The Mech Touch

Chapter 7611 Mother Crystal

Ves transmitted a message that contained his thoughts about trading a large share of their spoils to willing trading partners.

He planned to discuss this subject with her in greater detail after this meeting.

The Larkinson Clan needed to take advantage of this opportunity while the prices for these deathborn trinkets were still ridiculously high.

The more time passed by, the greater the probability that the Red Three and the other major players managed to get their hands on a sufficient number of alien specimens.

After all, the Hypeh-Tekas System was still in the hands of the Blackwater Summoner and his new allies.

The source of the dark miasma remained untouched and still served as a notable stronghold of the deathborn race. There was no way that either of the two were willing to give up now that they had committed so much to this endeavor.

The deathborn was bound to rebuild their temple complex and expand their colonial infrastructure even further.

They may even begin to expand their presence in other star systems in order to prevent a decapitation strike from wiping out all of their progress at once!

In short, the deathborn were bound to flourish so long as the native aliens did not regard them as enemies that had to be eliminated right away.

That would subsequently make it easier for future human expedition fleets to drop in and pick up lots of samples of deathborn technologies.

Ves seriously doubted that the human raiders would have much trouble gathering large quantities of seemingly mundane items such as acceleration boots and reinforcement bands!

Of course, it still took a considerable amount of time and effort to organize these raiding runs. Many of the major players also could not afford to redirect a substantial force of mechs and warships without weakening their existing military obligations.

That made trade with the Larkinsons so attractive, allowing the latter to demand higher prices.

Still, as much as Ves looked forward to securing valuable concessions such as high-end cultivation knowledge and additional RF Warship Tokens, he still felt a little disappointed that he had yet to encounter anything truly powerful or dangerous.

He knew that the RC search parties had managed to salvage far more goods than these modest goods.

"All of this stuff is good and all, but... my clansmen haven't fought and died just to obtain a bunch of research material." Ves said without bothering to hide his faint sense of disappointment. "I know you guys also managed to salvage more powerful specimens. Do you have anything that is both powerful and usable in the short term?"

The request caused the formation master to fall silent for a time. Several seconds passed before she slowly nodded her head.

"There may be one relic that meets your requirements, but... we still lack too much information to guarantee everyone's safety. If you insist on examining it, we will have to bring you to one of our larger and most secure labs."

"Then let's go."

The group exited the current chamber and moved down the corridors before passing through another secure checkpoint.

Ves noted that the bulkheads were thicker this time. The blast doors particularly looked as if they could withstand a number of hits from a mech-grade weapon. Once they passed through, he confirmed his suspicion that the entire secure lab had been designed as a self-containing block.

If the Moloch ever got threatened, she could eject the entire secure lab in the hopes that other vessels could successfully retrieve the block and its precious contents!

Of course, if a situation had already deteriorated to this point, the enemy would likely put a lot of effort into ruining this process.

"What you are about to approach is a known exotic radiation source. While not all of you are susceptible to it, please follow protocol and change into your hazard suits."

A set of lockers slid open. Everyone aside from Lucky donned their respective suits.

"These are new." Ves remarked as he donned his black-coated hazard suit. "I can see that you also incorporated some of the materials salvaged from the temple complex."

"They are. We designed a variant of one of the standard models. The most important difference is that we have reinforced the exterior with deathstone and hyper alloys that

are much more effective at blocking death energy and other negative energies. We have also carved rudimentary spell arrays that further strengthens this purpose."

The suits certainly gave each of them a much greater sense of security.

"This feels stuffy." Andraste complained as her thick suit looked proportionally more clumsy on her smaller frame.

"Meow."

"Even Lucky agrees."

"Just bear with it, honey."

Once they completed this step, they entered an observation room where a handful of collies wearing similar hazard suits sat behind their workstations.

"Sir. Ma'am. Welcome to our lab."

"Report."

"The Mother Crystal still remains stable, but not completely inert. It is continuing to radiate a low degree of mixed negative energies as before."

"Mother Crystal?" Ves asked. "Is that what you call this big chunk of green crystal?"

"That is correct, sir. We originally referred to it as the Large Mother Deathcrystal Fragment. This is derived from the Mother Deathcrystal, which is our own term for the massive green crystal that used to power the temple complex at its center before its catastrophic destruction at the hands of the Riot. When our salvaging operations began, retrieving the remains of this priceless crystal was our highest priority. This fragment is one of the few that we have managed to obtain, and it is by far the largest of its kind. Other fragments are much smaller in comparison."

He could believe that. Compared to the size of the original 'Mother Deathcrystal', the fragment cradled in the center of a highly shielded lab chamber was only a fraction of the former's size.

It was roughly the size of a small shuttle, but still looked remarkably good. Its sides were mostly flat and angled neatly from each other.

Even the side that used to be attached to the rest of the Mother Deathcrystal showed off a clean break!

This made the large fragment special as it still contained a lot of death energy. More importantly than that, it also showed a hint of structured activity. Its glowing center still generated pulses of light at a consistent frequency.

"Who has a claim on this crystal?"

"Your clan." Andrea Vos answered. "You and your clan are entitled to the largest share of the spoils. According to the current distribution plan, this particular crystal fragment is yours, though all of the other crystal fragments that are smaller but still formidable in size have already been claimed by your allies. This can still change if you decide that you would like to exchange it for other valuable prizes and rewards."

There was no way Ves would be willing to trade it for anything else!

Even if the Larkinson Clan lacked the research capacity to make heads or tails of this large green crystal, he could clearly tell that it was still rare and powerful.

It would be nearly impossible for the Larkinsons to obtain anything similar to it unless they raided another deathborn stronghold in the future!

It did not matter too much to him if none of the researchers of the Larkinsons managed to get anything useful out of this big boy. Ves already came up with a few crazy plans to harness its power for his own use.

Sure, his methods would probably waste much of the potential of this large crystal fragment, but as long as he succeeded, the results should still go on expanding his understanding of mechs!

"I take it that this crystal did not come out of nowhere."

"As you can surmise, this deathcrystal fragment is extraordinary because it still maintains a clean shape despite the calamity that has befallen the original Mother Deathcrystal." The Farseer explained to Ves. "Our studies in other deathcrystals and deathcrystal fragments has taught us that shape is a key variable to these alien constructs. Irregular surfaces somehow cause these green crystals to lose their cohesion. They stop functioning properly and leak out death energy as if a balloon has popped. We theorize that the deathcrystals are designed to function as closed or at least semi-closed systems. This is logical if you equate them to circuit boards or any other electrical system for that matter."

If that was true, then deathcrystals sort of functioned as machines in their own right. The biggest difference was that they ran on death energy rather than plain old electrical energy as their power source.

"Okay." He said. "This is clearly cool, but... have you figured out what it can actually do? I mean, anyone can guess that this fragment can still pull off a few tricks, but I imagine that it is very risky to experiment with it. I can't get an exact read on how much death

energy is left inside, but it looks like it is very considerable. Nothing good will happen if this fragment discharges it all at once."

"That is correct, sir. We dare not take risks with such a powerful and potentially volatile object. Proper testing can only proceed once you have brought it to a purpose-built lab that is preferably situated in an isolated location that is several light-hours away from any human population centers. However, we have not remained completely passive. My men and I have not been able to hold back from conducting a host of minor tests."

"What sort of minor tests?"

"We have learned several rudimentary methods that allow us to manipulate deathcrystals in a superficial manner." She responded. "Before you ask, we made these discoveries when experimenting with much smaller deathcrystals."

"I see. That sounds... a little more sensible, not entirely free from risk. What works fine with a tiny crystal might produce a very different outcome when you handle something as large as this. I hope it has been worth it, Andrea."

The woman smiled at him. "Then you will be happy with what you are about to witness next."

She passed on a few precise instructions to the other scientists.

Shortly afterwards, a free mechanical arm descended from the ceiling. It unfolded and cautiously started to reach towards the large fragment.

The arm extended a metallic finger and began to tap the surface of the glowing green crystal at several different angles.

It looked completely random to Ves, but he guessed that the pattern was definitely deliberate in nature. They just hadn't figured out its underlying rules and formulas.

Whatever the case, as soon as the mechanical arm finished tapping, the Large Mother Crystal Fragment suddenly started to pulse its glow at a higher frequency than before!

Ves almost took a step back when he sensed that the crystal became more active.

"What is happening?!" Andraste cried out as she could also feel the large object begin to mobilize its formidable energy reserves.

He extended his arm and held her shoulder in a reassuring fashion.

Meanwhile, the crystal began to pulse faster and faster before it projected a large green sphere!

At first, the projected green globe did not seem special.

It was only when Ves tried to look deeper that he began to detect hundreds of bright spots of light. Most of them were clustered around the center, though there were also other clusters located a bit further away.

"This looks... like the output of a detection array." He commented. "What is it picking up? Not starships. Not organisms."

The Farseer supplied the answer. "As far as we can surmise, it is detecting deathcrystals or elevated concentrations of death energy. We haven't been able to rule out either possibility as of yet. Regardless, this function alone makes this large fragment valuable to any combat force, as it can be used to detect the presence of deathborn or their tech at considerable distances."

"Are you sure about that? The range of this detection function does not look impressive if these clusters belong to other ships that are carrying deathborn spoils."

"This is just the default setting. We have already found a way to 'zoom out' so that the projected display can cover larger distances."

The same mechanical arm as before pressed a metallic finger across the surface of the large fragment and began to drag it in a circular fashion.

This drastically shrunk the clusters of light until they pretty much merged into a single point of light at the very center.

What was remarkable was that a handful of other points of light started to show up at the edges of the projected sphere!

"Is that...!?"

The Farseer smirked. "We have already compared this display to our star charts and confirmed that they correspond to other star systems in the region. What you are likely seeing is a map that displays the coordinates of other deathborn or deathborn technology. Whether it is truly real-time has not been completely verified, but we strongly believe this to be the case. In other words, there is no delay. This alien sensor is able to precisely pinpoint the presence and locations of possible enemy units across at least a dozen light-years!"

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Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 7612 Contradictory Value

The Large Mother Crystal Fragment possessed an amazing function!

It was able to perform a scan across interstellar distances that could accurately detect and determine the coordinates of other deathborn!

This was an incredible capability despite its limitations!

Ves certainly had not come across any form of conventional human technology that could do anything similar regardless of whether it picked up deathborn, humans, phase lords or anything else!

Perhaps the phenomenon that could come closest was to rely on the vague and costly predictions of the Great Prophet.

There was no comparison between the two!

As a mech designer and an engineer, Ves vastly preferred to work with a solution that could provide consistent and more importantly straightforward output.

The question now was whether this green crystal fragment could do more than detect deathborn or pieces of their technology.

"Does it have different detection modes? Can you configure it to search for living organisms or high-level entities?"

The Farseer did not answer immediately.

She first made a gesture towards the other scientists, who quickly controlled the mechanical arm to press the large glowing green crystal at several different points.

The projected green sphere disappeared shortly afterwards. The crystal fragment gradually dimmed as it settled back into a somewhat dormant state.

"Aside from a few inconclusive reactions, this is the only setting that we have been able to generate out of our cautious probes. We have many theories. If we assume that deathcrystals are the alien version of circuitry, then we believe that this particular fragment has mostly retained the original Mother Crystal's scanning function. If this is true, then it is unlikely to possess completely different abilities. As far as its main purpose is concerned, the damaged condition of this crystal has definitely impaired it in a number of ways. We believe it is plausible that it originally possessed different scanning modes, but we have not yet confirmed whether they are still accessible. That requires both greater understanding of deathborn technology and deeper examinations. We have only explored the tip of the iceberg so far. There is much that we have yet to uncover."

The collies did not dare to commit to any substantial actions. The crystal fragment may have only been a fraction of a greater whole, but it was still large enough to threaten the Moloch's entire crew if it blew up for whatever reason!

The scientists therefore had to hold back their urges and stop themselves from digging any deeper.

Though Ves commended the collies for their caution, he also felt let down by the lack of definitive answers.

"Why did you turn off the projection?"

"That is due to another major issue." The female formation master responded. "We have found that activating its real-time scanning function puts a severe drain on its energy reserves. While a crystal of this size can store a large amount of death energy, it is nothing compared to the original Mother Crystal. We are also assuming that the damage caused by the fracturing has introduced flaws that decrease its efficiency. More energy is being wasted, which is why it is generating an anomalous energy field that does nothing aside from making everyone around it feel uncomfortable. According to our calculations, if we keep the scanning function active for 7 whole minutes, it will bottom out its remaining energy reserves."

"That short?!"

"That is right, sir. This is the case regardless of the zoom level. There should be a way to reduce its scanning range and intensity, but we have yet to find this setting. We do not even know whether it exists or whether the fracturing of the Mother Crystal has caused it to become lost. If that is the case, then we may never be able to regain this setting unless we repair or alter this deathcrystal fragment ourselves."

That was an extremely unrealistic prospect. Even Ves could tell that deathcrystals was one of the more intricate and high-end domains of deathborn technology.

If red humanity did not manage to capture and interrogate a deathborn engineer or obtain any alien treatises on their technologies, it would probably take at least a decade of dedicated study just to figure out the more superficial principles of these strange crystals!

That was way too long for Ves.

He already resigned himself to the reality that the Larkinsons would not be able to do much to mitigate the severe energy demands of this deathcrystal fragment.

"Well, given what it can do, its current function is already powerful enough in itself. It is definitely a unique strategic advantage if used to hunt down or evade significant concentrations of deathborn. It would be more useful if it can detect living organisms,

though. We could switch it on for a brief moment and find out whether there are any hostile fleets lurking in neighboring star systems."

If that was the case, then this deathcrystal fragment would definitely become the most valuable treasure salvaged from the Hypeh-Tekas System!

Nothing could come close to matching its strategic importance!

This included all of the superdimensional spoils!

Sadly, the collies did not have the answers. Yet.

"Whether this crystal can truly search for living organisms and other criteria is unclear. It is dangerous to hold too many expectations given that this object is in a damaged and incomplete state. Even if it contains additional functions, it is questionable whether we can access them given that we are not deathborn ourselves. Perhaps one way to overcome this identity restriction is to employ the aid of your daughter."

Both of them turned their gazes towards the little girl, who had been staring at the large green crystal with a dazed expression.

"Hmph?" She suddenly became conscious of the attention she was attracting. "I... can feel a lot of stuff from this big crystal. It feels... strong... but also... garbled. I have tried to make sense of it through Yaika, but I only get the sense that I am 'hearing' static."

The Farseer did not look surprised. "This crystal either does not come with an intuitive interface or it has suffered damage. Whatever the case, do not try to push deeper, girl. The risks are too great."

Fortunately, Andraste knew better than to tempt fate.

"I know. This crystal is scary. It makes me feel as if I have stepped close to a high-explosive missile. Even if it is just sitting there doing nothing, my instincts are warning me that I do not want to be around if it ever detonates."

Though Andraste was not an engineer or an expert in xenotechnology, Ves and Andrea still took her words seriously.

Her companion spirit was able to pick up signals that others could not perceive due to her uncommon affinity towards the death element.

Not even Blinky could match Yaika in this aspect!

While the Star Cat was able to tolerate a broad range of E energy attributes, his versatility came at the cost of depth. He would never be able to compete with other companion spirits in terms of depth and specialization.

This was a tradeoff that Ves had consciously made when he initially determined the development trajectory of his companion spirit.

He did not regret this decision. He only felt sorry that Andraste may be burdened with the responsibility of managing this deathcrystal fragment in the future.

"You should actually feel lucky that this crystal fragment is so limited and impaired." Andrea Vos mentioned to Ves. "If it was truly capable of performing the tasks that you desire, then it would never be allocated to your clan in the first place. Several tier 1 galactic citizens would have staked their claim on it. I am referring to fleet admirals, god pilots and Star Designers. Each of them have strong reasons to secure this crystal for themselves in order to abuse its ability to precisely detect the up-to-date locations of alien forces."

That caused Ves' expression to drop.

He could easily foresee such a possibility taking place!

As much as Ves had climbed up the ladder of power, he was constantly aware that he had not yet joined the ranks of the top dogs.

Any genuine True God-level existence such as Xenotechnician or the Evolution Witch could easily swoop in and appropriate his precious Large Mother Crystal Fragment without encountering any resistance!

They only needed to provide a sufficiently plausible excuse to justify their actions.

Even if their honor and principles compelled them to provide ample compensation to the Larkinsons, Ves seriously doubted that it would ever make up for the loss of this priceless treasure!

Ves narrowed his eyes. The Farseer's latest remark had given him a very important reminder.

He could not allow this crystal to remain in the hands of RC researchers.

As much as he respected their competence and professionalism, they still worked for the Red Collective.

Their loyalties did not solely lie with him. They had no obligation to uphold his interests. Some of them may even be agents planted by other major powers such as the RA or the RF!

The best way to deal with this precious crystal was to transfer it to a fully Larkinson-owned vessel or lab as soon as possible.

He wordlessly stared into the other woman's eyes.

The formation master read his unspoken demand.

"I do not advise doing that just yet, sir." She answered. "My superiors have... expectations. Until we have returned to human-occupied space, the crystal fragment must remain under our supervision. We will continue to examine and probe this large specimen in the hopes of making another significant discovery. Only when we have returned to our side of the border will we fully organize all of our findings and calculate the 'final' value of all of the deathborn artifacts that we have brought back. If no greater authority has made an overriding claim on this specific treasure, then your clan is free to take it away by using up a significant proportion of its own quota."

That put Ves in a troubled mood.

One one hand, he hoped that this Large Mother Crystal Fragment did not possess any other easily accessible functions.

The more useful it became, the greater the probability that it would slip away from his possession!

On the other hand, if the crystal continued to remain obstinate and refuse to do anything else, then its utility remained severely constrained.

It would remain completely useless unless the Larkinsons needed to acquire information about whether there were any deathborn in the stellar neighborhood!

"I hope... that you and your researchers make sure to err on the side of caution in the next few days." Ves carefully said. "I don't want anything to happen to the Moloch and all of the valuable artifacts she is carrying. Besides, I don't want you to empty out the crystal's energy reserves. I imagine that it is very problematic to replenish its charge."

Chapter 7613 Setting Expectations

As Ves, his daughter and Lucky boarded the shuttle that would take them back to the Tarrasque, they had all fallen into silence.

The gem cat yawned and began to take a short nap while lounging on the little girl's nap.

Meanwhile, Ves and Andraste still remained preoccupied by what they had witnessed during their tour on the Moloch.

Ves gently reached out and grasped his daughter's small but firm hand.

'Pumpkin.'

'Papa?'

Both of them communicated with each other through spiritual means. This was a trick that everyone with a companion spirit or attainments in qi cultivation could accomplish. It was a much more secure means of relaying messages with each other, especially if they took measures to minimize their emissions by relying on proximity.

Naturally, if Ves the need to resort to this method, then he definitely did not want others to listen in on his conversation.

'When you looked at the Large Mother Crystal Fragment, what did you truly feel? I do not think that you merely sensed a lot of 'noise' from the artifact.'

Andraste kept her mouth shut while playfully swinging her legs back and forth. She maintained a perfect facade of innocence while radiating smugness towards her father.

'Heh, I can be subtle when I have to. You didn't want others to know too much about it, right? What I said back then was true. I genuinely felt like this crystal was some kind of mistuned communicator. However, Yaika was able to pick up something underneath it all. It was difficult for me to notice it at all. I only managed to find out several minutes after we entered the last lab. All of that noise and stuff is doing far too good a job of hiding it all. I bet there is no one else in the fleet that can do the same."

Ves tried to repress an urge. Even he and Blinky had failed to detect this undercurrent!

'Good girl. I am so proud of you, not because you are talented, but because you have learned how to keep secrets.'

'Papa is a good teacher.' Andraste mentally preened. 'Anyway, what exactly I have managed to detect is... weird. I don't know how to describe it to you. I felt as if my tongue had brushed against an entirely new flavor of death.'

'What do you mean by flavors of death?'

His girl struggled to explain her understanding. 'Death is... death. In my younger years, I have always known what it represents. At least I thought so. When I trample the bugs underneath my feet, I can feel their tiny lives slipping away. They just... go. That was all I ever knew. Then I started to talk to Helena and learned that death can have other forms. It's like... you know, how different religions have different afterlives. They all try to explain what happens after you die.'

'The starting point is the same, but the outcomes are different.' Ves mentally remarked.

'Like that! Well, I learned from Auntie Helena that death is not the same everywhere. It takes one form in the old galaxy, and a slightly different form in the new frontier. The two

aren't all that different to be honest. I think that was because the Red Ocean orbited the Milky Way for a very long time. They're related to each other.'

Ves understood what she was trying to convey. 'I see. Messier 87 must probably come across as a stranger in comparison.'

'Exactly! That big green crystal has put up an invisible field or whatever that is rooted in this foreign version of death. I bet that it is really important to the deathborn. Right now, I don't understand anything about it. There is plenty of stuff that feels familiar to me, but it is all wrapped up in completely new and alien rules.'

'Can you... connect to this underlying interface?'

'I can try, but... I don't think it will end well for me.' Andraste firmly responded. 'Just because I know a thing or two about death does not mean that I am a deathborn. I don't know a thing about their language and other stuff.'

Ves looked thoughtful. 'That does not rule out the possibility. You enjoy a rare advantage. I am sure that if you are able to address these shortcomings, you may be able to succeed and access the true administrative layer of that Large Mother Crystal Fragment.'

'...'

His daughter did not feel all that confident about this. She actually felt scared due to his growing expectations.

He quickly grew alarmed and bent over to hug his little girl.

'I won't force you to connect to that big crystal. I know it is dangerous. When it comes down to it, this is still a fragment of an insanely powerful and complex alien construction. Who knows how many traps and other safeguards those deathborn have left behind? There are too many risks involved with trying to harness it while blind to all of these hidden traps.'

The earlier engagements had already given Ves and the Larkinsons a good impression of the personality and habits of the deathborn.

They had already proved that they were clever. They possessed enough awareness about information warfare. Anything they built in the Red Ocean most likely possessed hidden safeguards that prevented humans or other unauthorized individuals from accessing their strange technologies at will.

This was far from the first time red humanity encountered such obstacles.

Humans always managed to break them. If there was one thing that they were good at, it was reverse engineering alien technologies. The only question was how long it would take for their best scientists to unlock the true secrets of deathborn engineering.

Ves did not want to end up with an extremely valuable alien artifact only to leave it in his vault for several decades.

It was a good thing that he already had several alternative solutions in mind.

Granted, they were all radical and may end up ruining the Large Mother Crystal Fragment on a permanent basis, but these were the risks inherent with prioritizing haste over caution.

The good thing was that Andraste would be left out of it for the most part. She did not have to take any risks until others had done the heavy lifting.

"I love you." He sighed as he patted her on the back.

"I love you too, papa."

A minute of silence later, Andraste finally chose to voice her words.

"That green crystal is way too big and dangerous for me, but those smaller gadgets were fun. Can I have them? That boot is really nice. If I had a pair of them sized for my feet, I could race across the battlefield with my sword!"

Ves almost coughed. "It is way too early for you to dream about swinging your sword against our alien enemies! Besides, there are plenty of high-tech mobility solutions that you can turn to that do not come with potential alien traps. Sure, they aren't as compact and convenient, but known human tech is the most reliable option available."

"That's so boring. Didn't you make lots of use of alien tech when you were younger?"

"You are not wrong, Andraste, but those were different times. The enemies I fought against were weaker and much less sophisticated. Things have changed after the Great Severing. The rise of the mutated voribugs and the threats from Messier 87 has forced us to confront a higher level of enemies that are not easy to exploit. We cannot blindly refer to our past successes to guide our actions in the days ahead."

He knew it was easy to say those sensible words. It would be a lot harder to stay true to their meaning.

Too many people still possessed blind reverence for human supremacy. They thought that they were the destined race that would always manage to overcome one existential crisis after another.

As the shuttle returned to the Tarrasque, Andraste cheerfully ran back to their stateroom while holding Lucky.

"Make sure not to say too much about what you saw, honey!"

"I know! I am not stupid papa!"

Ves could not afford to retire yet. He still needed to handle a few responsibilities, especially now that he had gained a greater understanding of the value of all of those deathborn artifacts.

He spent the next hour in discussion with the Saint Commander and other important figures about the allocation of the spoils.

Casella possessed an ambivalent attitude towards all of the strange alien stuff.

"Our researchers are already overloaded with their current assignments. Unless we can acquire a xenotechnology-oriented research institution or two, I do not think it is worth our time to do all of the hard work of figuring out these new technologies. It is much better for us to take advantage of our existing connections and exchange most of the unusable artifacts to our closest allies. This will not only allow us to get more for less, but also secure privileged access to their results. Our clan already possesses enough technological leads. We should cling to our existing advantages rather than dilute them in our greed to master more."

The Larkinson Clan ultimately possessed too many limitations to master deathborn technology.

Chapter 7614 Cybernetic Prisoners

This was not the first time that Ves learned that his clan lacked the research capabilities to decipher the secrets of exotic spoils of alien nature.

That was very problematic considering the Larkinson Clan's forces regularly came into contact with powerful alien adversaries.

Due to controlling the only human source of superdimensional matter, the Larkinsons enjoyed the unique advantage of fielding some of the strongest mechs short of god mechs!

Such powerful machines needed to be used on the right battlefields.

It was a waste to dispatch them onto less intensive battlefields where they could mindlessly bully alien cannon fodder without a single threat to their safety.

Not all of the native aliens were weak. Their encounter against the Blackwater Summoner and his well-equipped vassals under his command had given the combined fleet a bloody nose.

These were the enemies that the champions of the Larkinson Clan were destined to overcome!

It also helped a lot that fighting these enemies was highly rewarding.

Acquiring all of those deathborn artifacts greatly enriched the clan.

Salvaging the abandoned Saint Piercers and Saint Armors also gave the Design Department much more leeway in developing future superdimensional mechs.

The Dark Apostle and his Ascended Giants also drooled over the acquisition of new high-end phasewater organs!

If not for all of the casualties, Ves would have considered his half-finished campaign to be a resounding success!

"Perhaps my forces will return none too soon." Ves idly muttered.

He had a premonition that this would not be the last time the Larkinsons tangled with the deathborn and their native alien collaborators.

The acquisition of the mysterious Large Mother Crystal Fragment alone made him believe in this possible future.

After all, even if the Larkinsons failed to get anything useful out of it, just its most superficial function alone was an incredibly useful tool to pin down the locations of deathborn across the stars!

Red humanity did not need to rely on painstaking reconnaissance and infiltration to find out where the deathborn converged. They could just fly close enough before activating the crystal fragment for a few seconds to discover the precise coordinates of their nests.

If the sampling of valuable goods and debris from the previous battle was an indication of what humans could attain, he believed that future raids would still yield plenty of gains.

However, that brought Ves back to the original pain point.

The research institutions of the Larkinson Clan were unable to keep up with the growing demands of their services.

The matriarch of his clan along with many of the executives had done their best to address this shortcoming, but this was far from the only priority on their list.

The clan was still relatively young and grew larger with each passing day. Every administrative branch was swamped with work. The recruiting offices did their best to scale up their operations, but their efforts became increasingly more strained as they struggled to lure in the right kind of manpower.

Red humanity did not lack for ordinary job seekers. There were certainly enough third-raters, second-raters and even first-raters with average qualifications that dreamed of working for an up-and-coming group like the Larkinson Clan.

Yet the truly high-end talents remained frustratingly elusive.

Many of them were spoken for at birth or at a relatively early stage of their education.

Many major players had played this game for so many years that they had long planted recruiters or talent scouts at any upstanding school, academy and university!

These professionals could also rely on the huge reputations of their parent organizations to open doors and sign on promising prospects without encountering too many barriers.

While Ves believed that the men and women from the Larkinson Clan would one day be able to throw their weight around, he did not foresee this happening within a single generation.

That also meant that trying to scale up his research institutions could be done any faster.

The alternative solution was to buy up other research institutions, but even there the Larkinson Clan faced many barriers.

The most affordable ones could engage in ordinary R&D tasks without too many issues, but they completely lacked the high-end talent and experience to decipher anything truly challenging.

The more valuable institutions were already claimed by others for the most part. Many of them had been founded by states, superorganizations and other formidable players. They would never exchange such a strategic asset to their rivals unless they were truly desperate.

When Ves read the reports on how much the Larkinsons tried and failed to expand their effective research capacity, all he saw was a hundred ways to fail.

"Is it really that bad?" He asked his closest assistant.

Gavin Neumann did not need to employ the full capabilities of his digitized mind to respond.

"Every human knows that the ability to conduct research is an essential advantage at the beginning of the new age. New methods and technologies have become available. Any power that wants to retain their current strength and expand it in the future must innovate their way to success. The demand for scientists and engineers has become so great that every student that has proven to be a talent is being fought for by at least 20 employers!"

This pattern already created a considerable distortion in the employment sector.

Many students yearned to become a valued researcher.

Not only would they enjoy treatment reserves for kings and nobles, they also escaped military service and all of its associated dangers.

Almost no one was stupid enough to risk these precious talents on the battlefield!

The fact that so many organizations had already begun to put up scientists on a pedestal and bestowed them increasingly more extravagant privileges definitely spelled trouble in the future!

At the very least, it forced the Larkinsons to engage with more diva-like personalities than they wished.

"To be honest, we are doing quite okay even if we are unable to expand our research institutions as quickly as we like." Gavin tried to reassure his boss. "The relationships that we have forged with our allies have never been better. The Red Tree, the recently founded colonial empires and so on are all willing to share some of their most valuable research attainments with us. That is enough to prevent us from falling too far behind on the technological curve. A better outcome is more desirable, but not as attainable."

In other words, Ves needed to recognize his current reality and dismiss his unrealistic fantasies.

"Do you have any useful suggestions?"

"I have two." His assistant behaved a little more proactively than usual today. "One of them is to continue to do what you do best, which is making friends. As long as you get close enough to a power such as the Cybernetic Empire, it is not out of the question for you to conduct an exchange where the other party agrees to send you a batch of talented scientists."

Due to the Polymath's decision to assume leadership and centralize the entire governing structure of Bridgehead One, her little empire possessed a very strong focus on education and R&D.

For several decades, the Cybers continually made good use of their cranial implants to study advanced sciences and become competent in many different fields!

Of course, not all of them managed to fulfill their dreams. Ves had heard that the competition over there was extremely brutal. The Towers possessed limited budgets and could not indulge in too many people's flights of fancy. Therefore, only the truly talented and capable scientists and engineers managed to get hired.

As for the rest?

They could only settle for working at less prestigious R&D institutions or other employers.

These people seemed to be ripe for recruitment.

"Do you think it is a good idea to try to recruit second-string researchers from the Cybernetic Empire?"

Gavin firmly shook his head. "No. Not unless you make a special accommodation. The Cybernetic Empress keeps her people in a tight grip. Her empire still has not revoked the prohibition against emigration. Its citizens are forbidden from leaving. Otherwise, too many people who used to be mechers, fleeters, Terrans and Rubarthans would go right back to their old homes."

It was an unfortunate fact that many 'citizens' of the Cybernetic Empire never truly had a choice in their allegiance.

This problem became a lot more problematic now that Bridgehead One had reconnected to the rest of the Red Ocean and became accessible again.

As far as Ves had heard, the Red Two and the colonial star empires did not agree with this policy, but lacked the resolve to insist on their demands for repatriation.

The Polymath had become too powerful and well-entrenched to challenge. Threatening her was not only useless, but counterproductive. So long as she did not commit any truly unforgivable taboos, all of the other major powers were more than willing to turn a blind eye to her... lesser transgressions.

"It is not as if the old powers have tried already." Gavin spoke up again. "I have heard rumors, none of them confirmed, mind you, that they have all tried to smuggle their former men away from the sphere of influence of the Cybernetic Empire and back into friendly territory. None of these attempts ended well."

That caused Ves to frown. "What happened?"

"Their cybernetic implants. Think about it. The Cybers installed all kinds of devices into their bodies. All of that metal and circuitry has already merged with their muscles, bones

and nerves. Do you truly think that a leader who has demonstrated as much autocratic tendencies as the Polymath could not resist the urge to slip in her own backdoors and contingencies in those devices? Given her brilliance, no one can fully disable or circumvent her tampering. Her authority can also override all forms of opposition."

Ves widened his eyes in realization. "Damn. I hadn't put so much thought into their plight. The Cybers aren't as free as other red humans. Their cybernetic enhancements have permanently marked them as property of the state and its unfeeling sovereign. They are prisoners in their own modified bodies."

"Do you comprehend the greater problem with employing Cybers now, Ves? Sure, there are a lot of good mid-to-high-level scientists among them, but even if you can obtain a batch of them after trading away a lot of superdimensional matter, they will be able to integrate into our clan. Their cybernetic shackles will always bind them to their true owner, who can always choose to yank on their chains"

The unbreakable entanglement between the citizens of the Cybernetic Empire and their advanced augmentations would always set them apart from the rest of red humanity.

"No wonder some people on the galactic net insist on treating the Cybers as a separate race."

"That is a little too extreme for most people." Gavin said. "They are still humans. They are just forced by their own circumstances to maintain a degree of separation from the rest of us. It is not their fault. All blame can be laid at the feet of the Polymath."

The Star Designer likely did not even bother to pay attention to these useless complaints. They had no power over a True God.

Ves eventually shook his head. "Alright, I get it. Hiring the Cybers is not the best way to go forward. What else can we do that can definitively solve our problem?"

"That is why I personally favor my second suggestion." His assistant slightly leaned forward. "We raise them in-house. That may sound absurd to you at the moment, but it does not have to be. As long as we dramatically increase the population of our clan, we will not lack highly intelligent Larkinsons who are too loyal to ever think about defecting to other major powers."

"That... is a logical proposal, but it suffers from the same problem as many other suggestions. It will take too long, Gavin. We aren't growing fast enough to reach the desired scale anytime soon."

"I know, sir. This is why I have come up with a rather bold plan."

"What plan?"

"Take over an entire state. No, why not limit yourself to one? You can try to take over several states! You can do it, Ves. You are not only a tier 2 galactic citizen, but also a battleforged warlord of red humanity. No critic will be able to contest your right to rule over the territories of our people. As long as you act on this ambition, I am sure that you will be able to obtain the support of many allies!"

"..."