

Mech 4421

Chapter 4421 Mischievous Helena

Everyone began to gear up for another major battle.

Unlike the last time, the Golden Skull Alliance did not receive much time to prepare for the upcoming asteroid base assault.

Operation Saturday Market was marked by careful planning and extensive wargaming.

It also helped a lot that the attacking Hexers and Golden Skullers received a huge amount of leaked intelligence, much of which exposed the entire defensive layout of the Pima Prime System!

This time, the Golden Skull Alliance had to commence an attack against the mysterious Palace of Shame that was occupied by who knew how many aliens.

Each of their pirate groups possessed a dazzling variety of warships, starfighters and other odd combat assets that had no human equivalent.

The sheer diversity in aliens not only made it difficult to figure out their individual strengths, but also gave the strategists a lot of headaches when they tried to estimate the total combat power of the forces occupying the alien asteroid base.

The lack of intelligence on the enemy they were about to fight made it difficult to formulate accurate battle scenarios in simulation programs such as the MSTs.

All of the Larkinson mech pilots had to make do with practice sessions where they were pitted against a wide variety of known alien warships that humanity had encountered in the past.

In any case, the tech base of the indigenous alien races always shared a common root.

It seemed that whenever an alien race successfully joined the Red Ocean's galactic community without getting enslaved or destroyed in its entirety, its members quickly assimilated the most basic technologies that had become widely spread.

This was why almost every technology-based race in the Red Ocean utilized warp drives that were almost identical in design and performance.

Ves found this to be a rather interesting phenomenon as the indigenous alien races of the Red Ocean were not as divided as they looked.

At times, they resembled the human states that occupied the old galaxy. While they were definitely competing amongst themselves, they also became a part of a collective that allowed them to interact and cooperate with each other without letting race become a hindrance.

The Palace of Shame was like that on a much smaller scale. It hosted a lot of different individuals from a lot of different alien races and somehow managed to keep them all from waging all-out war was remarkable.

It spoke of a sense of unity across racial barriers that used to be fairly prevalent in the Milky Way Galaxy before the Age of Conquest.

Of course, once humanity rose up and began to roll over all of the ancient alien empires that used to dominate a lot of territories, there was no way for the human race to ever cooperate with other alien races!

In any case, humanity's domineering behavior throughout the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs produced a lot of benefits, but also prevented it from getting exposed to complex multiracial situations.

Neither the Larkinson Clan nor anyone else in the temporary coalition had ever fought against anything like the occupants of the Palace of Shame.

Ves felt a deep unease because of that. At the very least the coalition possessed a general understanding of the orvan race as well as many other races.

However, the Geminis had scant information about the warships, defensive turrets and so on. It was already certain that the aliens would make use of a few weird and abnormal technological marvels that could significantly skew the results.

In fact, one of the reasons why the Larkinson Clan possessed an advantage against its competitors was because it made widespread use of luminar crystal technology.

If the extinct luminar race was able to develop amazing crystal technology that was leagues more effective than conventional energy weapon technology, then what kind of crazy tech did the alien pirates depend upon to keep themselves alive?

"We can't underestimate the power of alien technology. Even the weaker ones have developed unique advantages that have given them an edge in an unforgiving dwarf galaxy."

The Red Ocean was just as cutthroat as the Milky Way Galaxy in the past. The weaker alien races that did not possess sufficient strength inevitably became extinct.

Few alien races were benevolent enough to shelter the newcomers that evolved to a point where they could explore the stars for the first time.

In that sense, the invasion of the Red Ocean by the human race hardly changed the status quo.

The difference here was that it was the humans that had become the predator while every other indigenous alien race demoted into prey!

"Prey or not, these aliens still retain their fangs."

This was especially the case for pirates and other lowlives. The ones residing in the Palace of Shame likely couldn't match up against the proper military equivalents of their races, but what the pirates lacked in legitimacy, they more than made up for it with cruelty!

It had been a long time since Ves and his clan fought against pirates. Aside from the fish-whales, the last major enemies they faced were professional human military mech forces.

Ves knew how they worked, how they thought and how they fought.

He could look at their mechs and decipher the approximate performance and preferred method of combat.

Criminal elements were a lot more mixed.

Sure, they were probably weaker on a general basis, but their lack of consistency also happened to be one of their greatest strengths.

Ves would rather fight against an enemy he understood much better than to confront a complete unknown.

He let out a sigh as he leaned back on his chair.

Due to the impending offensive operation, he had paused every ongoing design project.

The mech designers could get much more done by assisting the maintenance crews in tweaking and modifying the existing mechs.

It might not make much of a difference, but it would at least give all of the lab nerds a bit more practical experience. Some of them hadn't even touched an actual mech for over a year!

As Ves studied the current state of his healthy and vigorous prosperity tree, he sensed a powerful but gloomy presence appearing from behind.

"Hiya, little brother!"

"Hey, Helena."

The translucent form of his spiritual big sister circled around and seated herself atop his office desk.

Ves was pretty certain that Helena could make her body pass right through the desk if she chose to, but she had put in extra effort and energy to make her spiritual manifestation at least partially corporeal.

The ease and efficiency of her technique showed that she had improved her control by a small margin since her last visit.

"Why are you here, Helena?"

His spiritual sister furrowed her brows. "Don't be so defensive. I'm your sister, silly. I have the right to visit you anytime you want. Just be glad that I didn't drop by while you were taking a bath."

"Helena!"

"Hihihi!" The black-robed young lady giggled. "Just kidding! I'm not that crazy. I swear. By the way, those Geminis sure sound fun. They are probably the oddest living humans that I have ever encountered, but they are so adorable in how they have become so loyal to their significant others."

"Don't tell me you want to copy some of the customs of the Gemini Family."

Helena pretended to look scandalized. "Oh no! I wouldn't want to hurt Gloriana. She is already such a lovely woman for you. I still have a long way to go before I am ready to start my own relationship. Still, it doesn't hurt to explore my options. Do you happen to have a recommendation?"

He threw a flat glare in her direction. "No."

"Really?" Helena smirked. "There are plenty of guys in your friend circle who might be worthwhile to spend my time with. Let me see. The Solemn Guardian is too dull and simple for my tastes. Ylvaine is too old and creepy. The Illustrious One has that mysterious side of his, but he is too far removed from humanity. Lufa is the most honest of the bunch, but he is so pure that he's no fun at all. As for the rest... they are just powerful beasts. Though it doesn't really matter what species they portray them as, I am not into that kind of a relationship."

Ves really didn't want to hold this kind of conversation with his mischievous family member.

Whether it was right to treat Helena as his sister in the first place was debatable, but since he acknowledged her as family, he did not intend to treat her as an unrelated spiritual product.

"Since there is no one eligible available, then stop talking about your relationship issues. I'm sure that a handsome, friendly, funny and lovable man will enter your sight one day."

Helena grinned and leaned forward. "Someone like... Vulcan?"

"Disgusting! Vulcan is not an eligible choice for you! He's your brother!"

"So what?" His sister challenged him as she twirled a lock of her hair. "Genes and such might be a concern to flesh-and-blood humans such as you, but they are completely inconsequential to someone who doesn't have them in the first place. Vulcan sounds like a pretty nice guy. He's not a strong or proven warrior god, but he can compensate for that by making a lot of presents for me! He is just the perfect breadwinner. My family only really needs a single fighter anyway."

Ves tried his best to maintain his composure. He absolutely did not want to fall for this obvious bait!

He came up with the perfect retort!

"Vulcan is a dwarf."

"Ah. That can be a problem, yes." Helena frowned, but quickly cheered up again. "Well, we can work it out. I am very tolerant towards short gods, you know. Besides, I have a bit of a Hexer streak in me, courtesy of the Superior Mother. It is incredibly common for Hexer women to get married to boys that are much shorter than them. Sometimes there is an entire head's difference in length between the two, but the Hexer couples managed to make it work anyway!"

"That's besides the point, Helena! Vulcan is another version of myself! Since I am your brother, that makes Vulcan your brother as well!"

"I already told you that this doesn't matter among my kind! Haven't you heard about the multitude of alien gods that got married despite the fact that they were brothers and sisters or even mothers and sons? Don't apply your meatbag rules to god-like entities like me and your incarnation. I can marry and have kids with whoever I want. If Vulcan is my choice, then I expect you to give me your blessing!"

Ves felt sick to his stomach. It was one thing if a group of strangers like the Geminis engaged in this kind of behavior. He could just smile and tolerate his odd new acquaintances.

It was another thing entirely if Helena started to express the same desires!

Ves regretted the decision to work together with the Gemini Family even more! His sister would have never been corrupted if he and his expeditionary fleet stayed well away from the abnormal pioneering group!

Though a part of Ves still felt that Helena was teasing Ves, he could not afford to take this matter too lightly.

"Look, if you want to date a nice design spirit, then I will make one for you! Are you happy now?! You don't need to settle for sleazy spiritual entities, and you certainly don't need to turn to your own brother! Just give me a wish list and I will make the perfect boyfriend material for you myself!"

Helena looked genuinely interested in his offer. She thought about it carefully before she reluctantly shook her head.

"...Nah. I'm good. Lovers can't be made. Any god you make will only come across as a well-programmed bot to me. Why go through all this trouble when there is already Vulcan? I wouldn't mind it if you modify him a bit, though."

"Stop it, please! I can't take it any longer!"

Chapter 4422 Shameful Retreat

As Ves dealt with his teasing sister, his wife also spoke with one of her siblings.

Fortunately for Gloriana, Venerable Brutus didn't joke around. The Gemini Family's customs were of no interest to the Hexers. While their views on the ideal family unit varied quite a bit, none of them would go as far as matching brothers together with sisters!

"Look, Terina. It's your aunty Gloriana. Say hi."

"Hi, aunty!"

"Helly, my niece." Gloriana reached out to rub the physical projection of the adorable little girl that was resting on her father's lap. "You are so cute. You remind me of my first daughter when she was just as small as you. I hope you'll grow just as lovely as Aurelia."

"Hihihi!"

After Brutus was done with showing off his children, he and his sister began to talk about more serious issues.

"Did auntie Ariadne give you a briefing about our upcoming mission?"

"She did. It will be a hard fight and one that is different from anything else we have ever fought against." Venerable Brutus shared his views. "Our mech forces will have to cope with many different challenges. It won't be easy to maintain an effective blockade. If the alien pirate groups are smart and united enough to form up and attempt a mass breakthrough in a single direction, then whoever is in the way must hold the line."

Gloriana frowned. She understood her brother's concerns. Mechs weren't exactly great at forming walls, especially when they needed to cover too many angles.

One of the reasons why the Gemini Family did not hesitate to give up valuable concessions was because it was impossible to form a complete blockade by relying on its own forces alone.

It didn't even matter if they brought ten times as many mechs because their firepower was not good enough!

The Larkinsons had already witnessed numerous instances of how a horde of mechs was completely incapable of posing a serious threat against a single well-armed warship.

The disparity in scale was simply too great!

If the Gemini Family truly wanted to form an effective blockade that could stop even the largest pirate ships from pushing through, then it had to bring in additional ace mechs!

Expert mechs weren't enough. Though they were still effective at destroying smaller warships, the large quantity of warships docked at the Palace of

Shame meant that far too many enemy vessels would be able to slip away without encountering any serious hindrances.

Only the next tier of mechs like the Mars possessed the firepower to drill through so many thick hulls and cripple their propulsion or power systems in quick succession!

The two ace mechs of the Gemini Family along with the five ace mechs brought by the remaining pioneering groups represented a huge amount of firepower!

Each of them possessed the firepower of a medium-sized warship but were also much harder to destroy due to their insanely small profiles and incredible mobility.

Combined with the reality distorting powers of their ace pilots, these ace mechs possessed so much combat power that they could essentially destroy the rest of the coalition's mech forces without requiring any further assistance!

Yet even that might not be enough to defeat the pirate forces attached to the Palace of Shame!

Venerable Brutus noticed his sister's concerns and tried to reassure her. "We hold all of the initiative, remember? The aliens shouldn't know about our attack intentions. We can still gather more intelligence and obtain a better estimate of the capabilities of our upcoming enemies. Once we launch an attack, we will be in a position to push our mechs forward if we hold the advantage or pull them back if the alien warships prove to be too strong for us to resist against. If the aliens are primarily concerned with defending the Palace of Shame, then they shouldn't stupidly chase after our retreating forces."

Though Brutus was not a professional mech officer or a tactician by any means, he still received an excellent education courtesy of his high birth. He

was more than capable enough to understand the overall tactical and strategic considerations.

"Hmm, I suppose you are correct." Gloriana admitted. "I cannot help but worry, though. These insane adventures that Ves always drags us into often seem to explode in our faces. There has to be a variable that we haven't properly accounted for. My guess is that it has to do with whatever secret relics or ruins that the Gemini Family originally wanted to obtain. No ordinary alien would think of naming a pirate den the Palace of Shame."

"Are you sure about that, Gloriana? These aliens don't necessarily think like humans, and the words may have a different connotation in their original languages."

His sister crossed her arms and shook her head.

"The word palace has a clear association with royalty or nobility and I do not think it will be any different in an alien language. The concept of a hereditary ruling class is also fairly prevalent among the intelligent species back in the Milky Way Galaxy. If we assume that the word palace is explicitly related to a ruling noble, then a site that can be called the Palace of Shame should presumably be..."

"A place of exile." Brutus said as his eyes widened in realization. "Maybe... the Palace of Shame was originally set up to be a residence that was built to accommodate a defeated princess. Perhaps she took part in a struggle for the throne but lost against a more successful relative. The only way to deal with a defeated contender you don't want to kill but also do not want to be used as a puppet should be to exile the princess to a place that is far away!"

Banishment was a common means to gently get rid of a troublesome individual or group.

"It all makes sense." Gloriana said as she connected the threads together. "The most suspicious points about the Palace of Shame are that the former alien empires had never tried to eliminate this criminal stronghold and that the members of the orven race are involved. Both of these facts can be explained if the exiled princess may have been an important figure among orvens at one time! If this is the case, then the relics that we are after may be the belongings of this exiled dignitary!"

This story truly made a lot of sense!

However, not every story was so neat and clear-cut in reality. Brutus might not be as smart as his younger sister, but he still knew enough about life to never put too much stock in so many assumptions.

"Let's not get too excited, Gloriana. You are basing your theory on unreliable information. The Geminis have given us a great deal of information, but how do they know it is true? How much have they withheld from us? We may be missing several crucial puzzle pieces that would have led you to a different conclusion. For example, the Palace of Shame is actually quite old. Maybe the events that you have described truly took place, but those involved have already died hundreds of years ago. The orvens that have become a part of the power structure of the palace might not have any relations to this hypothetical banished princess."

"My theory shouldn't be too far off the mark." Gloriana confidently claimed. "The details may be somewhat different in reality, but the premise should be the same."

"You should share your theory with Ves and the others if that is the case, though I think they would have probably come up with this theory already."

"Those dummies don't know anything." Gloriana dismissively waved her hand. "The Larkinsons may be good in many different areas, but they do not understand nobility like us. I can still provide useful input."

They continued to exchange their opinions about what they might expect to encounter at the Palace of Shame.

However, the information they possessed was too limited for them to make too many solid conjectures.

Instead of making unfounded guesses about their upcoming alien opponents, they were much more comfortable with talking about their own capabilities.

"Are you still satisfied with the Star Dancer Mark II?" Gloriana asked with genuine concern.

"Nothing has changed as far as I know. It is still as good of an expert mech as ever. The only fault that I can mention to you is that it is excellent in mech duels but not so great in the kind of long-ranged slugging matches that typically take place in battles involving warships. My expert mech doesn't have the firepower to destroy large vessels as quickly as the Amaranto, especially after the latter received a new energy cannon."

Gloriana grimaced. "I should have pushed my husband harder to design a new blessed weapon for your expert mech as well. Now, our Golden Skull Alliance can only count on the Instrument of Doom and the Mars to fight against the largest and toughest alien warships."

"You should add the Everchanger to the list." Brutus said in a respectful tone. "It is much clumsier when it is equipped with a mounted wargear loadout, but its raw power is undeniably stronger."

"Hm, I don't trust Ves' pet project as much. They are not as reliable as true mechs. Besides, don't count yourself out too quickly. You've become a mid-tier expert pilot by now, right? You can generate considerably stronger true

resonance with your Star Dancer Mark II than before. Unless the aliens have anything comparable to high-ranking mechs, it is impossible for them to resist the divine might of your expert mech's attacks."

"I don't think my Star Dancer Mark II will be able to outdamage the Promethea despite having a younger and weaker expert pilot." Brutus retorted.

"Venerable Isobel Kotin and her Promethea are both specialized in spreading mass destruction through engulfing their targets in flames. My inclinations aren't as destructive. I respect the dance and I have always preferred to tango with enemy champions. At this stage in my career, I cannot change who I am or how I fight."

"Brother..."

Venerable Brutus Wodin shaped his piloting and fighting style in a time when the Red Ocean was still unknown and when the Hexadric Hegemony was still in its heyday!

The Friday Coalition was the big enemy that pressed over the heads of every Hexer.

None of the Hexer mech pilots ever spared any thought about preparing to fight against massive alien warships. They only had eyes for Fridaymen mechs!

Though Brutus was rightfully proud of his dueling capabilities, there was hardly any need for finesse if the upcoming battle turned into a brutal series of artillery exchanges.

"I will fix this problem for you after this operation is over." Gloriana vowed. "I will go to Ves and persuade him to give you a new weapon so that you can feel useful again in subsequent battles against alien warships."

Her brother raised his hand. "I am doing fine, sister. You don't need to intervene on my behalf. I am confident that the alien troops at the Palace of

Shame must have powerful starfighters or other strange vehicles that are more suitable for me to handle. I will be able to prove the value of my Star Dancer Mark II at that point."

"Maybe you are right, but that does not mean I will leave your lack of firepower unaddressed. We don't need to equip your expert rifleman mech with a massive oversized cannon, but we should still be able to update your current weapon so that it can keep up with the times."

"If you say so, Gloriana."

"Your little sister is always right!" The woman arrogantly claimed.

Venerable Brutus smiled. "To be honest, I am looking forward to the performance of the Handmaidens of Death. Their combat abilities are decent when fighting against hostile expert mechs, but their lethality should be far greater when fighting against starships. I predict that Operation Lighthouse will be the moment where they will truly become famous."

Gloriana could see why her brother was confident about this. As long as the aliens did not have the ability to defend against extraordinary attacks, they should be exceptionally vulnerable to death energy attacks!

Chapter 4423 Boryan System

Several days passed before the coalition fleet finally arrived at their destination star system.

The sensor systems of many ships immediately became engulfed by a flood of chaotic energies!

Fortunately, every pioneering group already learned about the local conditions in advance and hardened the sensor systems accordingly.

Many of them had to be reinforced, recalibrated or even shut down entirely in order to avoid reducing their lifespans.

"We have dropped out of FTL travel at a greater distance from the center of the star system than usual. The cause of this is the excessive and unstable magnetic activity generated by one of the stars in this binary star system."

"Our effective observation range has dropped by at least 75 percent!"

"The excessive electromagnetic interference is preventing us from observing many areas of the Boryan System. A massive alien fleet could be hiding in our blind spots without our notice."

The Boryan System was anything but ordinary!

If the local alien pirate groups wanted to hide and escape pursuit, they couldn't take refuge in any ordinary star system.

There were many pockets of turbulent and abnormal space in the cosmos. One of the best sites for criminals to remain out of sight of their pursuers was to hide in regions with strange and abnormal environmental conditions such as the Nyxian Gap.

While the Boryan System wasn't as dangerous or extreme as the Nyxian Gap, it was still a difficult territory for anyone to maintain their footing!

The reason for that was because it was a special binary star system with an unusual pair of stars.

One of the stars was a relatively ordinary red giant star. It looked big but its mass and luminosity wasn't that impressive.

The other star was a lot more special, though. This was because it was a small, dense and heavy neutron star!

Consisting entirely out of neutrons rather than more complex atoms, these stars were known to be extremely active in generating electromagnetic activity.

Many of them spurted out powerful jets of energy in varying directions while others maintained such strong magnetic fields that the crust of the star itself would quake!

In other words, neutron stars were extremely unpleasant to be around, especially at closer ranges.

If any visitors wanted to do anything useful in a star system that contained such a powerful object, then they had to conduct their activities in the outer system.

Though the extreme magnetic fields and other electromagnetic activity were still fairly powerful at those ranges, they at least weakened to the extent that it was possible to build permanent bases as long as there was enough shielding.

The massive interference generated by the neutron star still played a useful role in disrupting the effectiveness of many sensors, so any pursuit force that wanted to chase after a fleeing pirate fleet would quickly lose the trail, especially if their target dove into an enormous asteroid belt.

"How are the conditions of our ships?" Ves asked as he observed the entry of the coalition fleet from the bridge of his flagship. "Do any of them report any malfunctions due to the hostile environment?"

"We have received no such reports, sir. All of our starships are in working condition. Our crews are monitoring every essential system non-stop. We estimate that we may start receiving reports about malfunctions once we travel closer to the center of the star system."

"Please keep me informed. We need to know how much abuse our starships can take. Not all of them are as hardened against environmental damage as I wish."

Once the starships of every fleet from every participating pioneering group had been accounted for, the Gemini Fleet led the way forward.

Even now, the Geminis did not extend complete trust towards its temporary allies. They still grasped the exact coordinates of the Palace of Shame.

From what the Golden Skull Alliance and all of the other helpers had learned about this site, the secret asteroid base was actually extremely well hidden.

Many generations of alien pirates had successively upgraded its anti-detection capabilities. Perhaps the variety of alien tech may have made the Palace of Shame's technological capabilities rather messy, but it was virtually impossible to find the right asteroid among countless other ones.

Combined with the serious electromagnetic interference generated by the neutron star in the center of the star system, a fleet could scan the asteroid belt for thousands of years and still miss their target!

The only way to track down the well-hidden pirate stronghold was to grab an insider or a memory device that possessed the coordinates.

The Geminis most likely found out about the Palace of Shame through one of these methods, so no one doubted their ability to lead them to the right place.

Of course, the Geminis did not make it easy for everyone. Their fleet followed a rather meandering route that made it a lot harder to pin down the destination by extrapolating the route of the leading fleet.

Ves understood why the Geminis made such a precaution.

They not only wanted to prevent their temporary coalition from becoming moving on without them, but they also wanted to limit those that hadn't signed any deals from deciphering the coordinates.

No one knew whether the temporary coalition was the only human force in the Boryan System.

The huge degree of electromagnetic interference meant that there was a possibility that other third parties might be hiding in the asteroid belt.

Perhaps these other human pioneers had gathered a few clues about the Palace of Shame but lacked the means to pin down its coordinates.

Maybe the pioneers had the same idea as the alien pirates and wanted to use the Boryan System as a secret base of operations.

Whatever the case, the Gemini Family, the Golden Skull Alliance, the Adelaide Mercenary Company, the Lehrer Foundation and Boojay Family may not be the only human powers in the star system!

When Ves thought about this possibility, he felt conflicted.

On one hand, it was best to rush to the Palace of Shame as fast as possible!

This way, the temporary coalition would be able to take action and complete the mission objectives long before any third parties could come and get in his way!

On the other hand, Ves wanted the coalition fleet to slow down and thoroughly scout the surroundings to rule out the possibility that there were opportunists waiting in the dark.

He shook his head. "We can't delay too much. It is impossible to hide the fact that so many different starships from several major pioneering organizations traveled to the Boryan System. If other pioneers become curious enough, they will soon come en masse and get in our way!"

Besides, the alien pirates rooted in the Palace of Shame shouldn't be blind and deaf. They must have established at least several extensive early warning networks throughout the Boryan System in order to warn against incoming enemies.

If Ves had to choose between speed or caution, he would choose the former in this particular situation.

Acting quickly was better than acting late in a situation like this! With seven ace mechs at their disposal, The Geminis and their teammates possessed ample firepower!

It was a pity that Ves wasn't in charge of this operation. One of the terms of the contract was that the Gemini Family dictated the route and pacing.

Since the Geminis set a moderate pace, Ves could barely tolerate the additional days it would take for them to reach their final destination.

"I suppose that at least gives us a bit more time to prep our mechs and starships for combat." Ves muttered.

He decided to make good use of his time by checking all of the important mechs in person.

The expert mechs were all in good condition more or less. Many of the ones that incurred a lot of damage in the previous battle had been restored to the best of the Larkinson Clan's abilities.

One of the more serious problems was that multiple Larkinson expert mechs had lost pieces of Unending alloy during the battle.

Though the clan had done its best to retrieve all of the bits of metal that had gone flying, it was impossible to regain all of it in a limited amount of time.

The only way to restore these older Larkinson expert mechs to their proper conditions was to draw from another source of Unending alloy.

This was why Ves personally authorized the cannibalization of much of the Shield of Samar to repair battered mechs such as the Riot and to a lesser extent the Everchanger.

"Just treat it like an organ transplant."

Ves planned to phase out the use of Unending alloy in time. It became increasingly more difficult to maintain the expert mechs that relied heavily on these non-replenishable materials.

He hoped to be able to find a proper substitute for this powerful material. He had already begun to explore a few ideas, but he was far from being able to produce his own alloy that was both tough and spiritually reactive!

Ves briefly thought about the Palace of Shame. The Geminis had already told him that the messy pirate groups collected a lot of different materials over the years.

There was a good possibility that he might encounter a material in their collections that might offer what he needed!

"In fact, I don't care if the new material is not as tough as Unending alloy. As long as I can stuff spiritual energy inside of it, I can easily use it as a replacement for my P-stones!"

He was running out of patience. His inability to acquire more spiritually-reactive materials such as P-stones, B-stones, F-stones and Unending alloy was seriously hampering his work.

"Maybe I need to look at organic substances instead." Ves wondered. "I have always gotten along better with biomatter. Too well, sometimes."

He actually gained an opportunity to obtain a valuable piece of bone that might have what he needed, but he became so busy with other projects that he neglected this option.

Though this particular offer was no longer available, there should still be ways for Ves to obtain similar bones through other channels. He just needed to approach the right parties!

One of the more important people he visited during this time was Legion Commander Taon Melin.

The Eye of Ylvaine would play an important role in this battle. Though the ace mechs were the main units responsible for felling the enemy warships, they could only focus on the biggest ones most of the time.

The responsibility for bombarding the smaller but much more numerous pirate vessels rested on artillery mech units such as the Eye of Ylvaine!

"Will your Transcendent Punishers perform up to expectation?"

"They will, sir." The Ylvainan mech commander replied. "The firepower of the Transcendent Punisher model isn't light and they can always switch to the right damage type depending on how the alien warships are built. It may be tricky to overcome their more exotic forms of protection, but we do not think that any of the pirate ships can move fast and agile enough to evade most of our attacks."

They talked a bit more about the Eye of Ylvaine's battle readiness. Though the Ylvainans had not changed anything significant since the conclusion of the Battle of Pima Prime, it was not necessary for them to do too much.

The job of the Eye of Ylvaine was quite simple. They merely had to pound the enemy warships that came out of the Palace of Shame.

The tricky part was controlling the damage.

"I don't want those ships to blow up." Ves stated to Commander Taon. "Any of them could carry several kilograms of phasewater. It's impossible for our retrieval teams to pick up every drop of phasewater that has spilled into space. Don't hesitate to allow your men to borrow Ylvaine's power to help them cripple the alien vessels without causing them to collapse any further."

"You can count on us, sir."

Chapter 4424 Human Nature

Operation Lighthouse put heavy emphasis on both the ace mechs and the ranged mechs of the participating pioneering groups.

While the Larkinson Clan fielded a lot of strong melee mechs, it was difficult for them to get involved in the earlier stages of the joint operation.

As long as the alien defenders of the Palace of Shame retained all of their powerful warships, it was all too easy for them to lay down a withering barrage of fire towards every incoming mech formation!

Even if the Palace of Shame was surrounded by asteroids that could provide plenty of cover, there should still be more than enough space for the defending warships to unleash the might of their secondary gun batteries.

Ves did not want any of his mechs and mech pilots to get mowed down with ease. He would rather have his forces maintain their distance and pelt the enemy warships from a safer distance.

"The mech industry should really come up with a way to make melee mechs more relevant in space battles." He complained.

He couldn't count the times he expressed this sentiment over the years. This was not a new problem by any means, but the mech industry had yet to present a practical solution that would allow melee mechs to close in on enemy warships without getting torn to pieces.

The only solution that came close enough was to equip mechs with minidrives, but this was anything but a practical solution because the cost was way too prohibitive!

If everything went well, the melee mechs should still be able to contribute in many ways during the later stages of the battle.

"We first need to inflict such a heavy blow on the alien pirate forces that they will fall apart and lose cohesion. We can't launch an all-out assault so long as our opponents are still organized."

This was why it was important to take out their flagships and biggest hitters first!

Just like humans, many alien races had the habit of placing their highest authority figures on the biggest and most powerful vessels.

If the coalition could take out these alien flagships by storm, there was a large chance that the remaining pirate ships would fall into chaos!

After all, pirates were all the same. It was extremely improbable that they were hardened and disciplined soldiers that operated under a solid chain of command.

As long as the big chiefs perished in battle, the underbosses would definitely quarrel amongst themselves in order to take over the surviving forces!

The infighting might get so bad that the coalition's melee mechs might be able to get close without encountering much opposition.

Of course, if this did not take place, then the Larkinson Clan and the other pioneering groups would just hold back their melee mechs a while longer.

"In the meantime, they can still make themselves useful by contributing additional firepower with spare rifles."

Ves inspected the cargo bays where the Larkinson Clan had stored large racks of spare luminar crystal rifles.

None of the weapons were particularly large, powerful or expensive, but they would get the job done as long as enough of them fired at the same time.

There were thousands of humanoid melee mechs in the Larkinson Army, and Ves did not want them to remain idle all this time.

Though it became a bit more troublesome to manage the energy levels of the melee mechs as they fired their luminar crystal weapons, they could still provide a lot of help by directing their firepower at static targets such as the Palace of Shame or particularly large alien warships!

"Don't worry, sir. Our Swordmaidens don't have much desire to play with guns, but we can use them if we have to." Commander Sendra reported to Ves when he paid a visit to the Wild Torch. "Those rifles are easy to use, though their punch is a bit lacking to be honest."

Ves didn't look surprised when he heard that. "Power is something that you must earn, commander. I trust in the professionalism of your Swordmaiden mech pilots, but many of them haven't utilized rifles in years. They are so invested in their swordsmanship training that they are psychologically repulsed by the thought of using a ranged weapon. I don't want to hand over weapons that are too powerful for their own good. Besides, the greater the power, the greater the burden to the mech. Ranged mechs are already designed to cope with this, but a pure melee mech such as a Second Sword is not as equipped to handle these difficulties."

Though the Swordmaiden Commander looked disappointed, she did not linger too much over this issue. She was already glad enough that her Swordmaiden mech pilots could still have room to intervene in the battle while the two sides remained apart from each other.

"How are your subordinates doing?" Ves curiously asked. "Are they happy and eager to confront the pirate of the Palace of Shame?"

Commander Sendra hesitated for a moment. "They're not as excited as I wish. Don't get me wrong. My sisters definitely enjoy a fight, but it has to be on their terms. We are not comfortable with maintaining our distance. Too many aliens don't play by our rules."

"There are good reasons for that." Ves replied. "Mechs would have never gotten off the ground if the Big Two did not enforce a warship ban. If the MTA never came to life, then we would have probably been utilizing warships instead of mechs at this time. The indigenous alien races of the Red Ocean have never encountered a powerful authority that prohibited the use of warships. Our human race is unique in that sense."

The Swordmaiden Commander let out a cynical chuckle. "What a great honor. The human race is the only one that is so dangerous to its own kind that we had to take away our own weapons in order to protect us against ourselves. What does that say about the strength and future of our race?"

Ves raised his arm and patted the woman on the shoulder. "I don't think it is a bad idea. At least this shows that humanity recognized the danger before it was too late and took action in advance. I can't say the same for many other alien races that have all gone extinct over the ages. I am sure that many of them have met their end due to their own mistakes. It is okay to make mistakes as long as you acknowledge them and make up for them. I don't think humanity is as bad as many people say for that reason."

Humanity had an incredible capacity for creation and destruction.

The growth of its civilization and the mastery of ever greater technologies meant that humans could rise far above every race or fall into a bottomless pit where there was no way back.

After Ves shared a bit of his views towards humanity, Commander Sendra became a lot more contemplative.

"I would like to think that humans like you and me can build a fantastic society where our Swordmaidens are no longer needed to fight for survival, but..."

"You don't believe humanity can rise above our flaws, Sendra?"

The legion commander let out a sigh. "We have all witnessed too much darkness in the hearts of other humans. My sisters and I simply can't believe that we are heading towards a better future. Just look at the Big Two. The mechers and fleeters are responsible for starting the scramble for phasewater and the many fights against the local alien forces. If the top of our society is already this bad, it will definitely be worse further down the ladder. We are all flawed and tainted and there is nothing anyone can do to cleanse us from our inherent flaws."

That was certainly a pessimist viewpoint.

"Is that the kind of future that you want to embrace?" Ves asked. "What of your two children? Do you want them to grow up in an environment where society is collapsing all around them and where they have to mature a lot faster in order to struggle to survive?"

Sendra scowled. "I am not letting Wexel and Terina fend for themselves. Brutus and I will do our best to protect them and train them to fight if possible. I don't think that human society will get any better in the future, but I still believe in our ability to carve a better place for ourselves. That is what I am fighting for. I have no ideas about saving human civilization as a whole. That is none of our business. I just want to save and protect our family."

"That is a sentiment that I can get behind." Ves smiled.

They began to talk about family after Sendra drifted to this topic.

"I wish I could spend more time with them." The legion commander confessed. "It's hard for me to do my job while also making sure I can spend enough time with our kids. Marrying a Glory Seeker hasn't made things easier for me. My husband and I both work on separate ships and fleets. This had never been much of a problem when we were all staying in Davute, but now

that we have started to travel again, it is difficult for me to remain in touch with my children. Sometimes, the only way I can talk to them is over a comm call."

Ves understood how painful it must be for a mother like Commander Sendra to be unable to hug her young children in person.

"Have the two of you tried to reside on the same ship at the same time? If you want, I can talk to the Glory Seekers about setting up a rotation where you and the rest of your family can switch back and forth while staying on one ship at a time."

"We already thought about that, sir. It won't work out for us. I can't lead my Swordmaidens from afar. My sisters need a strong presence above their heads in order to stay in line. Brutus also can't separate himself from the Glory Seekers for too long. He is one of their few male expert pilots and a direct descendant of the Wodin Dynasty to boot."

Commander Sendra and Venerable Brutus failed to come up with an adequate solution, so they just stuck to their ad-hoc approach and tried to make the best of the situation.

"Do you regret your decision to pursue Venerable Brutus?" Ves asked.

"Oh no. I am still happy despite all of the complications that I have to deal with. Swordmaidens like myself have special taste in men. Brutus is the perfect prince for me. He is strong but he is also respectful and sweet. I like that he is stronger than me but acts as if he doesn't have to prove his superiority to me. He is also a great father to our two children, though I wish he wouldn't stuff as much Hexer nonsense in Wexel and Terina's heads."

Ves could clearly sense the genuine love and respect in Commander Sendra's tone. He was glad to hear that this relationship was doing well.

Brutus was his brother-in-law while Wexel and Terina were his nephew and niece. That made them a part of his family.

"If you ever need more help from me or our clan, just say so." Ves offered to Sendra. "I can afford to make some allowances for you and your children on account of our family relations. Are your kids doing well?"

"They are, but I don't know what they will be doing once they grow up. I want them to become mech pilots if possible. Both their father and I can teach so much about fighting with mechs."

"What if their genetic aptitudes don't cooperate with your dreams?"

"Then I will just send them to school and hope they can make something of themselves." Sendra shrugged. "Would you teach them to become mech designers if they are interested?"

"Sure. If they truly want to design mechs for a living, I won't refuse them. However, they better be passionate and sincere about it, though. Learning how to design mechs is demanding work."

"Heh. I will be sure to teach my children to behave. I can promise you that they won't waste your time, sir."

"We'll see about that. Let us wait until they are 10 years old before we discuss their trajectories."

Chapter 4425 Informal Agreement

The Boryan System became more and more hostile to the human starships as they ventured closer to the center.

Fortunately, the coalition fleet did not have to travel that deep inside the star system in order to reach its target.

As the fleet led by the Gemini Family approached the coordinates of the Palace of Shame, the ships slowed down and tried their best to blend into the nearby asteroids.

If they wanted to start off Operation Lighthouse on a strong footing, then the human attackers needed to remain as incognito as possible.

The massive interference generated by the nearby neutron star helped a lot with that. Long-ranged observation was practically impossible due to all of the magnetic fields and other stellar activity scrambling everything in the star system.

Of course, just as the human coalition fleet depended on the local conditions to hide itself from the local aliens, the forces rooted in the Palace of Shame also took advantage of the difficult environment to hide their own activities.

The Larkinsons and the other groups constantly dispatched mechs to conduct patrols and engage in extensive reconnaissance, but they quickly encountered a major hindrance.

"This damn radiation and this damn magnetic field is putting so much noise into our signals that nothing coherent is getting through. My mech can't maintain communications with our fleet anymore."

" We need to make adjustments. The only ways we can pass on a message is if we form a daisy chain or if we contract our deployment range."

As the Geminis and other pioneering groups resorted to these primitive measures to maintain effective communications over longer distances, a few of the Larkinson Clan's scout-oriented mechs began to show their value at this stage.

The Light Hunter fielded by the Flagrant Vandals and the Signal Bearer fielded by the Penitent Sisters and other Hexer forces proved to be a lot more reliable than other scout mechs.

The reason for that was because they were able to maintain effective communications over longer distances!

By using the Illustrious One and the Superior Mother respectively as spiritual communication networks, the Light Hunter and the Signal Bearer mechs were able to range much further while maintaining at least basic contact with their motherships.

In fact, the Larkinson Clan offered to lend a few Buzzy Bee mechs that could perform the same job to the other pioneering groups beforehand, but only one of them accepted the offer.

"These Buzzy Bees are doing a really great job, Larkinson!" General Hermain Foraine of the Adelaide Mercenary Company told Ves over the comm. "I could have really used these mechs in some of my past encounters. I'm jealous of your Light Hunter mechs, though. Their ECM systems don't appear to be as good, but their scouting abilities are much better."

"I am glad to hear that our products are serving a useful purpose in your hands, but I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, general." Ves replied. "Our Light Hunter model is not for sale. We have developed many mechs that are precisely tailored to the needs of our clan. If you wish to obtain a comparable mech model that is adapted to your mercenary company, then you can commission a mech design or two from us. Just take into account that it will cost you, though."

The leader of the Adelaide Third Fleet looked discouraged. "I am afraid I won't be able to take you on your offer. I've been arguing my case to the higher ups, but they insisted on sticking to our regular schedule. We have invested so much money on replacing our older mechs with our current ones that we don't have much left to spare. Maybe that will change after we successfully raided the Palace of Shame, but for now our mercenary company needs to be frugal."

It started to make more sense why the Adelaide Third Fleet was roaming the dangerous border region between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone.

The Adelaides were essentially scrounging for money!

Not every pioneering organization was as rich as the Larkinson Clan!

Compared to running a mech company where a few bestselling mech models could easily churn out massive profits, it was a lot harder for mercenary organizations to earn windfall profits.

Most mercenary missions paid very well, but their durations were inconsistent. A single accident during a single mission might trigger massive losses which would instantly wipe away all of the profits earned from the last five or so missions.

Ves could guess without searching the galactic net that the Adelaide Mercenary Company must have suffered a major loss during one of its missions.

Whatever happened to the company had worsened its financial position by a considerable degree.

This was already bad news for a pioneering organization that entered the Red Ocean fairly recently.

Ves knew first-hand how much money it cost to prepare for a migration to the new frontier and to quickly update everything to Red Ocean standards.

As it was, General Foraine had already done his best by squeezing out a small amount of MTA credits so that his Third Fleet could acquire a limited amount of useful LMC mechs.

"If the other pioneers ask you about your experiences with our products, I hope you can put in a good word for them." Ves politely requested. "While I

don't need their patronage, I truly think that my mechs can help them limit their casualties and defeat their opponents faster."

"I will be sure to do so as long as you promise to give us a discount or preferential treatment."

Ves paused for a moment. "We don't do discounts as we believe our mechs are always worth the price. It's not a big problem to give your mercenary company extra privileges, though. We should talk further once we have concluded this operation."

"I will hold you to that, Patriarch Larkinson."

They shifted the discussion from their mechs to the current situation in the Boryan System.

"The neutron star is damaging all of our more vulnerable parts and machines." General Foraine complained. "I don't know how all of those alien pirate ships can stay in one shape after getting exposed for so long. Can you help us limit the damage? Our repair bills are rising by the day!"

Ves nodded in understanding. "Our fleet will also need extensive repairs after this is over. I think the aliens probably have access to special shielding technology that can negate much of the destructive effects. I think I have an idea on how we can build such a device, but it will take months if not years to develop an adequate magnetic shielding device that is powerful enough to cover a single starship."

There was no convenient solution to stop the accelerated degradation of all of their hardware. Not even the Geminis prepared an effective solution despite knowing about the conditions of the Boryan System a little earlier.

They just had to get in, defeat the aliens and get out as fast as possible, preferably within a week.

This was a tight timetable, but the Golden Skull Alliance was already accustomed to working in a hurry.

Besides, it wasn't always a good idea to linger around a battlefield for too long. Word would spread eventually and lots of greedy vultures would come eventually in order to pick up a lot of salvage on the cheap.

"I don't know where the Palace of Shame is located, but according to our analysis of the behavior of the Geminis, it should not take long before we approach the site. Does your clan concur?"

"I've received similar reports from my subordinates." Ves replied. "Our chances of encountering a hidden alien patrol ship are much greater. We need to be ready to react quickly. If the aliens at the Palace of Shame receive too much advanced warning, we will be met with fully organized opposition."

"It may already be too late for that. We are trespassing on their territory at the moment. I am more concerned about the main battle. If our mechs ever experience difficulties that we cannot handle by ourselves, can you lend us your aid to bail us out? We can promise to do the same for you. We will not stand by and let your alliance get pummeled."

Now this was interesting. On the surface, General Foraine wanted nothing more than to establish a promise to watch each other's backs.

Ves wasn't fooled, though. He spent too much time with Purnesse to stop at the surface.

When he tried to look deeper, he figured out that General Foraine wanted to accomplish more than just a promise to scratch each other's back if any of them ever suffered an itch.

The man wanted his Adelaide Third Fleet to form a united front with the Golden Skull Alliance if necessary.

There were only a few cases where it was usual for the two pioneering fleets to join forces.

Either the alien enemies were so overwhelmingly powerful that they could no longer follow the original battle plan, or the members of the coalition might turn against each other!

Ves did not believe the Geminis had overestimated the strength of the aliens residing in the Palace of Shame, so he felt that the second case was much more likely to happen!

Of course, it was still rather unlikely that the Geminis and everyone else would ruin their reputation, credibility and trustworthiness in order to backstab their allies, but Ves already experienced betrayal in the past.

Though everyone in the temporary coalition may have signed a contract, Ves had never taken much stock in the binding power of an electronic document!

Ves slowly nodded. "I will have to discuss this further with my alliance partners, but I don't think they will object to standing by your side. The premise of this is that you and your fellow Adelaides show that you are worthy of our trust."

The other man grinned. "I believe our successful mercenary record will tell you enough about us. We will pay you for your protection if your alliance has served an instrumental role in covering for us. I expect your side to do the same if our roles have been reversed."

"No problem."

It was a bit reckless to form a private relationship with a pioneering group that Ves wasn't really familiar with, but he felt it was best to try to make this work.

Ves had developed a good impression of the Adelaides. They did not convey the rough and unreliable attitudes of the mercenaries that he had met in the past.

Their mech force was also alright. Though the Adelaide mech models weren't that impressive in his eyes, they were still solid performers that could last for many years as long as they received sufficient maintenance.

The Adelaide mech pilots were also highly experienced in battle. There was plenty of footage on the galactic net that showed how these mercenaries didn't only know how to present their mechs in parades.

Ves would be a fool to reject the goodwill from a pioneering fleet with so much effective combat power!

The two talked a bit more. Neither of them had any intentions of making a formal contract, so they could only rely on trust to make their agreement valid.

It was not exactly the most reliable way to form a cooperation, but Ves had a good impression of General Foraine and the Adelaides.

The Black Cats were already digging up information about the Adelaide Mercenary Company in order to learn more about its integrity, but for now Ves was inclined to trust his own judgment.

The two shook the hands of each other's projection to finalize their informal deal.

Before they ended the call, General Foraine passed on a warning to Ves.

"You should watch out for the Santana Group. Their soldiers are alright, but none of them have any say in the holding company's decision-making. The executives who are in charge will do anything for profit. I don't think they will be stupid enough to pull off a stunt during the main battle, but once we get to

the point where we need to gather and divide the spoils, we are no longer strictly allies anymore."

"...I get what you mean."

Chapter 4426 LingerinD Doubts

The fleet slowed down after a time.

There were several reasons why the ships needed to move slower.

First, navigating through an asteroid belt was quite perilous to say the least. The Gemini Family and the rest of the coalition did not dare to send too many of their starships through the densest areas of the belt.

Perhaps the scouting vessels and the smaller combat carriers possessed the agility to maneuver around the floating rocks, but the biggest and slowest capital ships were not as endowed!

The journey presented an especially serious danger to the fleets with a significant number of civilian vessels. The Larkinson Clan and the Boojay Family were especially reluctant to dive into the middle of the belt for this reason.

Fortunately, the periphery of the belt was not as difficult to navigate through. Combined with the fact that the asteroids mostly followed static trajectories that could easily be mapped out in advance, none of the starships came close to colliding against anything dangerous.

Mechs were still needed to break apart or push away smaller floating rocks, but these were trivial issues.

The bigger reason why it was best for the coalition fleet to slow down was to minimize the risk of discovery as much as possible.

Though none of the coalition troops expected to be able to maintain the element of surprise, the less time they gave for their opponents to respond, the better!

"We have already detected and tampered with hundreds of listening devices in advance." Calabast reported to Ves. "The good news is that they are all rather old and simple. Machines get worn down all the time due to constant exposure to the heavy and turbulent magnetic fields and other activity generated by that big neutron star. The Gemini Family already prepared countermeasures against these devices, so our Black Cats as well as the covert operations units of the other groups have dealt with them in the best way possible. If nothing has gone wrong, these devices will continue to think that there is nothing wrong despite the fact that over a thousand human starships are flying right past their sensors."

That sounded nice, but Ves did not believe the aliens that had occupied the Palace of Shame for centuries if not longer could be fooled that easily.

They wouldn't have been able to survive for so long if their detection network could be subverted with so much ease!

"This star system is too unfriendly towards technology." Calabast stated. "The aliens do not have the wealth to invest in expensive, shielded listening devices that are much harder to deal with. It is much more economic in the long term to rely on inherently disposable detection machines. No matter whether they are based on alien programming or circuitry, their simplistic nature means that it is easy for our scientists and engineers to crack, especially if the MTA has already deciphered the relevant alien race's tech base."

"What if we're dealing with biotechnology instead?"

Calabast smirked. "We have already dealt with a number of bioconstructs. The exobiologists at the Larkinson Biotech Institute along with the biotech experts working for the other pioneering groups have already taken care of the biomachines that we have detected so far. The Santana Group owns numerous biotech companies that employ far more senior researchers than anyone else, and the Gemini Family also happens to be competent in this field due to its interest in genetics."

This was the advantage of banding together with different pioneering organizations. Their diverse competences and activities granted them advantages that provided a lot of value in the right situations.

Ves had little doubt that the Larkinson Biotech Institute would play an especially crucial role in every interaction with alien races or native exobeasts.

The Palace of Shame probably contained a lot of weirdness. It would be handy to have the relevant experts on hand to judge the value of strange alien goods.

"Do you really think the aliens haven't noticed our approach as of yet?" Ves remained skeptical. "According to the briefing given by the Geminis, the orven race has maintained a foothold in the Palace of Shame for a long time. The orvens have definitely become a part of its core power structure due to their strength and technological might. Have our scouts detected any devices that are derived from orven technology?"

Calabast's smile dropped a bit. "No. We haven't. We admit that there is a chance that the orvens have already detected our approach through the use of extremely well-hidden sensor systems, but there is nothing we can do about it. This is also why the Gemini Family doesn't want to delay too much. We need to strike before the alien pirates can prepare a more organized welcoming party for our troops."

"Then why are we slowing down?"

"Isn't the answer obvious? We should already be close to our destination. The Geminis have probably dispatched covert scouting units in advance in order to determine the current state of the Palace of Shame. Once they have received the most up-to-date information about the disposition of the alien pirate forces, we can tweak our attack plan one last time before we begin to take action."

Everything was happening a bit too fast for his liking. Ves did not feel entirely comfortable with how the initiative was being grasped by someone other than himself.

Still, that didn't entirely explain his unease. During Operation Saturday Market, he had little to no problem with letting the Hex Army take charge.

Though he didn't particularly like General Alisky Victrix, he trusted the Hexers not to screw him over.

He did not possess the same confidence in the Gemini Family. The other pioneering groups were all strangers who only cared about their own interests. They had very little reason to show any extra regard to their allies.

This was also one of the reasons why the six pioneering groups did not choose to integrate their forces tighter. They still retained their autonomy, their own chains of command and even their own areas of responsibility.

This made it difficult for them to maximize their collective strengths, but it also prevented the pioneering groups from getting into each other's way.

The Golden Skull Alliance cooperated a lot better with Task Force Fury during Operation Saturday Market. Ves missed those times, but there was nothing he could do. It was impossible for him to forge a closer bond of trust with a bunch of strangers that only decided to cooperate on a single joint operation.

A part of him even wished that he had never met the Gemini Family in the first place!

Ves and Calabast continued to talk about whether the orvens or the other aliens occupying the Palace of Shame were preparing to bolster their defenses or get ready to run away.

"We do not believe the latter case is likely." Calabast mentioned. "The alien groups have been rooted in the Palace of Shame for so long that they will not want to abandon their only stronghold so easily. Besides, where would they go? Almost every surrounding region has turned into human territory. They already missed the best window of opportunity to escape. The story given to us by the Geminis may not be accurate, but the theory that there is something about the Palace of Shame that encourages all of these pirate groups to stay behind is plausible."

Ves furrowed his brows. He was getting more and more frustrated by the looming uncertainty of this secret. Did it exist? Was it as big as the Gemini Family thought? Would the Larkinsons be able to take advantage of it? Could the aliens take it away before it fell into human hands?

All of these uncertainties made him question whether it was worthwhile for the Larkinsons to even take part in this operation.

He continually kept these doubts in his mind as the discussion slowly turned to what might happen if the temporary coalition managed to neutralize all of the enemy starships and gained control over the immediate space surrounding the Palace of Shame.

Calabast projected a three-dimensional map that resembled a highly elaborate ant nest.

"We have recently received a more detailed map of the interior of the asteroid base. As you can see, there are so many tunnels, halls and defensive

strongholds that taking it over is anything but simple. While our smaller and more compact mechs can still fit into some of the more open spaces, it will take a lot of infantry to sweep the rest of the asteroid base."

That sounded both dangerous and time-consuming to Ves. He could already imagine the hard fighting that might ensue as the aliens were driven into corners.

"Can't we just blast the place open with our mechs?"

His spymaster shook her head. "You are not the first person to make this suggestion, but the Geminis and a majority of other pioneering groups have adamantly rejected this option. Demolishing the Palace of Shame not only risks destroying the primary objective of this operation, but will also lead to the destruction of a great number of other valuable goods. It is more profitable for them to send masses of relatively cheap bots and infantry soldiers inside the palace and have them do their jobs."

"Great. I hope this won't turn out to be a bloodbath."

"Our clan is a lot more optimistic about this invasion than you. This is a good opportunity for our own infantry troops to showcase their own worth. The Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders are especially eager to set foot inside a foreign space station and spill alien blood with their sharp and hungry blades. They have been training for combat for many years but rarely had the opportunity to make use of their skills in real scenarios outside of the occasional mercenary missions."

The Larkinson Clan's most prominent defenders were its many mechs and mech pilots, but they weren't the only ones that could fight.

Now that the clan had exploded in numbers, it became a lot easier to arm and train a lot of infantry soldiers.

Compared to mech pilots who needed to be paired with mechs that took up a huge amount of space and upkeep, it did not take much room or funding to raise a complete infantry regiment!

Though Ves and many other Larkinsons clearly couldn't care less about infantry, it was still an essential requirement for any organization to have a sufficient number of foot soldiers on hand.

As Ves tried to recall the details of the Larkinson Clan's infantry troops, he found that he could hardly call up any information that was current. It had been a long time since he paid attention to the state of his infantry forces.

The only exception was his honor guard. He regularly updated the powerful equipment of his closest and most important guards himself in order to ensure they were fully equipped to handle the latest threats to him and his immediate family.

"Do you think they will do alright, Calabast?"

"I cannot truly say, Ves." The woman shrugged. "My answer is irrelevant. No matter how many casualties they suffer, our infantry needs this invasion to prove that it has a reason to exist. Our footsoldiers are sick and tired of seeing our mech pilots do all of the fighting on behalf of our clan. We will most certainly attack more alien strongholds in the future, so it is best to put them to test as soon as possible. They will undoubtedly make mistakes during this operation, but they will learn from them and be better prepared next time."

This was the typical development process of a military force. The infantry forces under the command of the Larkinson Clan could only go so far by relying on training. Most of the footsoldiers were still rookies for the most part, and their growth must have plateaued due to their lack of experience.

Though Ves still didn't care too much about his infantry troops, he hoped that they would not drag his clan down when he needed them the most!

Chapter 4427 The Orven Race

Before the assault commenced, Ves and many others received a surprising piece of news.

Calabast had only recently left the office after she was done with giving Ves an update, but she returned right afterwards after receiving an important update!

"The Santana Group's covert operations unit has managed to capture an alien scouting vessel that strayed closer to our fleet's position." She succinctly reported even though Ves already received the same message through his comm.

Ves already had a lot of new questions in his mind. "Do you think this is a routine patrol or do you think the groups in control of the Palace of Shame have figured out that there is an approaching threat?"

"We can't say." The black-clad woman shrugged her shoulders. "All I know is that we can gather a lot of useful information from the captured ship, though the vessel's capture may also give our opponents a greater understanding of our capabilities. This is why the Santanas are making sure to keep the captured alien hull away from our main fleets."

It took a bit of time for the Larkinsons to receive more information about the captured ship. Calabast had already instructed the closest Black Cats in the field to suspend their current assignments and move to the alien scouting vessel as soon as possible so that they could provide more detailed information.

Soon enough, the Larkinson Clan received a transmission that finally granted Ves a good view of the alien ship in question.

"That's... an orven-style starship." Ves noted. "The all-black coating along with the wide and relatively flat hull shape is a dead giveaway of that. No other

indigenous alien race has a history of designing such an atypical scouting vessel. The materials used to construct her interior also matches what the orven race has historically made use of. I can see that the orven ship is still relatively new and fresh, but her tech isn't anything to be impressed about."

The orven race was known to be strong, but that only applied to its best. There were many other orvens who were not as wealthy and powerful. The large orven underclass had to make do with cheaper and more inferior tech.

That sounded awfully familiar now that Ves thought about it, and he wasn't the only one to recognize this similarity.

It turned out that many exobiologists viewed the orvens as the aliens that most closely resembled humans!

The orvens were bipedal, furred mammals that closely resembled upright apes but without a nose.

For some reason, the orvens and many other native creatures on the same planet never developed the sense of smell.

They all made up for it by strengthening their other senses. The orven race stood out for their four eyes.

The powerful eyesight of the orvens caused them to develop a preference of operating in low light environments.

As they originally evolved on a planet with 0.81 g, the orvens were also taller than humans on average. A typical orven adult could reach a height of 3 meters, though the tallest individuals of this race were known to surpass a natural height of 4 meters.

The orvens also lived significantly longer than humans. They aged slower to the point where a typical healthy orven individual was able to live up to 320 years without relying on any treatments.

The downside was that the orvens did not excel that much at learning. It took decades for them to raise qualified scientists, engineers, doctors and other professionals.

It was due to this that the orven race maintained an extremely high respect towards elders.

Over time, the orvens built up a society where many of its people were born into castes.

Though there was still a limited degree of upward and downward mobility, the vast majority of orvens tended to learn from their parents and pursue the same careers.

The orven caste system was quite stable for the most part. The orven society existed for a long time and had reached a high level of stability.

If not for the fact that humanity upended the entire Red Ocean by launching a massive invasion, the Orven Star Nation or whatever it was called would have been able to maintain its current form for many more years!

Another important aspect about orven society was that those at the top were extremely smart and powerful.

An important reason for that was because the orvens at the top were functionally immortal. They had access to advanced biotech treatments that completely broke the physical and non-physical limitations that successfully allowed them to escape the fate of a natural death!

No one knew how many years the oldest orvens had experienced, but the intelligence that the MTA had gathered from many sources suggested that there were numerous ancient visionaries that had first come into prominence over 10,000 years ago and still remained active to this day!

The orvens looked up to these living fossils so much that they even revered their highest leaders as literal gods!

All of this sounded extremely silly to Ves, but religion was hardly exclusive to the human race. The orvens developed their own traditions of worship. A surprisingly high proportion of the orven population were devout believers in the members of the highest caste.

Many humans who first learned about the orvens couldn't decide whether these aliens were strong or weak.

On the one hand, the orvens built up a stable interstellar society and steadily advanced their technological mastery over time. They weren't particularly brilliant or spontaneous, but they excelled in long-term thinking and planning, enabling them to avoid many mistakes that more impulsive races tended to make from time to time.

On the other hand, most orvens were dull and incapable of exhibiting much independent thought. Many of them were no different from slaves who solely existed to serve their higher caste masters.

The upper echelon of orven society were generally smarter and more talented, and heavy augmentation further made up for their genetic and physical shortcomings.

The difference between a lower caste member and upper caste member of this race was so high that it was not that much of a surprise that the latter could moonlight as a god!

Though the Big Two managed to collect a lot of information about the orvan race and orvan society, Ves only learned how these aliens worked on a general basis.

He did not possess any specific information about the orvens that chose to settle in a pirate base that was far removed from their own star nation.

Ves continued to observe the orven scouting ship in the projection as the Santanas took control of both the exterior and the interior of the vessel.

After a relatively short wait, the Santana Group finally succumbed to the pressure exerted by the other pioneering groups and opened up the orven corvette to outside visitors.

Both Ves and Calabast switched to a direct helmet feed of a Black Cat officer that had received permission to step aboard the alien vessel.

High ceilings, dim lighting and triangular-shaped corridors immediately gave the interior a distinctly non-human vibe.

The ubiquitous black color scheme along with the moist air made the place look even gloomier than normal.

One of the more interesting quirks about the lower caste orvens was that they did not engage in any form of entertainment at all. Recreation simply wasn't a part of their lives.

What they did spend their time on while they weren't performing their duties was showing their piety to their 'gods'!

As the Black Cat officer slowly toured the relatively small alien ship, his helmet feed continued to showcase abstract statues and artwork that vaguely represented the gods revered by the crew of the scouting vessel.

One of the challenges to interpreting this religious iconography was that they possessed so little features that it was difficult to figure out which orven god or leader they personified!

The human captors needed to interrogate the orven crew members in order to gain the right answers, but the problem was that they never said anything!

The orvens were relatively xenophobic and hostile towards other races as a rule. Even the lowest and most marginalized member of their alien society refused to betray anything even when subjected to heavy torture!

"How troublesome." Ves muttered.

If a group of humans captured another group of humans, there were many different solutions to make the latter spill their beans.

However, since the Santana Group and the other pioneering groups never came into contact with the orvens before, they did not master any special interrogation methods that could make the stubborn aliens open their mouths.

"In time, humanity will develop an effective drug that can encourage an orven captive to tell the truth." Calabast said. "Our race may also develop a special neural interface that can forcibly extract all of the memories of an orven individual and convert it into usable digital files that we can interpret. It may take decades for all of this useful technology to become available."

In other words, there was no way for any of the pioneering groups to gain anything useful out of interrogating the captives.

"Please instruct the officer to take a look at the captives."

The source of the live feed moved to a small cargo bay where a number of heavily armed and armored guards watched over a group of orven crew members that had been fully restrained and locked within energy cages.

Each of their black-furred, noseless faces clearly showed a lot of hatred as the orvens loathed their human captives.

From time to time, a group of Santana intelligence officers brought out an orven captive so that they could try their luck and see if the aliens spilled any useful intelligence about the Palace of Shame.

None of their attempts succeeded, but that didn't stop the humans from trying.

As Ves and Calabast observed how little the captors were gaining from the orven prisoners, the latter came up with an interesting proposal.

"You have a talent for communicating with alien life forms." She spoke to him. "Do you have any useful tricks that you can use to make the prisoners talk?"

Ves blinked. "Uhm, maybe. It depends on how they think and how their brains work. I can't really guarantee anything unless I have direct access to an orven prisoner, but theoretically I should be able to squeeze information out of a captive as long as their mentalities aren't too weak."

When he looked at the angry but rather pathetic-looking orven crew members, Ves wasn't sure whether these orvens were strong or weak.

On the one hand, they were lower caste orvens who easily submitted to their higher caste leaders.

On the other hand, the orven crew members possessed the same xenophobia and intense hatred towards humans that characterized every other member of their race!

Calabast smirked. "It doesn't hurt to try. Let me issue a request to transfer a handful of the alien prisoners in our custody. Are you willing to interrogate them if we are able to bring them back to our flagship?"

"I suppose I can try." Ves thoughtfully replied. "It might be best to bring along Venerable Joshua as well. He is even better at befriending aliens than me. I'm not sure we can get much useful information out of a captive, though. The lower caste crew members clearly look like grunts who only know how to obey orders. If we want to obtain more important details, then we should grab their higher caste officers."

"Let us see what we can get."

The Larkinson Clan issued a request to take a few of the orven prisoners into custody, but the Santana Group adamantly refused to give up even a single living alien!

"If you want to get your hands on live specimens, then go out and capture your own orven scouting ship!"

The Santana Group remained obstinate until the Larkinson Clan finally offered to exchange money for the alien prisoners.

Even then, the Santanas refused to hand over any of the officers of the alien vessels.

In the end, the Larkinson Clan managed to gain custody over three random orven crew members after handing over 150 MTA credits!

Chapter 4428 Interspecies Dialogue

Nobody really expected to gain any useful information out of interrogating the orven captives.

The pioneering groups would have better luck obtaining relevant details by hacking the scouting vessel's electronic database, but that would take a significant amount of time.

No matter what, the heritage and the technological development of the orven race was deep! Their encryption and security measures were quite mature and difficult to crack without special software and hardware.

While the Santana Group hackers were trying their best to crack open the scouting vessel's secrets before the Gemini Family decided to commence the assault, the Larkinson Clan quietly brought back a small batch of alien prisoners.

Ves still felt sour for paying 150 MTA credits just to get his hands on just three low-ranking alien spacers.

While it was not uncommon for people to pay a fair amount of money to obtain alien captives so that they could play with their new possessions, the value for most of them generally didn't exceed 1 MTA credit.

The Santana Group's negotiators were simply too good. They correctly identified the importance of this particular batch of prisoners when the temporary coalition was just about to assault the Palace of Shame.

The Santanas also knew that the Larkinson Clan was rich. They therefore set a price that was close to Ves' psychological limit for him to tolerate the deal.

Of course, the Santana Group probably never imagined that the Ves may have mastered unique capabilities that would allow him to extract real information out of the minds of the alien captives!

As long as Ves succeeded, the Larkinsons still gained a lot of value out of this deal!

Ves would gladly pay 10,000 MTA merits if he was able to find out the true secret behind the Palace of Shame!

When Ves received word that the Black Cats had successfully transferred the prisoners to the holding cells, he rose from his chair and made his way to his latest purchase.

Calabast walked by his side while continuing to give him updates on new developments.

"Now that the Santana Group succeeded in capturing an intact and virtually undamaged alien vessel, the other pioneering groups have engaged in more aggressive reconnaissance. They want to capture their own valuable orven scouting ships."

"What if they bump into a more dangerous alien warship?"

"Then that is even better." Calabast grinned. "If we can find an isolated enemy war asset, we can leverage our superior numbers to capture or destroy the threatening vessel with ease. That will save us from fighting against an additional powerful enemy once the main battle begins."

"I see. Are we doing the same?"

"That goes without saying, Ves."

"Tell our people to take it easy. We will gain access to plenty of alien ships and prisoners after we win the upcoming battle. There is no need to work too hard at this stage."

The two eventually reached a security department where the prisoners had been stuffed into special holding cells.

The orvens were accustomed to living in a different environment that was inhospitable to humans. The Larkinsons had to change the gravity, the air pressure, the air composition and the light levels of the cells in order to keep the exotic guests alive.

As Ves approached the cells in question, he slowed down and extended his spiritual senses.

He could immediately sense the alien minds and spirits. They were considerably different from that of humans.

Even if an orvan individual somehow underwent an extreme biological makeover that made him resemble a human, Ves would still be able to infer the truth by looking at how they looked from within.

"Interesting."

Ves stopped before a cell. An energy screen formed a semi-transparent barrier that isolated the captive but allowed those outside a clear view.

He was glad to see that the alien prisoner was still in good physical condition. He was afraid that the Santanas would have given him damaged goods, but they were professional enough to deliver the right products.

"This guy sure is tall." Ves observed.

The furred creature was sitting on a bench that was especially made for his height, but even then Ves could see how much the alien crew member could tower over every human.

What was interesting was that the alien was completely naked. Though his fur amply preserved his modesty, the lower caste members of the orven race generally didn't wear much clothing.

Real clothing and jewelry were seen as luxuries to the orvens. Only the higher caste members dressed themselves up in order to distinguish themselves from the masses and each other.

Though the orven crew members still carried more functional equipment on their bodies, the Santanas had stripped them all away, which was a shame.

A team of exobiologists had departed from the Dragon's Den to the Spirit of Bentheim in order to take charge of the alien captives.

The scientists all exhibited a lot of excitement. Though the Dragon's Den contained tens of thousands of pakklaton prisoners as well as a varied collection of exobeasts, this was the first time they came into contact with living members of one of the major alien races of the Red Ocean!

In order for an indigenous alien race to gain this status, it had to be powerful enough to survive and thrive in many different regions of space.

Though the orven race did not have a strong presence on this end of the dwarf galaxy, that did not detract from the fact that the orvens still managed to

hold their own against the other major alien races such as the phase whales and the puelmers!

This might give every member of the orven race an inherent sense of pride that was impossible to break.

It was the same with humans. Even the poorest third-class space peasant possessed an unreasonable sense of pride and confidence in his own identity, especially when he was confronted by other aliens!

"I can already feel how intractable this guy is." Ves remarked as he continued to stare at the tall and furry alien being. "I'm not as surprised anymore by how vehemently the orvens resist interrogation. They truly believe their own race is superior."

Calabast crossed her arms as she judged the three captives from her own perspective.

"The alien prisoners have already resigned themselves to their fate. They are ready to die for a greater cause. I think it is best if you think of them as the religious nuts that you are so fond of meeting. These orvens behave closest to them than any other type of human."

Ves' lips curled in displeasure. "Great. That is just what I need to hear."

It seemed that he couldn't escape the reach of religion even if he walked among aliens!

"Well, let's get to it, then. Please take one of these guys to an interrogation room so that I can have a chat with the fellow in person."

"How would you like to set up the interrogation room? Do you want to keep the prisoner isolated or do you want to talk to him in a more personal setting?"

Ves briefly thought about it. "The latter, please. I want him to see me in the face and vice versa. It will be much easier for me to manipulate the capture when there is as little separation as possible."

It took a few minutes to set everything up. Ves in the meantime opted to equip his Unending Regalia. The only change he made was that he opted to wear a thin, transparent helmet as opposed to a heavier helmet that would make him seem impersonal.

He changed to his personal suit of combat armor not just because he needed to protect himself from the inhospitable orven environmental conditions, but also because it made him look more impressive.

According to the MTA database, the orven race equated impressive looking clothing and accessories to higher caste superiors.

Though the Unending Regalia probably didn't fall in line with orven tastes, it was still an impressive and imposing piece of equipment.

This was especially the case when it had been infused with so much of his spiritual energy!

As a living product, the Unending Regalia gradually took on a life of its own, gaining spiritual weight that allowed the combat armor to function as an increasingly more effective ceremonial dress!

Whatever the restrained orven captive expected to meet, the male alien definitely did not expect to see an impressive red armored figure stride into the low-lit interrogation room.

"%#\$#*%#." The orven's strong voice echoed across the room.

Ves did not bother to activate his translation program. The one provided by the MTA was adequate, more or less, but he did not completely trust it to convey the full and accurate meaning of every sentence.

A man of his talents had no need to make use of a translation program.

"#\$&#\$* @."

It appeared that the alien captive still remained talkative despite his doomed status. Ves could hear from the tone alone that the shackled orven remained defiant and did not intend to surrender any ground.

The only favorable sign so far was that the orven displayed a bit more wariness and respect towards Ves.

Compared to the other 'humans' the orven had met, this one clearly looked like a high caste member!

"Hello there." Ves smiled and greeted as he approached the table and sat down on the other side of the chair. "I would like to hold an interspecies dialogue with you. Is that alright?"

"#@#\$&\$*&."

Of course, the alien had no idea what the human was saying.

Ves also didn't understand the gibberish that the orven captive was spewing, but that was because he deliberately closed his spiritual senses.

He decided to change that by concentrating his mind and try to get a better grip on his prisoner's mental and spiritual state.

"#\$&."

The alien vaguely sensed that something had changed, but he lacked the ability to understand what just happened. His spirituality was even dimmer and weaker than that of an ordinary human!

Ves leaned forward and spoke with a slightly different inflection in his tone. "You should be able to understand me now. Do not be afraid to respond."

The orven exhibited a strong physical reaction to what just happened. The alien would have risen to his feet if not for the invisible bonds keeping his body in place!

The creature's four eyes widened by a minute degree as the prisoner looked at Ves with incredulity.

"Human... not real. Cannot say. No. You are not orven. Why can I understand human words?"

Ves grinned. His first goal was to throw the orven captive off-balance.

"My powers are beyond your comprehension. I am not like those other weak humans that you have met or learned about. The humans that have captured you are merely slaves in our society. I am different because I am their master. Do you understand the difference?"

The mix of truth and lies along with the way that Ves delivered his meaning evoked another reaction from the orven spacer.

As a living being who was firmly a part of the bottom of the totem pole, obeying and respecting his superiors was ingrained in his mind and spirit!

Though the alien's intense hostility and rejection of other species prevented him from submitting to Ves on the spot, it was clear that he had lost his mental balance!

"Let us get to know each other." Ves suggested. "What is your name, orven?"

"My designation is Aruva-QkrnRa-81."

"I see. I have many names and titles, but you can call me patriarch. I am the leader of a clan that encompasses 500 trillion humans. Thousands of planets have fallen under my sway and I answer to no other human aside from the Polymath, the smartest and most brilliant leader of the human race. By the way, I am over 1 million years old. Do you know how long that is? I have lived

over 3000 times longer than your maximum lifespan! I am ancient, wise and powerful beyond belief!"

Aruva-QkrnRa-81 or whatever he was called looked so shocked that he simply couldn't believe in Ves anymore.

"Lies... you are speaking false, human! No member of your race can grow so old!"

"Oh really now? Are you certain about that, Mr. Aruva-QkrnRa-81?"

Ves leaned forward while concentrating a bit more. He consciously reached out to the Phase King and invited the design spirit to inhabit his mind for a time.

A powerful spiritual presence descended in the dim and moist interrogation room. Ves suddenly gained an aura that conveyed an undeniable sense of age and power.

The Phase King was by far the oldest design spirit in Ves' collection. Though it was easy to lie with words, it was a lot harder to fool the spirit!

When Aruva-QkrnRa-81 looked at Ves as the latter embodied the Phase King, the orven captive felt as if he was sitting right in front one of the highest leaders of his race!

In fact, Aruva-QkrnRa-81 couldn't imagine that there was any orven ancestor that could match Ves in his current form!

Compared to the limited amount of orven leaders that the alien captive had the privilege to glimpse from afar, those high caste members of his race paled in comparison to the human patriarch!

Chapter 4429 Aruva

The orvens were aliens that differed a lot from humanity.

However, life tended to repeat a lot of templates that had been proven to be successful throughout history.

Ves was glad that the alien captives he received this time were at least somewhat similar to humans.

If he obtained even weirder and more inhuman life forms such as sandmen or voribugs, then he wouldn't even be able to figure out how to approach an interrogation!

Right now, it became clear that he was beginning to dominate Aruva-QkrnRa-81 on a mental level.

The tall, black-furred alien looked at Ves with fear and awe as the alien prisoner likely gained the mistaken impression that he was in the presence of a human god!

Not just that, but Ves ostensibly was a god that was more powerful than the orven 'gods' that the orven captive knew of! The human sitting in front of him was also the only god that had ever paid him so much personal attention!

In the large but highly stratified orven caste society, it was unthinkable for the immortal orven deities to pay any attention to the lowest servants at the bottom. The differences in status were so extreme that a trivial starship crew member like Aruva-QkrnRa-81 simply didn't have any idea on how he should handle such a situation.

His acquired hostility towards aliens violently clashed against his strong compulsion to respect and obey his 'gods'.

Ves could see that while he managed to throw the orven captive into confusion, the alien spacer might not remain this way forever.

He needed to take advantage of this temporary state as quickly as possible before the alien eventually woke up and remembered his true loyalties!

"Tell me what you and your fellow orvens are hiding in the Palace of Shame."
Ves spoke in a commanding tone.

What made his command different from that of other humans was that he not only spoke directly to Aruva's spirit, but also channeled as much of the Phase King presence as he could at this time!

Though the strain on his mind and spirit was not light, Ves tried his best to endure the pressure.

The grand display of might certainly had a great effect on Aruva! The poor alien chump normally would have kept his mouth shut or hurled insults against his human captors, but Ves radiated so much strength that the alien's ingrained habit of obeying his superiors kicked in at this time!

"Our bloodlines have guarded the heart of the Palace of Shame for many generations! Even I do not know what I and the rest of the Unspoken have been tasked with protecting for our entire lives, but it is a great honor for a humble servant such as myself to be a part of this holy quest! Compared to the shame and dishonor of engaging in piracy, nothing is more important than my cause!"

The alien captive blurted out a lot of interesting information all of a sudden! Ves rapidly processed the key words and meanings as he tried to ride the current momentum.

Though Aruva's did not contain the answer that Ves truly sought, the prisoner at least confirmed that the Palace of Shame definitely hid a great secret!

Not only that, but this secret greatly involved one of the pirate groups that the Gemini Family had briefed everybody upon.

The Palace of Shame hosted multiple powerful alien pirate organizations. The strongest of them was the so-called Unspoken, an old orven pirate group that

had steadily declined over time but still maintained a strong degree of suppression due to owning an intact and relatively powerful battlecruiser.

The primary armaments of this battlecruiser were so powerful that they possessed the capability to blast the Palace of Shame into pieces as long as they were allowed to go wild!

Even though the Unspoken only had a single major warship left, the formidable strength of this mighty vessel still allowed this group to occupy the top of the Palace of Shame's power ranking!

The Gemini Family already shared conjectures about the true reasons why the orven race bothered to maintain a presence in a lowly pirate base.

It turned out that the theories that the Geminis came up with were accurate. The Palace of Shame truly served a far greater purpose than to provide shelter to a bunch of degenerate pirates.

Ves began to form his own understanding of the situation.

The pirates outside of the Unspoken likely served as unwitting camouflage and cannon fodder to the hidden masters of the Palace of Shame.

The presence of all the diverse alien pirate races and groups gave authenticity to the idea that the Palace of Shame only served as a pirate haunt. It was too ludicrous to think that it was actually a vault for any great treasure or secret.

If the Palace of Shame held a secret of unsurpassed value, then the greedy pirates who resided in the asteroid base for so long would have tried their best to plunder it already!

At least that was what others would think.

Even the history of the Unspoken had been fudged. The Geminis only suspected that the orven race played a more important role in the Palace of Shame than what was obvious on the surface.

If not for the fact that all of the pirate groups including the Unspoken chose to stay in a territory that was doomed to fall into human hands, it would have been a lot more difficult to recognize that there was a lot more going on in this place!

Ves stared deeply into the alien captive's four inhuman eyes. "What is your cause? Tell me what you believe it has to do with. Your superiors may have told you nothing, but individuals such as yourself still have a habit of spreading rumors. Tell me the stories you have heard."

The alien captive tried his best to resist the directive. He knew on an intellectual level that it was wrong for him to obey the instructions of a member of a different race, especially one that originated from a different galaxy!

It was too bad that the lower caste orvens tended to be rather slow in their heads, especially when they were still young.

Ves deliberately chose to interrogate the captive that looked the youngest for this purpose.

Since it was a great taboo for lower caste orvens to ignore the instructions of their superiors, Aruva again felt compelled to respond!

"We... are the protectors in the dark. We... are the hidden soldiers of an order that is more ancient and noble than any of the orders that have ever existed in our galaxy. Our mission is beyond all of the fights within our nation or the wars between different races."

"What is your mission, soldier?!" Ves pressed the orven captive.

"I do not know! I really do not know! All I know is that it is the greatest responsibility that the children of our galaxy must undertake! We are the protectors in the dark! We are the descendants of an order that has always remained silent but never unmoving! We live a life of infamy so that the rest of our race can survive in the light!"

Ves grew a bit frustrated. The alien captive was repeating what little information he possessed.

This was the downside of interrogating a low-ranking grunt. There was no need to share any sensitive information to a lowly spacer like Aruva-QkrnRa-81. The Unspoken only needed him to perform his limited duties aboard one of its starships.

As Aruva's tiny spirituality began to show increasing signs of instability and conflict, Ves knew that he was running out of time.

"Who among the Unspoken knows about the secret of the Palace of Shame? Who among your kind is aware of your true mission!"

"I... I know not... of any other aside from our leader and his heir." Aruva reluctantly replied. "The rest... do not... have... the right blood. They are all... too four and impure..."

"Who are they?"

"The Shadow Lord... Kurgeuth-Trxne-Magznte-Prizen-Nachtza-Olerine-5... and his heir... the Shadow Child... Mastanch-Irxna-Magznte-Prizen-Nachtza-Olerine-6."

Higher caste orvens possessed longer and more impressive-sounding names than the lower caste orvens at the bottom.

The orvens felt it was completely unnecessary to bestow honors to those that could not achieve anything significant in their lives.

If lower caste orvens ever managed to make great contributions that earned them a promotion, then they would get to extend their names to signify their change in status.

At the same time, those that made grievous mistakes and earned themselves a rare demotion would have to surrender a part of their names!

Though the names of the so-called Shadow Lord and Shadow Child weren't the longest ones employed by the orvens, they were definitely enough of a mouthful to signify their relatively high place in the hierarchy!

Ves did not like what he heard. It was nearly impossible to capture the two highest-ranking orvens of the Unspoken alive.

He truly believed that he had stumbled upon a secret that might be greater than any supposed treasure locked inside the Palace of Shame.

The alien captive's words suggested that there was a greater organization behind the Unspoken that exerted influence in many different locations aside from the Palace of Shame!

When did this secret organization come into existence? Who were its leaders? What agenda did it pursue?

It might be that Ves was vastly overestimating the scope and influence of the mastermind behind the scenes.

The only comparable secret organization in his mind was the Five Scrolls Compact. This caused him to lean towards the assumption that the Red Ocean might have its own version of a secret cult that was trying to plot everyone's downfall!

Though it was unlikely for this to be the case, Ves needed to know for certain! He did not want to reside in a galaxy where the Big Two, the indigenous alien empires and everyone else unwittingly danced to the tune of an alien cult!

Ves tried to exert more pressure onto Aruva. "So your 'Shadow Lord' leads the Unspoken, is that right? He is not strong enough to be his own master. He must answer to a greater leader. Who does your Shadow Lord serve?"

"I do not know! I do not serve alongside the great Shadow Lord!"

"You may not be allowed to know the truth, but you must have heard stories about him. What do his servants and attendants know? What have they shared with other orvens such as yourself?"

"They... would never dare to break their vows of secrecy... I know nothing!"

"Do you truly know nothing?" Ves scoffed. "You are awfully adamant about repeating this phrase. You cannot fool one that has lived for over a million years. You know something. I can feel it in your heart. Either you can tell me what is truly on your mind or I will force it out of your head by force!"

A memory flashed through the mind of Aruva. Though the alien tried harder than ever to suppress this memory and avoid saying anything about its contents, Ves abruptly banged the surface of the table with his armored fist.

BANG!

The loud noise generated a crack in Aruva's mental barrier. The move that Ves had made evidently triggered a conditional reflex.

"Godblood! The Shadow Lord once met with a descendant of an Elder God in secret!"

As if realizing that he had just spilled information that he should have never shared to a human, Aruva's four green eyes widened as if they were about to pop!

"No... I do not know... I do not know... I DO NOT KNOW!"

Before Ves could ask any further questions, Aruva's mind and spirit abruptly snuffed out in an instant.

At the same time, blue blood leaked out of all of his eyes and other orifices.

Ves froze in puzzlement. "Aruva?"

The alien captive was dead. Through some means or another, the alien experienced so much distress that he chose to end his life rather than bear the guilt of leaking out critical information!

Seeing that he could no longer squeeze any further information out of the orven prisoner, Ves relaxed his mind and allowed the Phase King to retract his presence.

Ves thought about the crucial words that Aruva uttered from his mouth.

"The descendant of an Elder God, huh?"

There was only one indigenous alien race that was known to bear this title.

"Sure enough. It's the phase whales again."

Chapter 4430 Secret Order

The first interrogation was a massive success.

Ves obtained more information out of Aruva-QkrnRa-81 than any other human managed to squeeze out of the prisoners of the captured orven scouting vessel!

Sure, the details were rather scarce, but the meaning of everything that came out of Aruva's mouth was significant!

He took one last look at the captive that had ultimately chosen to cut his life short rather than live with the guilt of sharing a secret that was greater than everything else that he had exposed.

Ves actually didn't know that the orvens could commit suicide like this. If he wanted to extract additional information from the other two orven captives, then he needed to take care not to push them to the brink.

"I guess this death was worth it. At least Aruvan had the courtesy to depart from life after he shared his big secret."

After thanking the expired alien one last time, Ves calmly stood up and left the interrogation room.

He met up with Calabast who had paid close attention to what took place inside the interrogation room.

She replayed the recorded footage of the brief interspecies dialogue. A translation program helpfully interpreted Aruva's native words, though Ves noted that the software did not convey the exact same meaning.

There were many nuances that the translation program either missed or interpreted in the wrong manner. This caused Calabast to base her thoughts on slightly faulty data.

It was not that big of a deal, though. The basic meaning of Aruva's words were still clear.

"You did a good job, Ves." Calabast complimented him. "I knew you had a few tricks up your sleeve, but outright trying to pose as an ancient and terrible human god was a great way to exploit the orven prisoner's psychological triggers. We have improved our understanding of the behavior and attitudes of the orvens. We would like to guide your actions in the next interrogation session so that we can generate more results."

That was a polite way of saying that Ves was still an amateur at this and that a professional could have done better in his shoes.

Ves shrugged. "Okay, but I don't think we can get that much more out of these prisoners. We can throw them off-balance for a time, but once they process their unprecedented situation and realize that they are only putting the Unspoken at greater risk by talking, they won't hesitate to sacrifice themselves to protect his cause."

"We are aware of that. Don't worry. We won't let the remaining two prisoners die too quickly."

"Maybe we should allow Venerable Joshua to approach one of them instead." Ves suggested.

"The friendly approach will not work. There is no way to hide the fact that Venerable Joshua is a human, which the orvens see as a greater evil than any other enemy of their race. Much of Joshua's success in developing good relationships with different entities is because there are grounds for cooperation. This is not the case in this instance. Humans are the invaders of the Red Ocean and the destroyers of every native civilization. We are the greatest evil that the Red Ocean has ever seen. We are the one threat that can force all of the indigenous alien races to set aside their rivalries."

That was true. It was impossible to brainwash the orven captives to the point where they were willing to shift their loyalties to a human power. It was just too absurd for them to work against their own race and heritage.

Even if individuals such as Aruvan were being mistreated by their superiors, that did not diminish their racial pride and loyalty!

Ves could even argue that these simple-minded underlings were even harder to shake than the higher caste members of their race!

The lowly grunts were conditioned from birth to do their jobs and obey the instructions from their orven superiors without question.

The higher caste members who actually had to do a lot more thinking ought to be a lot more flexible in comparison. Their capacity for deep thinking also allowed them to form more diverse opinions about everything.

This was also a strong reason why Ves wanted to capture a high-ranking orven officer. He would have much more room for maneuver if he interrogated someone who wasn't accustomed to blindly following orders.

"So what do you make of this secret alien order?" Ves asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised if such a large conspiracy theory turns out to be true." Calabast replied as she crossed her arms. "The Red Ocean may not be as big as the Milky Way, but it is still an old dwarf galaxy that has existed for a long time. Life evolved in the stars around us a long time ago. Few ever managed to develop to the point where they gained intelligence and started developing technologies, but don't forget about phasewater. Access to this powerful substance substantially lowers the barrier to interstellar travel. Warp drives are not that difficult to make for any decent intelligence race as long as there is enough phasewater."

Phasewater possessed strong spatial manipulation properties that could easily reduce the difficulty of developing a means of superluminal travel by three or four times!

Throughout history, there were many alien species that evolved in their home star systems but eventually became extinct without ever impacting the wider galaxy around them because they failed to develop a viable means to travel faster than the speed of light!

The fact that phasewater gave everyone an easy way out meant that the Red Ocean should have birthed dominant alien civilizations a lot sooner than in the Milky Way!

However, that hadn't happened.

Many members of the scientific community debated why this was so. Some posited that one or several dominant alien races of the Red Ocean may have emerged in the past.

However, they found that the dwarf galaxy that they belonged to was ultimately too small and limited to help them attain their higher ambitions.

Perhaps these once-powerful alien species gathered their collective potential and utilized a huge amount of phasewater to transport themselves to an entirely different galaxy or reality!

There was no solid proof to this theory, though. The indigenous alien races that existed to this day did not know anything about this possibility and human pioneers found no archeological traces of powerful precursor races that had left the Red Ocean.

A more probable theory that received the support of many scholars was that the Red Ocean's stagnant development was due to the complacency and lack of pressure of all of its native alien races.

The phase whales, the nunsers, the puelmers, the orvens and even the voribugs never experienced the pressure of total war that could drive them to extinction.

They had lived so long and spread their presence so extensively across the Red Ocean that if total war erupted between any of them, they would likely drive everyone to mutual extinction!

This had led to a state where the major alien races still competed against each other in regional conflicts, but conscientiously avoided any possibility of escalating it to anything greater.

Once the natives of the Red Ocean established this new status quo, the drive to improve and become overwhelmingly stronger than everyone else was no longer as significant as before.

Too many aliens grew comfortable with the relatively peaceful and stable galactic society that they had formed. No one wanted to break the peace, so a lot of alien scientists and developers began to devote their efforts to more peaceful pursuits than inventing stronger weapons.

At this time, the major alien races that previously lorded over the Red Ocean probably regretted the fact that they had been sleeping behind the wheel for so long!

Now that disaster finally struck in the form of a massive extragalactic threat, the aliens led by the puelmers abruptly woke up from their long dream and had to contend with the nightmare that had befallen their dwarf galaxy!

"Do you think that it is true that the phase whales have any relation to the Unspoken and the Palace of Shame?" Ves asked.

His spymaster frowned. "The way that the alien captive responded makes me believe that he has witnessed a meeting between the so-called Shadow Lord and a phase whale in person. He was probably stationed on a ship that had attended this possible event. If this is the case, then that is an indication that the Palace of Shame is far more important than we imagined. The involvement of two different major alien races shows that this matter transcends the interests of a single group within a single race."

Ves grinned when he heard that. "Good. The greater the importance of the Palace of Shame, the more benefits we can gain out of looting it. Whatever multiracial organization is behind all of this must be incredibly rich and powerful. It wouldn't put anything cheap inside an asteroid base that is significant enough to merit the personal attention of a phase whale."

His strategic partner did not like what she heard. She turned and pinned him with a reproachful stare.

"You are playing with fire again, Ves. I would have thought that this revelation would have made you second-guess the wisdom of proceeding with the attack. Though we have only received scant details about this unknown multiracial organization, we may very well be on our way to provoke a secret society that is as monstrous as a certain cult. Have you forgotten why you

urgently wanted to leave the old galaxy as soon as possible? If you persist in this, then we may end up in a similar situation! The biggest difference is that you have nowhere left to run."

Though Ves initially became alarmed by her ominous predictions, he soon relaxed and scoffed at her overly pessimistic words.

"You're blowing our current circumstances way out of proportion, Calabast. We are in a much different situation than before."

He raised an armored finger.

"First, if this multiracial organization even exists, it cannot shake the might of the Big Two. There is no way that a phase whale or a hunter-killer fleet will cross into human-occupied territory just to eliminate a trivial group of second-class humans."

He raised a second finger.

"Second, there are too many humans for us to merit any special attention. I would think that the members of this secret order are much more focused on beating back the MTA and CFA than to waste their time on the dregs of the human race."

He raised a third finger.

"Third, the Palace of Shame probably isn't that important in the greater scheme of things. If the hidden order truly cared about it, then it would have found a way to evacuate whatever is locked inside the asteroid base before the humans arrived."

Before Ves could bring up his fourth point, Calabast held up her palm. "You can stop now, Ves. I get the story. I admit that your arguments are all plausible, but we are all basing this on scraps of information from a lower caste orven. The range of possibilities is too extensive, but if we want to be

careful, then we should always take the worst-case scenarios into account. In my judgment, we are about to enter a dangerous collision if our clan proceeds to attack the Palace of Shame. We should at least spend more time on gathering intelligence. We can make much more informed decisions if we have a better understanding of the truth."

Ves shook his head. "We don't have the time to go through all of that trouble. The longer we wait, the more things can go wrong. Besides, we already formed an agreement with the Gemini Family and the other pioneering groups. It is too late for us to back out at this point. We can still make this work in my opinion. We just need to be more careful and maybe encourage others to take the lead."

More than anything else, Ves wanted to see for himself what the Unspoken were hiding inside the Palace of Shame.

If there were any massive conspiracies brewing beneath the surface of the Red Ocean, then he wanted to find out about it sooner rather than later!