strategy that I am about to outline."

The Evolvers were the fish-whales that were closest to humans in their society and traits. When Ves recalled that the king fish attempted to communicate with Venerable Tusa, there was actual hope for cooperation between the Golden Skull Alliance and the Evolution Kingdom!

"The ancient facilities on the Lab Continent may be of value to us, but accessing them is not a critical objective to us. Not only is it unlikely that we can decipher the tech that the phase whales have left behind, we cannot stay and occupy them permanently with our current level of strength."

Ves grimaced even though he knew that Calabast was right. The others pretty much treated the labs as a secondary objective. It would be nice if they could gain access to it, but they would lose no sleep if they failed to make this possible.

The map changed again. The two continents of the Evolution Kingdom returned to normal and another floating landmass became highlighted.

"The next kingdom holds what we want. The Phase Kingdom is aptly named. Each of the light blue fish-whales has integrated a significant amount of phasewater in their bodies and we can assume that they know how to make use of them in a destructive manner. Despite the great potential of their phasewater abilities, the Phasers do not appear to be capable of projecting their power outwards. They only occupy a single landmass, namely the Lake Continent, and have adopted a full defensive posture to retain hold of this great prize. We can be certain the other kingdoms recognize the value of phasewater, yet for so many years the Phase Kingdom has maintained its hold on this key territory."

The Lake Continent was the most valuable landmass to the Golden Skull Alliance. While Ves and the others were uncertain whether the fish-whales thought the same way, it should definitely be a desirable prize!

"It is unfortunate that we know far too little about the Phaser fish-whales themselves. We have not seen them in action nor confirmed whether they are at war with the Swarmers. We can presume this is the case as a domineering and expansionist group as they should not be able to resist the temptation to take over this resource-rich landmass. The Phasers would have been more assertive in expanding their territories if they were not under so much pressure."

The map changed to highlight three of the most distant landmasses from the Gate Continent.

"Finally, we have the Hot Kingdom. The Heater fishes as Tusa calls them are all black in coloration, which we believe they have developed in this fashion to absorb the maximum possible light and heat energy. The continents they occupy happen to play an important role in the semi-closed ecosystem of Purgatory. Much of the powerful rays generated by the blue supergiant star selectively passes through certain membranes that separates the pocket space from the main reality and subsequently land in specific places. Most of these hotspots happen to be concentrated in the continents occupied by the Heaters."

Every continent appeared to contain hotspots, but the ones occupied by the Hot Kingdom were definitely more endowed than others!

"The Heaters have not only claimed the three adjacent landmasses that receive the most energy, but have also evolved their combat approach to match their favorable conditions. While this may have turned the Blue Light Continent and the other two asteroids into key locations to the fish-whales, their value is almost zero in our eyes."

Many people nodded. Energy was hardly a scarce resource in human civilization. There were plenty of stars and plenty of rich fuel sources available in the territories occupied by humanity.

The troublesome part about energy was storing it and generating it in the right manner, but that was not relevant to this situation.

"Now that we have surveyed all four kingdoms, it is time to talk about how we should handle them." Calabast started to grin. "I am sure that each of you have looked at all of these powerful and numerous fish-whales and thought to yourself that it is impossible for us to defeat even a fraction of their numbers. While that may be true, your vision is severely limited if you think that direct combat is the only way to attain our objectives. The entire concept of the divide and conquer strategy is to slice up a large body of enemies and take advantage of their internal divisions to make them fight against each other."

It was a clever if difficult way to defeat specific fish-whales without paying a ruinous price.

However, before she could proceed, a skeptical-looking Ariadne Wodin raised an important question.

"Can we even divide the fish-whales?" She asked. "We are the foreign aliens in this pocket space. For all of their hatred against each other, a threat from beyond should be of far greater concern to them. Not only do humans like us threaten the survival of their race, we also hold the only gateway that can lead them outside of this prison that has confined them for so many years. If I was in their place, I would band together with my fellow fish-whales and launch an all-out attack on Fort Fishblood!"

That... was a serious possibility.

Chapter 3836 Humanity's Weapon

"You are indeed right to raise this concern, marshal." Calabast graciously said. "If the fish-whale race wishes to remain prosperous, it should go all-out into repelling us from Purgatory and take control over the ancient star gate. However, think about it for a moment. Who do you think the Evolvers will hate more, the Swarmers who have killed lots of Evolvers and assaulted the Lab Continent for who knows how many times, or the friendly alien visitors who try their best to trade and cooperate with the locals?"

Many people turned thoughtful. When Calabast phrased this matter in this manner, it became a lot more understandable why cooperation became possible.

Calabast smirked. "It takes a high degree of cognitive and societal development to produce individuals who think about the good of an entire race over their own self-interest. Given how primitive and uncivilized these native life forms appear to be, the most they can take into consideration is the interests of their own group. What we need to do is to exploit their lack of vision and tailor an approach where we can both get what we want."

"Even if it comes at the detriment of the entire fish-whale race?"

"Yes. Short-sighted as it might sound, the divide and conquer strategy has worked in many different situations because it inherently takes advantage of the selfishness that many population groups possess. No matter whether they are human or alien, it is hard for them to resist the temptation to get ahead even if their state or species must pay a terrible price."

"We should try not to antagonize the fish-whales more than necessary." Ves added. "We can't take over this pocket space with our strength, so there is no reason for us to plot the downfall of every kingdom. We should just focus on grabbing our rightful share of phasewater before getting out. The MTA will probably take care of the rest."

The spymaster nodded in agreement. "That is true. In fact, we should try our best to frame our intentions in the best light to the aliens we choose to cooperate with. For example, we can argue that eliminating one of the kingdoms is good for the fish-whales because it will reduce their internal divisions and bring them closer to unity."

"Communication is a weapon." Ves stated.

"Exactly, and we humans have mastered its use in diplomacy and warfare. Through countless wars and collisions, we have gained a lot of experience in how to leverage communication to our advantage and passed on what we learned to the next generation. Throughout the history of human civilization, we have developed better frameworks, better techniques and better approaches around communication."

Calabast directed a contemptuous glance towards the map of Purgatory.

"Compared to a civilization that has not only conquered half of the Milky Way but also a good chunk of the Red Ocean, how can these backwards indigenous fish-whales come close to our racial accumulation? I am not discounting the possibility that they have engaged in diplomacy with each other, but if that is true, the frequency and sophistication of their communications should be low. The more we communicate with the fish-whales, the more we can gauge their mastery of this weapon."

Not everyone possessed a fine appreciation of communication as a weapon. Patriarch Reginald looked like he wanted to scratch his head.

"It sounds like playing with fire to me." The Cross Patriarch gruffly remarked. "We have all seen the power of the king fish. Is it really as easy to fool as you all think? We only have to make one mistake before this big fish decides to open its huge maw in our direction before spraying us all with its titanic swarm-destroying energy spray."

Calabast crossed her arms. "Blowback is always a possible risk, especially if we know too little about what we are dealing with. The best we can do is to adopt the most helpful posture possible. I will get into this later. First, I want to explain my thoughts on how we should handle the different fish-whale kingdoms."

She raised three fingers.

"In general, we can treat the groups in question with three different approaches. First, we can befriend and cooperate with them. Second, we can ignore or adopt a neutral posture towards them. Third, we can treat them as hostiles that we should eliminate as soon as possible for the betterment of our goals. Now, let us begin by determining which of these three basic approaches we should adopt for each of the fish-whale groups."

She turned to the map and highlighted all four kingdoms.

"The Hot Kingdom does not have what we want and is the furthest away from our base in this pocket space. We should ignore the Heaters and maintain a neutral posture if we ever come into contact."

"The Phase Kingdom is small but holds what we want the most in this pocket space. It is extremely unlikely that the Phasers will agree to trade their abundant reserves of phasewater for others to us, so defeating them is a necessity for us to succeed in our campaign."

"The Evolution Kingdom is also small, but shows the greatest degree of sentience, intelligence, sociability and rationality. If we approach the king fish correctly, there is a decent chance that we can achieve a mutually-beneficial agreement that can lead to a temporary military alliance. We should put our best effort into befriendng the Evolvers."

Calabast paused for a moment.

"As for the Swarm Kingdom... they are a force of nature in Purgatory. Negotiating with its guiding intelligence is extremely unlikely to yield results due to its historical domineering behavior pattern and the overwhelming strength of its fish-whale massive armies. That said, many of the Swarmers appear to be inattentive most of the time, which will allow us to avoid hostilities with them. We may even be able to take advantage of their various shortcomings to steer them into actions that they would otherwise not undertake. It is for this reason that I believe that cooperating with the Swarmers is key to succeeding in our campaign!"

"Huh?"

Her last statement generated plenty of confusion and bewilderment.

People could understand why they should steer clear of the Swarmers. To cooperate with this rabid swarm of feral, bloodthirsty and cannibalistic fish-whales was unimaginable to those that had recently fought a bloody conflict with their brethren!

"The Swarmers are too dangerous!"

"They are only dangerous if they choose to attack our forces." Calabast retorted. "Just as with the Evolvers, we should give them as little reason to resort to this action as possible. To us, there is no benefit to fighting them. Aside from the site around the alien star gate, their territories have little to nothing of value for us. Instead, the greatest advantages of the Swarm Kingdom that we can leverage is their high military strength and their obvious desire to take over the remaining landmasses in the pocket space. Our goals may not align with each other, but that doesn't mean cooperation between us is impossible. We just need to... apply a different communication strategy towards the Swarmers."

A lot of people wondered what this kind of communication strategy would even look like. Was it as simple as sending over the Dark Zephyr to taunt a few hordes before purposefully leading them on to the Lake Continent?

Ves doubted that it would be so simple!

He liked her perspective, though. Viewing the Swarmers as potential assets was better than viewing them as irreconcilable opponents.

Now that Calabast explained how they should treat the four fish-whale kingdoms, she proceeded to the crux of her plan.

"Given this situation and the conditions we are working with, we first need to establish a solid foothold within the alien circle. The Evolution Kingdom is our best candidate for the reasons that I have already mentioned. We must do our best to build our relations with the Evolvers in the limited timespan we have available."

"That doesn't gain us anything by itself." Patriarch Reginald remarked.

panda novel "You are correct. That is why we must leverage this relationship into actual results. The best way we can accomplish this is to persuade Evolvers to team up with us to break open the Phase Kingdom."

Commander Melkor looked puzzled. "How can that even work? The Phase Kingdom may be small, but it holds a defensive advantage and likely excels at launching wide-area attacks that can take down a huge amount of enemies at once. The Evolution Kingdom is not that much stronger and is under strong pressure to defend its own territories. If the Evolvers attack the Lake Continent, they will suffer so many losses that they cannot possibly defend it and their old territories against the Swarm Kingdom! If the king fish has any brains, he would never agree to such a suicidal plan!"

Calabast nodded in agreement. "This is why we need to adopt a more sophisticated plan than what you have suggested. We will have to borrow the strength of another fish-whale kingdom to gain access to the huge phasewater concentrations on the Lake Continent."

Melkor still looked skeptical. "If we somehow manage to fool the Swarmers into attacking this phasewater-rich landmass, do we even have an opportunity to collect our spoils? I don't think those Swarmers will be in a sharing mood once they have sacrificed a lot of their own kind to defeat the Phase Kingdom."

"That is why we must formulate a more elaborate plan than that. We must continue to explore and communicate with the different kingdoms in order to understand what we can do to unravel the status quo and nudge the circumstances in our favor."

It would have been much simpler if they could just launch a straightforward raid on the Lake Continent and grab all of the phasewater over there by force, but that required way more mechs than the Golden Skull Alliance had at its disposal.

This was why they were listening to Calabast to begin with. Even if people had doubts about their ability to wrangle different groups of fish-whales into attacking each other, it was worth a try. The payoff for success was too huge for them to disregard this opportunity!

Calabast elaborated her vision and answered different questions for half an hour before the conference meeting ended.

The expeditionary forces did not take action immediately because they still needed to settle on a specific plan to make contact with the Evolution Kingdom.

To that end, Ves requested a private meeting with Calabast. Both of them soon appeared in a smaller virtual meeting room where they could speak in private.

"What is it now, Ves? I am a pretty busy woman at the moment."

"I want to talk about our first contact with the Evolution Kingdom. I don't know what you have in mind, but I think it is best if I make first contact with the king fish."

"..."

Calabast looked so unimpressed with his suggestion that she did not even deign to voice her disapproval! Her expression already conveyed what she thought about his stupid idea!

"Hear me out, Calabast. You have worked with me for years, so you should know that I can communicate with all kinds of life forms. Now, I suppose we can send a diplomat or something to communicate with the king fish, but without a common language this will always be a slow and difficult affair. Instead of wasting all of that time, why not resort to an effective solution and let me talk to the big fish in person? I am willing to take the risk of entering the spatial portal and boarding a vehicle that can take me to the perimeter of the Lab Continent so that I can have a good talk with the fish in charge."

The woman let out an exasperated sigh. It was as if she was reprimanding a naughty boy for misbehaving in the same way for the umpteenth time!

"Did we not talk about how your days of gallivanting into danger zones are over? You have built a large and extensive clan, Ves. Let others bear the risk of contacting a dangerous group of fish-whales. I distinctly recall that Venerable Joshua gets along with different humans and animals as well. With his friendly and earnest personality, he stands a good chance of breaking the ice with the Evolvers."

Ves shook his head in disagreement. "Joshua is a nice fellow, but he has one major fault."

"And what is that?"

"I'm the Devil Tongue and he is not." He stated.

"..."

Chapter 3837 Kindred Spirits

pANDa novel

When Ves announced his intention to lead the first contact team and spearhead the talks with the powerful king fish, everyone around him thought he had gone mad!

The reaction against his proposed role was almost uniformly negative!

To them, it made no sense why a powerful and dignified clan leader had to put himself in extreme danger by venturing inside a dangerous pocket space and initiate contact in person with an intelligent alien creature that possessed the size and firepower of a warship!

Perhaps letting him step forward was excusable in the early days of his career and the Larkinson Clan, but that period in his life had passed a long time ago. He no longer needed to put himself in a highly vulnerable position to get things done.

Ves had his own considerations, though. He did not change his mind despite the immense pushback he received from the likes of Calabast, General Verle, Commander Casella and even Venerable Jannzi!

Only a few individuals did not try to dissuade him from going ahead with this hare-brained scheme.

"I haven't heard you say anything about my intention to talk with the king fish. Do you disapprove as well, Nitaa?"

His tall and stoic bodyguard remained impassive and unreadable in her massive custom combat armor.

"It is not my place to dictate your actions, sir." Her filtered voice said behind her closed helmet. "While I do have an obligation to protect your life and will not hesitate to escort you away from high-risk zones, there must always be a balance between opposing obligations. You may not always make the safest decisions, but you always act with purpose while being aware of the risks you incur. You must bear the ultimate responsibility for your decisions."

She sounded as if she had long accepted the antics that Ves got up to. Her basic response was to throw up her hands and do her best to bail him out if he ended up in a predicament.

Ves smirked.

If Lucky was here, he would probably respond in a blasé manner as well. It was too bad that the gem cat was currently exploring the Gate Continent for valuable minerals and other hidden goodies.

Once he made his decision, he needed to prepare for his upcoming assignment. Speaking to a big alien fish that had never encountered a human before or ventured into a greater galactic society was anything but a straightforward process!

He spent the next few hours consulting with Calabast and Minister Shederin Purnesse on how to develop an accord with such a powerful and bizarre creature.

While they believed that the king fish and the rest of its race were too sheltered and underdeveloped to catch on to many diplomatic traps, Ves did not set out to screw over the Evolvers.

He vastly preferred to establish mutually-beneficial agreements with other parties. Whether they were human or alien, benefits were universal and it was hard for entities to break a deal if they clearly put themselves in a worse position than before!

Of course, not everyone acted in a manner that was beneficial to their interests all the time. Emotions was a major wildcard and Ves could never be certain whether the king fish was rational enough to make sober decisions.

The only way that Ves could know for certain was to head over to the Lab Continent and get in touch with the king fish.

Having interacted with many different entities, Ves had honed his ability to read and understand different life forms. Whether they were exobeasts, design spirits or even weirder existences, he only needed to observe their spiritual state for an instant to get a good glimpse of their personality and emotions.

Only a few entities were capable of hiding their true thoughts and emotions from him. Calabast was highly observant and had long figured out what Ves was capable of. Even without this awareness, her DIVA training had instilled her with drills and mantras that forcibly obfuscated her mental activity.

There was no way an indigenous alien fish-whale would go this far to deceive someone like Ves. Diplomacy in an isolated backwater like Purgatory probably amounted to nothing more than taking breaks between attacks or something!

As Ves was in the process of constructing different spiritual masks that he could don in order to project different personas towards the biggest fish of the Evolution Kingdom, his comm chirped as he received a high-priority call.

"Ves!" Gloriana's projection appeared in front of him. "What do you think you are doing?!"

"Uhhh... preparing to go on an excursion?"

His dearest wife looked as if she was about to explode!

"PREPARING TO DIVE INTO THE JAWS OF A FISH MONSTER, MORE LIKE! Have you put any thought about how tremendously stupid and idiotic you are for even considering this monumental reckless course of action?! You are the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan! Over 200,000 clansmen are looking up to you! What do you think will happen to them if you perish?"

Ves shrugged. "They'll be fine. The clan may rely heavily on me, but there are plenty of talents among us that can take over where I left off. The chief ministers are already presiding over most of the affairs of our clan to begin with. They just need to do their jobs as usual."

"If the fate of your clan doesn't worry you, then what about your family? What about me? I need you, Ves. We are partners! We promised to support each other's work and reach the rank of Master Mech Designer together. I do not want you to ruin this golden opportunity because you made the wrong gamble at the wrong time!"

"I told you over and over, Gloriana. I don't gamble! I take calculated risks. There's a difference!"

"Your math when it comes to risks is so bad that you probably think it is safe to jump into a black hole!"

"Hey, I'm not that stupid!"

The look she gave him was almost identical to that of Calabast a few hours ago. How come people had so little faith in his risk assessment capabilities?

Gloriana turned around for a moment so that she could lift their cute little daughter in her arms.

"Think about our daughter, Ves." She said in a softer and more pleading tone as she stroked her baby's head. "Think about our unborn child that has just begun to grow in my womb. Do you want to see them grow up with only a single parent like yourself? Tell him what you think, Aurelia. Do you want to see daddy go away forever?"

Their daughter teared up. "Daddy no! Stay!"

Ouch! Gloriana dealt a double whammy towards Ves this time!

Not only did she cynically exploit their baby daughter, she also referenced the void that accompanied his life when his mother died early in his childhood.

Though Ves didn't feel comfortable due to her latest line of attack, he recalled all of the reasons why he wanted to go on this excursion and firmed up his resolve.

He took a deep breath in order to calm his mood. Neither his wife nor his tearful daughter should be allowed to sway his mind.

"Gloriana. Please trust me and let me go through with this. I might not look like it, but I know what I am doing. There are multiple good reasons why I need to head into Purgatory."

"Oh? And what are your reasons?"

"The most obvious one is that I am probably the most suitable to communicate with an unknown alien life form. I can not only overcome the language barrier, but also adjust my behavior and speech to increase the chance of forming a friendship according to my unique observation abilities. No one else can match me in this. I am already familiar with befriending all kinds of weird creatures. This should be no different."

"Venerable Joshua—"

"—is too earnest and honorable to conduct diplomacy." Ves interrupted his wife. "No offense, but Joshua would be a poor negotiator. He won't be able to act according to the best interests of our clan in every situation."

Gloriana did not accept this argument. "Why can't you just let Venerable Joshua approach the king fish by himself but instruct him to follow the instructions of a team of professional diplomats? You can just whisper what you want to say to the king fish while staying behind in Fort Fishblood."

"There are at least two flaws to your argument." Ves shook his head. "First, creating additional chains in communication will make our talks with the king fish a lot more clunky. We would lose the fluency of developing a natural accord between each other. Second, if I tell Venerable Joshua to tell a clear lie or say anything that will damage the Evolvers, will he be able to follow his instructions?"

"He holds a lot of trust in you, Ves."

"That is true, but expert pilots are highly principled soldiers."

Gloriana looked deeply at him. It slowly dawned upon her that there must be more behind his latest decision.

"You're up to something, aren't you? What are you planning, Ves?"

He sighed. "You're right. Aside from helming the talks with the leader of the Evolution Kingdom, I am also aiming to accomplish an additional objective. In our earlier planning session, most people consider gaining access to those giant alien biolabs to be a secondary or optional objective."

"Isn't that the case?"

"Not to me!" Ves heatedly replied. "Do you know how fascinated I became when I watched the footage of the battle between the Swarmers and the Evolvers? You might view it as nothing but a mindless scrap between two groups of aliens, but I am different. To me, this fight can serve as a possible model of how a group of matured growth mechs can defeat a numerically-superior standardized mech force!"

"What?!"

Not just Gloriana, but even their daughter looked befuddled at his answer.

Ves didn't care, though. He became enthralled by the passion he evoked when he saw the battle footage for the first time!

"Don't you see the parallels between the Evolver fish and my living mechs? Those Evolvers stand out from their Swarmer counterparts for possessing sentience and being able to think for themselves! Each of them are clearly valued individuals in their society and earn a lot more respect than what the Swarmers show towards each other. The latter care so little about individuals that they don't hesitate to pounce upon their injured brethren in order to sate their primal urges. That is just like repairing a broken mech by cannibalizing the parts of another mech!"

Gloriana looked completely lost by now. Despite her superior cognitive capabilities, she was unable to wrap her mind around Ves' convoluted logic!

"The king fish or whoever is responsible for augmenting and mutating all of the Evolver fish is a visionary, forward-thinking leader." Ves spoke with genuine admiration. "It takes a lot of guts and imagination to experiment on the same kind. I can feel it, Gloriana. The king fish and I may be kindred spirits. We are both experimenters and innovators looking to create better and stronger products. We are creators who enjoy using the means at our disposal to overcome a challenge by inventing the right solutions!"

"..."

"This is why I need to approach the king fish in person and gain access to those biolabs. My design philosophy is stirring, you know. I am sensing a golden opportunity to progress my cognition of mech design and gain extremely precious inspiration that I can never encounter in normal places. My life is important, but I do not want to spend my entire life cooped up in a safe and secure ship or design lab. I am at my best when I explore new curiosities and this

is probably one of the greatest chances for me to evolve my work to a higher level! So no, I will not stay behind and let my clansmen do all of the work. I will go up there and talk face-to-face with the king fish so that we can discuss our respective passions like kindred spirits!"

To say that Gloriana was apoplectic was an understatement. Her body shook with repressed anger and frustration as she tried to figure out the best way to respond to Ves' extreme motivations!

"You do know that you are making way too many assumptions about the king fish, right? How sure are you that this juggernaut in the form of fish will sit down and enthusiastically exchange insights with you? Can you guarantee that this creature will not just open its gigantic maw so that it can swallow you whole?!"

"I'll just see how it goes..."

Chapter 3838 Pillars Of The Clan

Ves disrupted a lot of plans by inserting himself into them. Putting the patriarch of the rising and increasingly more prosperous Larkinson Clan right on the proverbial front lines sounded as stupid and outdated as a king swinging a sword alongside his subjects in a pitched battle!

However, there were still perks to being in charge. Despite almost everyone voicing their disapproval of his reckless act, his prestige and his control over his own organization were still considerable enough for him to push through with his own direction.

The most amusing reaction he received was from his fellow Journeymen.

More specifically, the newest batch of Journeymen to join the Larkinson Clan.

Dulo, Sara, Janassa and Tifi all confronted him just as he was about to board the shuttle that was about to bring him to Fort Fishblood.

"Sir! Is it true that you are about to meet one of those scary fish-whales in person?" Dulo asked in a perplexed tone.

Ves nodded. "That's right. This is a critical job and I am the most qualified to fulfill it. There are nuances to talking to giant and possibly ancient alien organisms that most people don't even think about. Establishing cooperation with the king fish that most likely leads the Evolver King is the most critical breakthrough that we can achieve in our plan to divide and conquer the fish-whales. There is no way we can successfully plunder more phasewater than what most exploration fleets can find in a year if we cannot get at least one faction of fish-whales on our side."

Though he thought he laid out sound logic in his reply, the expressions of the four new Journeymen showed that he did not do a good job in gaining their understanding.

"I don't understand." Sara Voiken responded. "You are a mech designer, am I correct?"

"Uh huh."

"You do not have any professional diplomatic training, right?"

"Uh huh."

"You cannot pilot a mech nor trained to fight like a soldier."

"I went through boot camp when I was drafted to serve in the military of my former home state, though admittedly I did not get a lot of actual combat practice."

"Then why go there in person at all, sir?!"

Ves frowned. He had heard a lot of appeals, but this one felt more personal.

"What is the matter, guys?"

The four Journeymen looked at each other before Tifi answered his question.

"We... won't do as well if you aren't around." She admitted. "We all recognize that you are the critical ingredient that makes our Design Department work. Your work is able to elevate the designs of younger and less inexperienced Journeymen like us into valued and appreciated products. Seeing how well the mech pilots of the Larkinson Army has embraced our new models has made us all look forward to how we can revolutionize the mech market when we are still in the early stages of our careers. If you are gone..."

"...All of that goes up in smoke." Janassa finished.

When the second batch of Journeymen joined the Design Department, Ves purposefully instilled an atmosphere of honesty, openness and even bluntness.

Part of that was because both he and his wife had little patience for obfuscation. It was better to expose problems and failures early than to leave them hanging and cause delays in the process.

Another part of it was because they would all connect their minds to each other whenever Blinky or Alexandria formed a design network. This was a process that required everyone to extend at least a decent measure of trust towards each other.

Though the new Journeymen should have gained a better insight of his personality and character, they evidently did not understand him well enough, or else they wouldn't be trying to dissuade him from going forward.

"I care about our clan. I do. That is exactly why I have to go through with this trip. This is about more than teaming up with one group of aliens to raid another group of aliens. There is a fantastic source of inspiration at the Lab Continent. Those biolabs and the work that the Evolvers have done to grow and mutate their bodies are incredibly relevant to my design philosophy. What the fish-whales lack in sophistication, they make up for it with at least a hundred-thousand years worth of experience!"

As mech designers, they should all understand what it meant to find fantastic inspiration that could accelerate the development of their design philosophies.

Yet despite that recognition, they still showed a lot of reluctance.

"Sir..." Dula began. "I can understand why you would want to go there, but is it really worth the risk of antagonizing and getting attacked by the king fish and the rest of the Evolvers? We know far too little about them and cannot predict their reaction to mechs and humans. What if that big fish decides to respond to your diplomatic party in the same way it has responded to the attacking Swarmers?"

Ves smirked and banged his armored fist against his chest plate. "I'm not a rookie when it comes to surviving under fire. This is why I am wearing a custom-developed suit of combat armor while you are all wearing hazard suits. In addition to that, I do not intend to approach the Evolver Kingdom while riding an ordinary armored shuttle either. I plan to ride the Everchanger as I attempt to communicate with the king fish."

"You what?!"

"Relax. It'll be perfectly fine." He tried to reassure his frazzled colleagues. "There are hardly any safer places I can be in the field than inside an expert mech. The space inside the cockpit is a bit too cramped to comfortably accommodate two humans, but I have already designed an alternate interior that will solve this problem for the upcoming mission. To be honest, I initially thought about riding the Shield of Samar instead since it is much more capable of defending against any violent outbursts from the king fish, but the defensive mech is so slow that it can't outrun pursuing fish-whales."

That, and Ves didn't exactly enjoy the best relationship with Venerable Jannzi. The two may share a common goal in hoping to see the Larkinson Clan thrive, but they possessed vastly different political stances on how to realize this dream.

Sitting in the same cockpit as the grumpy expert pilot for hours if not days on end would probably be a form of torture for the both of them! For his sake as well as hers, Ves thought it was best to ride with his favorite expert pilot instead!

Although it sounded extremely odd for a mech designer to join a mech pilot in the cockpit of a mech that might end up in the thick of action, it made complete sense to Ves. He truly had little confidence in any other vehicle he could ride.

The limited diameter of the spatial portal did not allow for the passage of starships. Any shuttle or vehicle that was small enough to make it through the other side was too weak to withstand bombardment from a warship-grade threat.

He talked a bit more with his fellow Journeymen. Though he understood their concerns and did not think they were wrong in their opinions, that didn't change the fact that he felt he needed to go through with his plan.

After making his stance loud and clear, he bid his fellow Journeymen goodbye and resumed his journey.

The mech designers left behind all looked at his back in dismay.

panda novel "This is what makes Ves different from every other Journeyman we've met." Sara Voiken eventually said. "He chases after every opportunity to advance his design philosophy no matter the danger. If we had his guts, we might be able to reach his level as well."

"We'd be dead if that happened." Her brother flatly stated. "Have you studied his record and listened to what the old-timers say about his penchant for seeking trouble? Venerable Jannzi especially likes to harp on how many people keep dying around the patriarch. If not for raising such a strong mech force and if not for figuring his way out of various predicaments, he would have been dead a long time ago. More ordinary mech designers like us shouldn't follow his model. We should obediently stay in the design labs and only go out on safe excursions instead of trying to follow his footsteps."

The rest nodded their heads in agreement.

Janassa Pellier was the first to turn around. "It will be up to us to carry the torch if the patriarch suffers an accident. It would be a pity if we can no longer lean on his innovations, but we can still fight for the Larkinson Clan in our own way. We don't belong on the battlefield, but we are more than competent enough to fight our way into the mech market. Only we can shoulder the enormous burden of bringing in enough revenue to pay for the hefty expenditures of our clan."

The Larkinsons might be upstarts in the Red Ocean, but they never did things cheaply. Ves had always been able to earn enough money to fund all kinds of investments that deepened the foundation of the clan and accelerated its rise to power.

Even if the clan lost its most powerful source of income, the rest of the organization was still strong enough to pick up where Ves left off. Its increasing diversity, its varied capital ships and its high concentration of competent young talents meant that it was already set up to succeed in a fashion.

The Larkinson Clan was already one of the true reflections of its founder's emphasis on growth!

As the four new Journeymen thought about how they would have to face the future without the umbrella of the patriarch, Ves encountered one more notable individual in his path.

He groaned. "Not again. What is it with you guys? Even you, Ketis?"

"Don't misunderstand me." She said as she stopped in front of Ves while wearing the Unending Dragon Mark I that looked just as powerful and impressive as his own combat armor. "I would be the last person in the clan who would want to stop you. In fact, if not for a special circumstance, I would have accompanied you as well this time."

Ves raised his eyebrow. He did not look surprised when he heard she wanted to come along. They were pretty similar people in this regard. They were both mech designers who derived a lot of gains from new adventures and discoveries. Getting exposed to drastic new sights always got their creative juices flowing.

"Why did you decide to skip this time?"

The swordmaster sighed and placed her armored palm on the abdomen area. "Just like Gloriana, I have already implanted my designer baby into my womb. I'm pregnant now, Ves. Even though my future son is only a small collection of cells for now, I am still afraid of exposing the embryo to the powerful fluctuations of combat. If I get injured..."

Ves sighed and placed his hand on her shoulder plate. "You have made the right choice. Being a mother is a whole new responsibility to you. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to sink your blade into in the future."

"I know. I am not as impatient as you. I will stay behind and hold down the fort for you. Are you confident that your attempt to befriend the king fish will succeed?"

"I don't know." Ves honestly admitted. "We know far too little about the fish-whales and the Evolvers in particular. However, I think it is worth a try. The inferences and deductions that I have made based on the data that we have collected shows a lot of promises. I truly think it is worth the risk to explore this opportunity. As long as I am able to return with a harvest, everything will be worth it. I am already making strides towards advancing to Senior. If I can study the model of the Evolvers, I have a suspicion that I can utilize what I've learned to push our upcoming commercial mech designs to the next level!"

That was the goal that he had in mind when he decided to set off for the Lab Continent! Everything he did was for the betterment of his work. With the next design round looming closer, Ves wanted to turn it into a transformative point in his career.

Since Calabast had persuaded him to go big this time, he wanted to make sure his work lived up to the heightened expectations of the mech market!

Chapter 3839 Instant Inspiration

Purgatory was an odd space.

Ves could immediately tell that he was no longer in a normal place as soon as the shuttle entered the other side of the portal.

There was something... different to his senses that only more sensitive people such as himself would notice.

It was as if he had long lived in a realm where his body was completely aligned to a specific frequency.

Now that he had entered a different space, the frequency of the new environment was a little... off. The difference was relatively minute and his body and mind did not become negatively affected by this change, but it still produced a sense of discordance that was hard to describe.

Ves had no idea whether this would produce any negative side effects. For now, it was like a faint high-pitched tone in his ear that would never fade away but one that he could easily disregard as long as he did not concentrate on it. The altered frequency only became a detriment if he considered it a bother.

He quickly set aside this odd little interaction and focused on the other changes. There wasn't much he could observe from within the armored shuttle and the projected footage of the outside environment did not do Purgatory justice.

He resolutely issued a command.

"Halt the shuttle and open its hatch. I want to go outside and take a look in person."

Though his command disrupted his itinerary, he didn't care about that at the moment.

The pilot steered the shuttle to the side so that any subsequent mechs and vehicles passing through the portal did not collide with it. Once it hovered in a safe space, the hatch slid open, allowing numerous armored figures to float outside.

Ves took a deep look at the majestic vision above his head. Throughout the mysterious gray fog that hid the boundaries of the pocket space, he could see numerous different asteroids floating in place as they had done for many years.

Naturally, these asteroids had to be fixed in place in order to remain in their exact positions without shifting the entire time. They also received other forms of protection to make sure that the fish-whales or other other destructive influences did not shatter them into pieces.

All in all, Purgatory was indeed a remarkable pocket space. Only a peak power such as the Big Two could rival such a creation.

Ves already began to exhibit more awe towards the phase whale that created this large and private playground. Alien or not, to be able to wield science and power to such a grand degree was proof that the creator had reached the pinnacle in its field.

Even if the phase whale was long dead and gone, Purgatory served as an enduring monument of the creature's greatness. It was a grand design that other creators like Ves would feel privileged to come in touch with. He already began to gain inspiration from this sight, and this was when he had just passed through this portal!

"I knew it was the right choice to venture inside!"

For a moment, he did nothing except to keep his gaze upwards and let his imagination run free.

He began to think about the formation of the pocket space.

He imagined what it was like when it was still operating in its original form.

He thought about the diverse kinds of tech he needed to master in order to create a similar pocket space.

He visualized how the passage of time affected Purgatory's internal situation.

He crafted a story around the fish-whales, who originally served as test subjects for some kind of biological program but had now broken free and taken control of their own destiny.

He thought about the emergence of many different native kingdoms, only for the Swarmers to gain the upper hand and swallow up enough rivals so that only four distinctly different groups of fish-whales remained.

The entry of humans into Purgatory represented a new chapter of history to the native life forms of this pocket space. For the first time in millions of years, outsiders had come. The status quo that had existed for many generations was about to undergo a drastic change.

Thinking about all of the gains he came to make in this pocket space caused his imagination to take a completely different turn all of a sudden.

From the moment he thought about how he could apply his potential gains to his future mech designs, he began to generate the strangest idea that he had come up with for a while.

"What if... every living mech I design comes with its own 'pocket space'?"

It was an absurd thought and one that was clearly impossible to be realized!

A single mech that carried a whole pocket space the size of a moon was an absolute treasure that was no less expensive than a CFA battleship!

Naturally, Ves did not waste any time on such an unrealistic fantasy. He instead interpreted the 'pocket space' attached to his mechs in a more figurative sense.

"It is clearly impossible for me to design a mech that can match the creation of Purgatory, but what if the pocket space is an imaginary rather than a real space?"

It was an interesting thought experiment and had so much potential that Ves seriously tried to play it out. What would he do if he could impart an illusionary pocket space to his mechs?

He thought about his upcoming mech design projects and honed in on his intention to design a commercial training mech.

Ever since he developed the intention to start this mech design project, he had always felt a bit dissatisfied with its concept.

It was easy enough to take the Chiron design as a base and convert it into a more universal mech design.

However, Ves would never be satisfied with such a straightforward conversion. The potential of growth mechs was more than that and his urge to innovate needed a greater challenge in order for him to feel fulfilled.

He already lined up a few ideas to enhance the value and functionality of his commercial training mech, but none of them were groundbreaking compared to the existing functions of his Chiron design.

The potential to impart an illusionary pocket space in his training mech was different!

As long as he was able to accomplish this, he could shape this pocket space in any way he wanted.

The application that would fit a training mech the best was to create a simulated battleground.

It would function similarly to all of those virtual piloting simulators that his Larkinson mech pilots regularly used to practice their skills and build up combat experience.

Of course, Ves was well aware that those sophisticated simulation programs always possessed shortcomings.

The first biggest shortcoming was that they did not correctly interpret the less straightforward aspects about mechs. The functioning of more esoteric exotics and the effects of various design philosophies such as his own translated poorly into simulators.

The mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan complained more about this fault than others. The virtual versions of the living mechs they were familiar with not only felt dull and listless, their unique characters did not grow nor persist in any way.

To put it more simply, a virtual mech of his own design lost one of its greatest appeals, which was the capacity to grow and adapt to its mech pilot!

Hence, the Bright Warriors, the Ferocious Piranhas, the Valkyrie Redeemers, the Transcendent Punishers and all of the other mainstays of the Larkinson Clan always remained at the start of their growth period in the virtual simulators!

Perhaps the mech pilots did not feel bothered by this in the beginning, but as their real living mechs slowly developed and unlocked their hidden potential, the disparity between real and virtual mechs became more and more evident!

This was why the various mech legions conducted so many live practice sessions despite the hefty cost they incurred. The mech pilots simply didn't gain as much if they practiced their piloting skills in a simulated environment.

The second major shortcoming of piloting simulators was their lack of real consequences. Every pilot who entered a simulator pod knew they were entering a false environment that was completely devoid from reality.

Death in a simulator only meant that the pilots had to reset their false mechs so that they could try again.

Perhaps the software program or the organization they belonged to might impose costs and penalties on their own, but these were only pale attempts to instill the consequences of losses into the mech pilots.

No matter what, those flawed simulation programs could never instill the threat of true death to those mech pilots.

Without the fear of suffering permanent consequences hanging over their heads, the mentality and attitudes of mech pilots during their simulation sessions were never as serious as they were in actual battle.

This was also one of the major reasons why mech pilots during times of calm rarely broke through. It was too difficult for them to receive enough stimulation and spark a chain reaction in their hearts and minds that caused them to squeeze more potential out of them than they had ever done before.

"The current state of simulator programs is not good, but it isn't bad either."

Simulator programs specially developed for mech pilots existed as long as the Age of Mechs. The underlying tech already existed for the most part. Developers did not need to add much more in order to make them suitable for mech pilots to practice their skills by piloting virtual mechs.

Yet even though it was easy to develop simulations that emulated the actual piloting experience by 80 percent or 90 percent, closing the gap any further was an extremely difficult endeavor!

Ves did not specialize in virtual reality nor possess too much knowledge in the related fields, so he only possessed a general understanding of the challenges facing piloting simulator developers.

He did know that few of them accomplished breakthroughs in the generations that followed. The simulator programs of today might be a lot more advanced and fully-featured than the ones that came out a few centuries ago, but they were still largely the same in essence!

"That also means that the actual benefit that mech pilots can gain from them has also remained stagnant."

All of the iterative improvements and additions definitely improved the piloting experience, but the fundamental problems related to imperfect modeling of reality and the lack of real consequences remained.

This was where Ves believed he could make a difference with his latest idea.

12:05

"What if... virtual reality no longer holds the answer anymore?" Ves wondered as his eyes tried to. As a mech designer, it was not his job to change this situation and improve the effectiveness of piloting simulator programs.

Under ordinary circumstances, mech designers like Ves had no choice but to accept that they could only go so far in representing the full charm of their mech designs in a virtual environment.

Yet as Ves continued to gaze at the majesty of Purgatory, he began to form a different stance towards this long-standing problem in the mech industry.

"What if... I can create a better and more realistic piloting simulation environment?"

He thought about how his first foray in mech design started with designing virtual variants of a then-popular game called Iron Spirit.

Fantastic mech pilots such as Joshua King, now Joshua Larkinson, rose to prominence due to piloting his earliest works at the time.

Naturally, Joshua no longer played that silly game anymore. Iron Spirit was a game that was marketed towards citizens of third-rate states. The simulator pods were cheap and provided an inferior virtual piloting experience compared to the more high-end models owned by his clan.

Yet even the second-class piloting simulator programs did not provide a fundamentally superior practice environment. It cost a huge amount of money to improve the realism of the piloting experience by a couple of percentage points.

Naturally, there was only so much that money could accomplish. Mech pilots were only able to make gains in more technical aspects such as weapon handling, instrument management and other mundane aspects.

More profound aspects such as polishing their willpower and testing their courage against true threats remained absent in virtual reality.

This was where Ves believed he could make a difference with his latest idea.

"What if... virtual reality no longer holds the answer anymore?" Ves wondered as his eyes tried to roam the depths of Purgatory. "What if the answer lies in creating an entirely different reality? An illusionary reality?"

It was an idea worth exploring.

Chapter 3840 A New Kind of Simulator

Trying to replace the virtual piloting simulation programs was not a trivial ambition.

It amounted to nothing less than upending the entire industry and market around this product category!

Ves did not think he could succeed in this challenge. He only came up with this idea just now. Developing it into an actual feature and product demanded a huge amount of time and effort! It would take decades if not centuries to complete a new practice tool that could completely displace virtual reality programs as the premier choice for mech pilots!

He just wanted to add another selling point to his upcoming commercial training mech design and possibly his other products as well.

He might even turn it into another staple feature of living mechs, one that was explicitly geared towards helping mech pilots improve!

Ves first thought about the strengths and shortcomings of virtual piloting simulator programs and tried to think how his own alternative could provide a superior practice environment.

He briefly turned his attention back to reality and swept his gaze across Fort Fishblood.

His elevated position granted him a decent view of the recently-erected base. Worker Bees had converted the materials harvested from Violet Ridge on one side of the portal and the Gate Continent on the other side of the portal into additional structural reinforcement.

The Larkinsons had never stopped their construction efforts. Ever since Venerable Tusa came back with recordings of powerful and highly destructive fish-whales, the construction teams were tasked with strengthening the fortifications of Fort Fishblood.

While they could only provide limited assistance in any battle, a bit more defense was better than nothing. Fort Fishblood turned into a larger, taller and more complete fortification by the day.

Naturally, mechs still played a starring role in the defense of this beachhead. While the Larkinsons had begun to dispatch groups of mechs in the surrounding environment, most of them stayed behind and guarded the fort against any possible attacks from the neighboring hordes of Swarmer fish.

He spotted the tall and thick Shield of Samar not too far away from the ancient space gate. The expert mech was dormant at the moment but could switch online at any time.

"Expert pilots have the greatest need for a superior practice environment."

This was the biggest downside to becoming a demigod!

When expert pilots reached an entirely new life phase, their piloting capabilities far surpassed their previous levels.

Simulators did not become irrelevant at the expert pilot level. People like Venerable Tusa and Venerable Joshua still needed to spend a lot of time in simulators in order to polish their basic and fundamental piloting skills to greater heights!

However, the inability for simulators to accurately represent the more metaphysical aspects of high-ranking mechs meant that expert pilots lacked a complete practice tool.

No matter how many simulated battles they fought, they weren't able to exercise their resonance strength in the slightest!

Aside from that, they weren't able to practice their resonance abilities and other advanced functions of expert mechs either. In the long run, their ability to pilot their expert mechs might actually regress because the flaws in their practice routine distorted their piloting style!

Ves' eyes shone as he continued to observe the Shield of Samar.

"If I can make a special illusionary simulator that can accurately simulate the full feature set of an expert mech, I can step up the practice of all of my expert pilots!"

This was an incredibly valuable innovation and one that might revolutionize the training pattern of high-ranking mech pilots across human space!

Ves quickly shook his head in order to temper his wild ambition.

Based on his current capabilities, it was impossible for him to construct such a powerful and complete illusionary practice environment.

Simulating the piloting experience of an ordinary mech was already challenging enough. Doing the same for a powerful expert mech that not only leveraged true resonance but also prime resonance was an extremely time-consuming endeavor!

He turned his sights away from the Shield of Samar.

He instead directed his gaze towards the more ordinary mechs utilized by his clan. Both the old and new models were special in their own way, but they were far from reaching the exaggerated power levels of his expert mechs.

They were much easier for him to simulate, but that didn't mean that he could pull it off in his current state.

"I am at the starting line when it comes to implementing this idea. I shouldn't aim too high at the start." Ves reminded himself.

He cast his gaze away from his existing mechs and thought back on his upcoming mech design projects.

Out of all of the ones he had in mind, the simplest mech that he could use as a platform for this feature was the commercial training mech.

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced it was the right choice to implement his new idea!

"Training mechs are already focused on training mech pilots to begin with, so a new illusionary piloting simulator is not that big of a surprise!"

Training mechs were also slower, weaker and less complex in their external performance characteristics.

They did not possess the huge amount of firepower of the Transcendent Punisher nor the compound glow of the Ferocious Piranha.

They were merely simple practice tools that calibrated their performance at a lower level in order to accommodate the limited piloting abilities of mech cadets.

The difficulty of simulating a lower-performing mech with fewer bells and whistles was much lower!

"This is a realistic goal." Ves smiled. [UPDATE FROM FREEWEBNOVEL.COM](http://FREEWEBNOVEL.COM).

Of course, he still had to invest a lot of time and effort in this new effort. He needed to start from scratch and conceive of an entirely new application of spiritual design that he had never developed before.

Even if he put in all of that work, there was no guarantee that he would succeed!

"Can I even do this?" Ves wondered to himself.

He did not feel discouraged at this idea. While he originally drew inspiration from this idea by viewing Purgatory in person for the first time, he did not intend to develop a creation as massive and profound as a real pocket space.

He just wanted to construct a spirituality-based illusionary realm that could provide mech pilots a more effective way of improving their piloting capabilities.

"What is the point of doing this? How will my living mechs be able to provide superior training conditions than virtual piloting training programs?"

He thought about the living mechs that defined his work. He recalled the complaints from his mech pilots about how the virtual simulators were incapable of allowing them to grow alongside their real living mechs.

If his product served as the core or carrier of the spiritual piloting simulator, then Ves might be able to break this constraint!

"This will be a huge step forward for the mech pilots of our clan!"

Ves also had to arrange a complete piloting simulator in spiritual form, of course. This demanded a lot of work and he wasn't sure whether the spiritual foundation of his mech design was able to carry a spiritual construct of this magnitude.

"In theory, it shouldn't be a big deal. The simulator program is just a large collection of programming code. I don't need to create an actual realm in an intangible form.

That was way too far away for Ves! He believed he would have to realize his design philosophy before he could tackle such an ambitious project.

For now, Ves would already be happy if he created a basic, barebones illusionary piloting simulator. The main requirement was that it provided a qualitatively better training environment with a much higher degree of realism than before.

In this form, the simulator would already allow mech pilots to practice alongside their living mechs. Both of them would be able to gain combat experience and deepen each other's relationship towards each other!

This was already a fantastic benefit of his virtual piloting simulator that could not be matched by any virtual piloting simulator! It didn't matter if his own work possessed other limitations due to their lack of maturity.

He could always expand this spiritual training simulator at a later date. His upcoming training mech design would primarily serve as a test platform in order to verify whether his radical new training concept was viable.

Once he created the most basic form of the spiritual piloting simulator and observed how different mech pilots interacted with them, he could derive new conclusions and design more elaborate spiritual piloting simulators for his subsequent products!

"I can even incorporate the growth aspect in the simulator so that it will grow grander and more elaborate over time!"

A newly-built living mech only possessed a limited amount of strength and carrying capacity for spiritual constructs.

If the living mech grew stronger over time, the simulator that was embedded into its spiritual foundation would be able to grow and become profound as well.

Ves might even make it so that its practice sessions became more attuned to the individual training needs of the mech pilot!

Once his thought reached this point, he felt as if something in his mind had clicked. By developing a brand-new spiritual piloting simulator for his commercial training mech, he finally judged that his crucial training mech design possessed enough added value to stand out in the mech market.

"Being able to provide a considerably more realistic practice environment is already an undeniable attraction to highly competitive mech academies!"

This was because the spiritual piloting simulator in his mind had the potential to offer more benefits.

Greater realism combined with deeper immersion gave Ves a chance to address the other major shortcoming of virtual training solutions!

If his spiritual alternative was able to pull the mind of the mech pilot deep enough, the new practice environment might cause the target in question to experience the illusionary battles as actual life-and-death struggles!

Normally, this was an incredibly difficult attainment. The best virtual reality developers had failed to come up with a simulator that could make mech pilots forget actual reality to the point where they treated their existences in the virtual environment as their real lives.

Yet Ves did not believe it was impossible for him to create this condition. His expertise in spiritual engineering was just good enough for him to be able to construct at least a basic form of immersive illusion.

He just had to lean heavily on the mind-melding and emotional manipulation aspects of his design applications.

If the glows of his mech designs were capable of making a pilot feel awe or fearful, it should be possible for Ves to induce other kinds of emotions in order to raise the stakes of simulated battles!

Ves briefly paused when he thought about the potential dangers to this design application.

"Can I go too far with this? What if a mech pilot becomes so deeply immersed that they prefer to inhabit the lives of their illusionary selves?"

This was not a new problem. There were countless addicts that had completely fallen for the charm of virtual reality games.

This problem would only grow worse with a more realistic simulation method. Ves needed to implement a lot of precautions to make sure that the mind of the mech pilot became clear again after the end of a lengthy illusionary simulation session.

"Maybe... I can reset their minds with the help of Lufa's glow."

This sounded like a great combination!

As Ves continued to think on how to implement all of the specific aspects of his new spiritual piloting simulator, he recognized many different challenges that each needed to be solved in different ways in order to make the entire idea work.

Yet no matter what questions he raised, he was always able to come up with the right answer.

If he wasn't able to solve a problem in the short term, then he would definitely be able to come back to it when he became a more experienced mech designer!

His passion became stoked as he became more certain about implementing this fantastic new innovation in one of his next mech design projects!

"It's viable!"