

## Mech 4561

### Chapter 4561 For Marvaine

There were many acceptable virtual schools available to Ves and Gloriana.

Even though they might not have the sheer amount of cash on hand to pay the exorbitant tuition fees for most of them, it was not as if the Larkinson Clan was financially strapped.

The clan's finances were hardly leveraged as the LMC already generated a lot of revenue.

There was not much point in borrowing lots of money to accelerate the expansion of the LMC when there were many hard limitations to growth.

The limited access to scarce raw materials, the shortage of reliable and trustworthy trading partners, the entrenchment of competing mech designers at many locations and the increasingly more congested transportation channels all made it useless for the LMC to expand its production capacity and build more branches in different regions.

As such, the LMC and by extension the clan still had lots of room to borrow money if necessary.

Ves was sure he could squeeze at least 1 million MTA credits from the Yem-Tar Trade and Commerce Bank, especially considering that he maintained good relations with the mechers.

"Tuition fees won't be an obstacle as long as they aren't too excessive." He told his wife. "The more expensive virtual schools might not always be better, but by putting higher barriers of entry, the quality and status of its student body will most certainly be higher."

This granted Marvaine greater opportunities to befriend classmates who would likely become bigshots in the future.

Of course, the intimacy between friends who had never met each other in reality was limited, so Ves did not put too much stock in this dynamic.

"We still have time to send an application for Marvaine." Gloriana said as she ceased her search. "It is better for us to wait for the outcome of your search for the missing Yorul-Tavik scion before we commit to a choice. The Black Cats can also use this time to dig into the backgrounds of all of these school chains. There should be much more information and secrets around them that can't be found through a quick search on the galactic net. Having attended similar schools in the past, each one that caters to the upper echelon of a society are heavily entangled into existing alliances, factions, ideologies and so on. A single choice can literally determine Marvaine's future."

That sounded even more serious than Ves thought. His wife was right. As far as the rich and powerful were concerned, people were never too young to pursue their ambitions. A lot of children had already been taught to network, scheme and plot their way to success by their parents!

Ves should know, as Gloriana had taken a similar approach to Aurelia!

Though Marvaine was not as genetically predisposed to excel at social manipulation, Witshaw & Seneca still made sure to brush up his general competences as part of an all-round boost in performance.

Besides, it shouldn't really matter if Marvaine couldn't keep up with all of the scheming. Being good at making friends certainly helped a mech designer out, but at the end of the day their value was solely measured by their ability to design mechs.

So long as Marvaine was able to stand out in his capacity to learn complicated scientific subjects as well as his ability to design excellent Mekanos, he would definitely become a popular fellow while attending school!

Just as how Ves attracted a succession of allies who valued him for his work, Marvaine should also be able to build a network around himself.

The premise was that Marvaine could not only keep up with his demanding study load, but become one of the top students of his class!

No matter how talented and intelligent Marvaine might be, his peers would definitely give him a run for his money. Their rich parents might be just as crazy if not crazier than Ves when it came to boosting the performance of their heirs!

Gloriana had full confidence in her son. "Marvaine will rank at the top of his class. Do you know why? He has inherited your spark of divinity. He is already leagues ahead in this aspect. The power of a god is expressed in miracles and turning impossibilities into reality. Whereas other children will have to surrender to the constraints of their designer genes, our son can break them and grow past his limits over and over again. We just have to push him forward when he is being challenged."

That did not entirely sit well with Ves. While Gloriana's argument sounded nice, this fit exactly with the high-pressure childrearing methodology that was typical of the Hexer people!

He recalled Calabast's story and learned that while it was an excellent way to produce high performers, the chances that children would break from all of the pressure and expectations was not light!

"I understand you want our child to excel, but don't go too far. He should still have enough free time to play with his friends and siblings. He only has one childhood, and I will not deprive him of this fantastic experience just because of our desire to enter the first-class mech industry sooner."

His wife didn't entirely agree with him, but they could settle this in the future.

Life went on for the Larkinsons.

Though Ves and Gloriana spent a bit more time tutoring and instructing their son, they largely went back to designing their mechs again.

In the meantime, the expeditionary fleet was slowly navigating through numerous star systems, some of which had seen battle in the past.

It was not strange for the Golden Skull Alliance to enter a star system that contained a sprawling debris field. There was usually one or more pioneering fleets in the vicinity that eagerly salvaged as much valuable remnants as possible in order to earn easy profits.

The expeditionary fleet decided to stay far away from this activity. Many of the cargo hulls of the Golden Skull Alliance were already full with the alien plunder they had accrued after the conclusion of the Battle of the Boryan Belt.

There was no reason to be greedy and compete against threatening pioneering groups for redundant loot.

What concerned Ves increasingly more was the movement and positioning of rival forces near the probable coordinates of where Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik might be hunkering at this time.

Enough time had passed for the Larkinsons to develop a more precise idea where the failed pioneer could be found.

Director Calabast took in all of the available clues and information and came to Ves to present her findings.

"...We have persistently requested Ylvaine to give us a direction to our mission objective aftering a new star system. Since we are not traveling forward in a straight line, this means that we can create a bunch of different cones that vaguely point in the same direction. Since Ylvaine's predictions become more precise as we are getting closer to our goal, the newer cones should be narrower, which helps with cutting down the possible destinations."

She waved her hand, causing a familiar star map of the border region to be projected above their heads.

Several different cones and arrows appeared on the map. Each of them originated from a different star system and all pointed forward.

Ves didn't need to employ any math to see that all of the arrows and cones increasingly homed in on a specific star system.

He narrowed his eyes. The light dot that represented this particular site was so small and dim that it was easy to overlook it entirely.

"Is that... a brown dwarf system?"

"It is." Calabast nodded. "There are few better places to hide from enemy pursuit. Brown dwarf systems are fairly common but are almost universally regarded as useless. Their failed stars do not generate enough energy to sustain life and they are too small and weak to form planets, let alone concentrate enough valuable exotic materials. The star systems themselves are relatively cold, dark and depressing places. Standard FTL drives also have a lot of difficulty navigating to them unless they are already in an adjacent star system, though I should remind you that native warp drives do not have the same problem."

"Hmmm..." Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "It doesn't make much sense. The original alien warships that destroyed his pioneering fleet shouldn't have that much trouble with navigating to this brown dwarf system. How did Lord Pearian shake off his alien pursuers?"

"We do not have enough information to give you an answer." Calabast replied.

"Figures. There is also another problematic issue. A brown dwarf system is a good hiding place if you want to prevent other humans from tracking you down, but why would Lord Pearian try to avoid getting rescued by a friendly human force?"

The director of the Black Cats had a more plausible explanation ready.

"There can be many reasons for that. A third party rescue force won't have his best interests at heart. Maybe he is afraid that a pioneering fleet will pick him up, and instead of delivering him back to friendly hands, the rescuers might decide to pass him onto an adversary of the Yorul-Tavik Clan. I can think of many ways that a competitor might be able to exploit Lord Pearian as a hostage."

Ves looked thoughtful at that. "Have the competitors of the Yorul-Tavik Clan issued their own bounties?"

"They did." Calabast nodded. "You can't find them on any open channels. They won't be that blatant about it, but everyone who is a part of the scene knows what is truly going on. Situations like these can't be avoided. It is one of the reasons why the Yorul-Tavik Clan is truly sincere about showering the rescuers of their missing scion with generous rewards. Being too perfunctory about it will just drive pioneers to take their business elsewhere."

The immediate benefits promised by these competitors turned out to be even greater and more concrete than any promises made by the Yorul-Taviks.

The boosted rewards ranged from more MTA credits to a greater batch of first-class exotics.

One secretive group even promised to gift an entire first-class multipurpose mech, and not a shabby one either!

Ves wasn't tempted.

"It's always dangerous to do business with snakes that are all too ready to play dirty." He said as he crossed his arms. "Besides, our clan has built a reputation centered around honor and integrity. It will be difficult for our clansmen and any outsiders to accept the fact that we are facilitating an evil kidnapping scheme."

To be honest, Ves really wanted to get his hands on a working first-class multipurpose mech!

The high technologies stuffed inside such a machine had an incredible amount of reference value to him. He could also gather first-hand information on the design paradigms of first-class mech designs.

However, using it was a lot more problematic. From the moment the Larkinsons started to field a single first-class multipurpose mech, the clan would immediately be reclassified as a first-class pioneering group, which came with a host of problems!

According to the rules set by the Big Two, first-class pioneering groups should stop mucking around in middle zones and stay inside upper zones as much as possible!

This was exceedingly dangerous to the current Larkinson Clan as there was no real way for all of its second-class mechs to compete against their first-class counterparts.

"Meeting the demands of the Yorul-Tavik Clan is for the best." Calabast approved of Ves' decision. "Pleasing the Yorul-Taviks will most definitely irk their enemies, but not too much. On the other hand, if we gave Lord Pearian to a known adversary, then we will incur a lot of hatred from the Yorul-Tavik Clan. We will have to watch our back wherever we go for a long time."

That sounded distinctly unattractive to Ves as well.

He reminded himself of his real goal for this rescue operation.

"I don't really care about gaining the favor of the Yorul-Tavik Clan. It is only a means to an end for me. What I really want is to open up a channel to interact and do business with the Omter Republic and its colonial holdings in the Red Ocean. We cannot afford to miss out on this chance!"

## Chapter 4562 Otrus Magrin

The brown dwarf system that the Larkinsons tentatively identified as the probable hiding place of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik did not even have a proper name.

The chance to leave a legacy behind by naming a star system that would stick around for millions of years apparently wasn't enough of an incentive.

The border region hadn't been frequented much in the past and the few explorers that roamed the area in the past usually directed their attention to more resource and energy-rich star systems.

As such, the brown dwarf system showed up as SDDD-4343X-AER-232666410 in the MTA's official database.

As this was a rather unwieldy way to refer to a location, Ves decided to call it by a different name to make it easier to talk about the star system.

In any case, the Golden Skull Alliance would officially gain the right to name SDDD-4343X-AER-232666410 upon arrival.

That was still a few days away. The expeditionary fleet had just entered a rather boring uninhabited star system that was right next to their destination.

Hundreds of starships waited to cycle their FTL drives in order to get ready for the next leg of the journey.

Mechs launched from the hangar bays and set up an immediate perimeter around the vulnerable ships. Numerous expert mechs were among them, though it was unlikely that their help was needed as the initial sensor sweeps revealed nothing of note in the vicinity.

The fleet lowered its alert level and most people went back to their prior routines. Although the threat of attack was always present, it was unlikely for third parties to drop out of warp travel and launch a surprise attack.



Just in case there were any human or alien forces that were plotting to raid the expeditionary fleet, many individual combat carriers and scout ships had already begun to spread out in order to detect such approaches in advance.

Although there was no particular reason to be more afraid than before, Ves couldn't help but grow nervous.

The Golden Skullers had come incredibly close to the probable location of the missing first-class scion. If the Larkinsons had a way to find Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, then it was possible that other powerful groups might have their own ways of making the same determination!

Ves and everyone else depended heavily on collecting intelligence to identify possible threats and 'competitors' in advance.

It was unacceptable for the expeditionary fleet to get blindsided once again. Ves had personally instructed Calabast to dig deep into every pioneering fleet that was close enough to interfere with the search, retrieval and evacuation of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik.

This was why she had entered his office once again to deliver an exhausting report about what the Black Cats managed to find out about each nearby fleet.

Many of them sounded fairly boring and unthreatening. Regardless of the amount of mechs they could field, none of them enjoyed the protection of an ace mech as far as the available data showed.

As long as this was the case, the Mars should easily be able to crush the opposing mech forces by itself! The ace mech was just that powerful!

That still left a number of fleets that most likely had an ace mech at their disposal.

"We are not alone in the current star system." Calabast stated. "There is another pioneering fleet on the other side that has arrived from a different

direction. It belongs to a private company called Cenatis Prospectin. As the name suggests, it is primarily occupied with discovering valuable resource deposits and mining them empty if the profit is sufficient."

That sounded a bit interesting.

Ves furrowed his brows while stroking Lucky's back. "Ordinary prospecting and mining fleets generally try to stay out of hotspots. Getting into fights with other pioneers is bad for business."

"That is not always the case." Calabast smirked. "Danger just means less competition to these mining companies. There is a lot of profit to be made in this border region. As long as their fleets have enough muscle, then they can guarantee enough safety to go about their day without interference. It is not as if most rivals have much interest in raiding a mining fleet."

That sounded about right, but Ves found it incredibly odd that a powerful mining fleet had roamed all the way out here. There shouldn't be anything too interesting in the surrounding star systems.

"Do you think that these guys are out here in order to find a hidden pocket of phasewater or something?" Ves asked in a deceptively light tone.

"I wouldn't call your attention to this fleet if I thought it was harmless."

Calabast replied with a shrug. "There are several points that have set off warnings within my department. The most important concern is that Cenatus Prospectin is not 'just' a boring mining company. It is founded by a pioneer and gentleman called Otrus Magrin."

"Who is this fellow?"

"He's a self-made businessman, just like you. The difference is that he's not a mech designer or an inventor. He is just good at attracting investors and taking advantage of fleeting business opportunities. From what we have learned from third-party sources, Mr. Magrin is a cutthroat businessman who

doesn't hesitate to drive hard bargains, coerce other parties into signing unfavorable deals and leave his trading partners out to dry when they no longer have any use. While he has made a lot of risky bets, he won more often than he lost, and this was why he has managed to fund the formation of a fairly powerful pioneering fleet."

This guy certainly possessed a colorful background. Ves grew intrigued and pulled up the man's record.

"Hm. He's from the galactic rim like us. Figures. Everyone who originates from the galactic rim tends to be scrappier than other people."

"We do have a reputation for seeking the limits more often than those who originate from the galactic heartland and the galactic center."

Pioneers who came from the more prosperous regions of the old galaxy could usually count on greater support from back home, but that also made them a lot less daring and willing to take risks.

Ves appreciated a man like Mr. Magrin. There were enough similarities for Ves to respect and understand the businessman's perspective.

"Wait." He suddenly said. "If Otrus Magrin is an unscrupulous businessman, then how has he managed to retain the services of an ace pilot."

"That ace pilot is one of his sons."

"Oh."

Otrus Magrin was actually a lot older than the typical pioneer in the Red Ocean.

Most people that sought to find new opportunities in the new frontier tended to be ambitious people who were generally less than a century old. They were not entrenched in the old galaxy and chafed at the restrictions of the rigid society and structures that prevented them from moving upwards.

A man of Otrus Magrin's caliber already enjoyed considerable success in his home star sector in the galactic rim. Perhaps the man still encountered plenty of hindrances over there, but he would have probably continued to do well if he stayed in his own neighborhood.

Then again, this man did not look or behave like a typical man that was over 250 years old. The intelligence collected by the Black Cats plenty of highlights about Mr. Magrin and his forces.

The fleet that belonged to Cenatus Prospecting had been in its fair share of fights. In some cases, it took the initiative to attack rival fleets in order to lay claim to a profitable resource point. In other cases, it had to beat off attacks because it had advanced where it didn't belong.

All of these descriptions sounded awfully familiar to Ves. The Cenatus Prospecting fleet was much like his own expeditionary fleet, but it was even more aggressive about taking advantage of profitable opportunities.

Ves pulled up the files that described the approximate strength of the enemy forces.

The Black Cats estimated that the fleet that belonged to Cenatus Prospecting could only field around 6000 to 7000 mechs.

While that was still a respectable number, the Golden Skull Alliance could field thousands more.

Still, this disparity in numbers meant little if the Mars lost against the opposing ace mech.

It was rather frustrating to many pioneers that victory or loss at the highest level would instantly determine the outcome of a battle regardless of any other factors. What were the regular mechs and expert mechs supposed to do when much of their efforts turned out to be meaningless in the end?

In practice, it wasn't always as straightforward as that. A huge number of regular mechs could still put a lot of strain on the defenses of an isolated ace mech.

At the same time, if the ace mechs of both sides entered into a stalemate, the other mechs could still play a huge role.

This was why Ves maintained a bit of caution towards the Cenatus Prospecting fleet, but not to the point of treating it as an existential threat.

"What are the chances that Otrus Magrin will decide to mess with our fleet?" Ves asked.

"The chances are not too high, but not too low either." Calabast issued her judgment. "Ever since he and his forces have entered the Red Ocean, his fleet has exhibited patterns of behavior that... can be described as aggressive. If he thinks that another pioneer is onto something good, he will latch onto his target and follow in the hopes that he snatch any opportunities."

Ves immediately frowned. "Are you saying..."

She pointed towards the map, which currently showed a route that began on a different side of the border region before slowly meandering in the direction of the current star system.

What was curious was that the route originally led to another destination, but suddenly turned in direction fairly recently.

"I take it this is the apparent route of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet." Ves remarked.

"Correct. If you look at the timing of this course change, you will notice that it has happened shortly after the conclusion of Operation Lighthouse. We along with several other pioneering groups have defeated a major alien force and plundered a rich amount of spoils. Though we have all taken the initiative to

keep this matter confidential, it is impossible to maintain complete secrecy when so many different people were involved in the attack on the Palace of Shame."

If Otrus Magrin somehow learned about what went on in the Boryan System, then he should have definitely taken note of the participants!

Ves stopped with stroking Lucky's back. "Okay. I think I know what is going on now. This is a vulture fleet, right?"

"We presume so. This vulture just happens to have set its sights on our fleet. Vultures love to follow around forces that have already proven to be successful in their previous endeavors. Considering our short but illustrious record, we are probably treated as prime targets."

"...At least Mr. Magrin has good eyesight."

Vulture fleets were groups of ships that usually didn't have the courage to confront targets head-on. Instead, the vultures waited until their prey got into a fight or suffered an accident that caused significant damage.

That was when the vultures would swoop in and finish off their wounded and exhausted prey!

There were many times where the expeditionary fleet had suffered so much during a battle that it had fallen into a period of weakness for many days.

It was anything but simple to recover from a large-scale engagement. If a vulture struck the Golden Skull Alliance when many mechs and expert mechs were either destroyed or heavily damaged, then it was doubtful that the Larkinsons and their allies could muster more than 40 percent of their peak combat power!

In that regard, the 6000 to 7000 mechs of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet sounded a lot more threatening than before!

"We need to discourage this vulture fleet from pursuing us." Ves stated.

"That is not going to be easy, Ves. As long as we try to talk with Otrus Magrin, he will know that we are nervous about his fleet. It will be easy to deduce that we don't want his forces to be around because we are about to engage in a lucrative activity. There is not much we can do to scare him away.

Intimidations and warnings will make him more suspicious. Turning away from his fleet will be seen as a sign of weakness or submission. Ignoring him entirely will give the impression that we are scared of his interference. In fact, pretty much anything we do will give the man a reason to believe that it is worthwhile to follow us around."

"..."

#### **Chapter 4563 Vulture Fleet**

As Ves dove deeper into the details of Cenatus Prospecting and its ignomous boss, he became more wary of the other pioneering fleet that just happened to be relaxing in the same star system at the moment.

"Despite the name of the company, Cenatus hasn't done a lot of actual prospecting and mining." Ves observed. "It is impossible for this company to raise such a large fleet and build up such a large mech force by sniffing out pockets of phasewater and valuable exotics in random star systems."

Calabast smiled. "That is because Cenatus Prospecting is just a cover for Magrin's actual profit generating activities. It gives the fleet enough excuses to enter the less civilized regions of space and roam around areas other isolated pioneering fleets pass by. It is much easier for vultures to take advantage of their prey in the more remote regions of space. The area we are in right now is also quieter than the other locations in the border region."

"I see what you mean."

There were too many signs that pointed to the possibility that Cenatus Prospecting had set its sights on the Golden Skull Alliance.

This was trouble. Ves struggled to think on how the expeditionary fleet could get rid of this tail without making Mr. Magrin even more determined to follow the Golden Skullers around!

It sounded like an impossible mission. Otrus Magrin was not as young and inexperienced as Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. This was a genuine old dog whose advanced age was already a clear sign of success.

Older bastards like this were always tricky to outsmart and outmaneuver. The only way to truly beat them was to smash their assets and remove their ability to interfere in any meaningful way!

That was obviously out of the question. The Larkinsons weren't shameless enough to tolerate unprovoked attacks against other pioneering forces, especially ones that did not engage in active hostilities.

Perhaps the only way to convince his men to attack the Cenatus forces was when the latter persistently followed the Golden Skull Alliance around.

The problem was that the goal of the Larkinson Clan was incredibly close at the moment!

Ves could not predict what he and his troops would find over there. If there were powerful enemies that took a lot of effort to defeat, then the vulture might decide to pounce at the most inconvenient time!

"How would you handle this situation if you had the power to decide our course?" Ves asked his spymaster.

Calabast tapped her feet against the deck. "I wouldn't rely on my judgment alone. This is such a major problem that it is better to hold a meeting and analyze our current situation from multiple different perspectives. That said,



my personal recommendation is that we should proceed without taking any special notice of Cenatus Prospecting."

So she decided that it was best to ignore the vulture as much as possible and hope it would grow bored enough to switch to a more vulnerable prey.

"What are your arguments?" Ves demanded.

"First off, ignoring a vulture is tentatively regarded as the best general response you can make. As long as we pretend that we are doing nothing special, there shouldn't be any ways for vultures to exploit any openings."

"That means that we should avoid conflict and other specific activities as much as possible. Will that be possible while we are close to retrieving our mission objective?"

"We have already dispatched a scout ship to the 'Ramage Repulsor System' as you have decided to call it. Once the corvette has entered the destination system, she will soon give us an up-to-date picture of what can be found in the small star system. If there are no clear signs of hostile warships or mechs, we can proceed to send over the rest of our fleet. It should be fairly easy to pretend that we are just fooling around while we covertly pick up Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. We will have to defend heavily on our stealth assets to do the job."

"Which means we can't send in large amounts of troops or any of our expert mechs." Ves flatly stated.

"Correct." Calabast nodded. "You may choose to send in more forces to whatever place Lord Yorul-Tavik is hiding, but that will most certainly catch the attention of the vulture. If Mr. Magrin is somehow able to deduce that we have picked up the one and only Lord Pearian, then all hell will break loose!"

There were too many ways that a bastard like Otrus Magrin could exploit this information. From Gathering a group of like-minded pioneers to assault the

Golden Skull Alliance to selling out the news to hundreds of different forces that were trying their best to find the missing scion, there was no way that the expeditionary fleet would be left alone!

While it was best to wait and do nothing for several weeks until the Cenatus Prospecting fleet grew bored enough to move away, Ves didn't want to wait anymore.

The longer he and his forces stayed in the chaotic border region, the greater the chance of encountering other pioneering fleets that might provoke other kinds of trouble!

As much as Ves disliked it, Calabast's proposal sounded like the best way to go forward. It was not that risky and Otrus Magrin wouldn't be able to pick up any clues if the stealth operation proceeded without issue.

The expeditionary fleet could then begin to make their way out of the border region. So long as the Black Cats and the scouting vessels remained on point, the chances of bumping into trouble shouldn't be too great.

"This is a decent plan, but... too many things have to go right." Ves muttered.

Calabast nodded as she readily acknowledged this issue. "That is true, but all of our other available options aren't so good either. The next-best solution is to hinder the movements of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet. One of the ways we can do that is to sneak infiltrators aboard their ships and have them sabotage important systems such as FTL drives or propulsion systems. As long as we cripple one or two capital ships, we can force our adversaries to stay in place and guard their impaired vessels until they can be repaired."

"That sounds like a more interesting option." Ves said. "There is no way that Otrus Magrin will expose a valuable capital ship to the many threats in this region of space. Any third-party pioneering fleet that happens to see a fleet

carrier or something that is completely alone and without the ability to run away will definitely accept the free meal!"

However, this plan came with its own host of problems.

"Mr. Otrus Magrin shouldn't be a leader who is blind to this possibility." Calabast warned. "His fleet and mech forces are professional and fairly well-funded and well-staffed by many accounts, so it will not be easy to slip in saboteurs aboard their capital ships. We absolutely cannot infiltrate their flagship because it is presumably under the protection of Saint Neville Magrin, their only ace pilot."

Nothing escaped the notice of an ace pilot within the confines of his Saint Kingdom. As long as the ace pilot performed regular patrols, then he could not only ensure the safety of the flagship, but any other capital ship his ace mech swept by as well!

The existence of an opposing ace pilot also ruled out the possibility of assassinating Otrus Magrin.

Ves briefly entertained the notion of sneaking his cyborg cat onto the Cenatus flagship and directly removing the source of his current problem.

However, the chances of getting discovered were too high. At worst, his cyborg cat would get blown up by the enemy ace mech without mercy!

He sighed and looked up at Calabast. "Your first proposal is probably the best way to go forward, but I intend to hold a meeting so that we can gather more ideas."

"Suit yourself." The spymaster shrugged. "All I can say is that preventing word from leaking out should be our highest priority. Thousands of pioneering fleets have already poured into this region, and more are undoubtedly on their way to join the fun. Gaining the favor of the Yorul-Tavik Clan is just that valuable. Anyone with at least decent acumen can take advantage of this valuable

relationship to promote not just themselves, but also their power base into first-raters."

"You don't need to remind me, Calabast."

The two talked a bit more before the meeting ended.

Once Calabast made her departure, Ves sighed once again while staring around his office. It had become a bit more impressive after he added a few trophies from the latest battle.

The prosperity tree was still doing well, but that meant nothing.

"Meow." Lucky demanded Ves' attention again now that the office became quiet again.

"Are you hungry again, Lucky?"

"Meow meow."

"You just ate a lot of alien metals a while ago! Is there even space left in your tummy?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Okay, okay! Let me see what I have..."

Ves opened up a drawer and picked up a spare chunk of ore that he had on hand for situations like these.

He was just about to throw it to his cat before he suddenly developed a wicked idea.

A grin appeared on his face as he dangled the fairly precious chunk of ore in front of Lucky's green eyes.

"Meow..." The cat already began to salivate.

Just as Ves was about to toss the rocky snack to his first cat, he abruptly swung his hand the other way and popped the chunk of ore into his mouth!

"MEOW!"

Lucky jumped into the air in alarm as he saw that Ves was biting something that was decidedly not edible with his teeth!

What surprised the gem cat even more was that Ves' teeth didn't break from eating such a hard substance.

Somehow, Ves managed to break up the hard ore with the force of his jaw and the strength of his unnaturally hard teeth!

Hard crunching noises filled up the office as crumbs of rocky and metallic materials dropped onto his uniform before sliding down onto the deck.

"Meow...?"

As Ves finally steadily swallowed his exotic 'snack', Lucky looked as if he was half-convinced that he was still dreaming.

The cat even rubbed his optical sensors with his front paws in order to make sure they weren't foggy or anything!

It finally dawned on Lucky what just took place.

Ves stole his meal. The damn human not only gained the capability to eat the same 'food' as him, but also had the temerity to deprive the rightful cat from filling up the void in his tummy!

"MEOW!"

"Calm down, Lucky!"

"MEOW MEOW MEOW!"

"Oh, come on! There are still lots of snacks on this ship that you can munch on! I'll grab a pile for you later!"

"MEEEEEOOW!"

"No, I'm not about to replace you or anything. I just went through a transformation process that has enabled me to absorb metal substances so that I can use it to reinforce my body and produce ammunition for my foot."

"..."

"The point is that I don't have a high demand for metallic exotics." Ves explained to his cat. "My body doesn't have a pocket space like yours, and it can't convert all of these materials into a lot of useful upgrades either. I'm not a gem cat. You are. I'm just an evolved human that is still largely biological in nature. Is that enough?"

"Meow..."

Though Lucky obviously wasn't happy for being pranked, he accepted the explanation. The cat petulant landed on top of Ves' head and vowed to stick close until he received a rich meal as compensation for all of the emotional damages he suffered!

"Meow meow!" Lucky impatiently smacked his tail against the rear of Ves' head.

"I know, I know. Can you be a little more patient? I will go down the vault and pick up a metal from our strategic materials reserve. Will that be enough?"

"Meow!"

#### **Chapter 4564 The Unrelenting**

The meetings didn't help.

Everyone had different ideas about Cenatus Prospecting and its notorious leader, yet all of the analysis and guesswork could not bring them closer to a solid solution.

As the starships of the expeditionary fleet came closer to completing the cycling process of their FTL drives, the time to make a decision loomed behind everyone's backs.

"I don't see why we are dilly-dallying around." Patriarch Reginald Cross crossed his arms in the virtual meeting room. "Just go ahead and attack the opposing fleet! Everything I've read about Otrus Magrin makes me believe he is a cretin. There is a 99 percent chance that this guy will instruct his fleet to follow us into the next star system and hover behind our backs until he sees a chance to stab our kidneys. Rather than let the man have his way, we should destroy his fleet before he does the same to ours!"

"Unacceptable." General Verle shook his head. "We cannot recklessly engage in a confrontation against a fairly powerful fleet on our own. Our mechs and expert mechs may outnumber theirs, but the disparity in numbers is not too great. We can win, but we will incur medium to heavy damage depending on how the battle unfolds. Then there is your duel against Saint Neville Magrin. This will be another coinflip. We were fortunate enough that your previous duel against Saint Jeremiah Gauge ended in our favor, but we have no guarantee that we can win the bet once again."

"I AM NOT WEAK!" The Cross Patriarch angrily slammed his fists against the deck! "I have proven myself in one ace mech duel and I will do so again!"

His Saint Kingdom exuded so much force and dominance that a part of its influence affected the attendees despite the virtual setting!

General Verle pointedly did not look at Patriarch Reginald. Instead, he turned to the second-most powerful figure of the Cross Clan.

"Master Benedict Cortez, how would you judge a matchup between your patriarch and the ace pilot that is watching over the Cenatus Prospecting fleet?"

The shrewd mech designer had already performed the necessary calculations and guesswork in advance.

"I judge that we have a 60 percent chance of winning this mech duel. This is based on the assumption that there is a level playing field and no external interference."

Reginald turned to his own mech designer as if he had been betrayed? "60 percent? Are you serious, Benedict?! You are underestimating me and my ace mech too much! Didn't you recently complete an update on the energy transmission systems of the Mars?"

"Those are minor updates that I implemented because the Mars needed to undergo a minor overhaul after the Battle of the Boryan Belt. They do not constitute a major upgrade. That is still years away from now. While I judge that our Mars is a superior ace mech to the Unrelenting of the opposing force, Saint Neville Magrin is significantly older than you. Unlike Saint Jeremiah Gauge, the opponent that you are dismissing too lightly is a seasoned ace pilot who has had decades to grow his resonance strength and techniques."

In other words, the ace mech of the Golden Skull Alliance was stronger, but Cenatus Prospecting most definitely had the stronger ace pilot.

"I don't believe that my Mars and I will lose against Neville and his Unrelenting." Patriarch Reginald stubbornly claimed as if he could not imagine any scenario where he would lose. "Just look at those images of the Unrelenting. It's an inferior ace hybrid mech that doesn't have as much phasewater as my own machine. There is a limit to how much phasewater that Otrus Magrin can steal or swindle from foolish pioneers."

That was true more or less. Cenatus Prospecting had been fairly successful in its own right, but it had hardly achieved massive victories against hard,



resource-rich targets such as Purgatory, Pima Prime and the Palace of Shame.

Whereas the Golden Skull Alliance dared to take on greater challenges and reap greater rewards in the process, Cenatus Prospecting mainly picked on opponents that were weaker and less endowed with resources.

It was a pipedream for Otrus Magrin to harvest hundreds of kilograms of phasewater from a single operation!

That said, Cenatus Prospecting did not always go after the weakest targets. A big score like the expeditionary fleet that had obviously plundered a lot of resources from a former alien stronghold was an exceptionally juicy target at the moment!

As the argument about Patriarch Reginald's chances to win against his main opponent continued to rage, Ves quietly called up the intelligence that the Black Cats had gathered on the enemy ace pilot and ace mech.

It was difficult to get a solid estimate on Saint Neville Magrin's strength and development, but he had probably become a strong junior ace pilot.

There was a possibility that he had reached the standard of a senior ace pilot, but it was unlikely that this was the case. Cenatus Prospecting would have been a lot more aggressive in its actions if Saint Neville Magrin possessed the power to defeat junior ace pilots with little suspense.

The man's record was colorful but not particularly unique as far as ace pilots were concerned.

The powerful mech pilot excelled early on as his ambitious father, his abundant augmentations and his natural talent allowed him to stand out among other mech pilots.

His increasing strength and his continually stellar performance played an increasingly large role in enabling Otrus Magrin to succeed in his schemes!

Now, over one-and-a-half centuries later, Neville Magrin had become a powerful Saint that lent his strength to a cause that was less than honorable.

It was unimaginable for most ace pilots to lower themselves to banditry and other dishonorable acts, but the man had been raised by a scumbag all his life. Indoctrination was a powerful force and it could twist the hearts of any warrior.

Ves shook his head when he contemplated the notion of trying to persuade Saint Neville to stop aiding and abetting his father's unscrupulous ventures. Many other people had tried and failed to make this stubbornly loyal ace pilot turn to the light.

Perhaps inspired by his father, Saint Neville's fighting style largely reflected his father's philosophy.

The Cenatus Prospecting ace pilot vastly preferred to go on the offensive. He focused on employing speed and impact to deliver unrelenting offensive strikes that were meant to break his opponents before they could mount a proper defense!

According to the analysis on the ace pilot's performance in past battles, Saint Neville preferred to take the initiative and firmly grasp the rhythm of a battle or a duel. The man may not be as comfortable when put on the defensive, but he relied heavily on speed and mobility to ensure that he would never be pinned down in one location.

The Unrelenting perfectly complemented his aggressive, high-mobility combat approach.

At first glance, the ace mech appeared to be a hybrid mech, similar to the Mars. Its weapon configuration made it clear that it was also oriented towards assault.

Ves was quickly able to discern the differences in purpose and fighting approach between the two hybrid mechs.

The Mars was a more balanced hybrid mech that happened to hit an excellent sweet spot that balanced out offensive, defense and mobility. It was not weak in any of these major areas and could compete adequately against most mechs at the same level.

The Unrelenting was a more specialized and pronounced ace hybrid mech. Its armor system was not as strong and amazing as the Abasis Armor that made the Mars so resilient.

This was not a surprise as it cost a lot of phasewater to provide such an exaggerated level of damage resistance to a mech.

Instead, the Unrelenting pursued a more economical route to victory, and that was by possessing respectable offensive power while piling as much advances to its mobility as possible!

Unlike the Mars, the Unrelenting was much more geared towards short, high-impact engagements than more drawn-out slugfests where longevity was key.

Its primary weapon was its lance. This allowed the Unrelenting to fight like a lancer mech, with devastating results!

Saint Neville had a history of utilizing different expert mechs and ace mechs to pierce its lance through tough targets and utterly shattering them through overwhelming force!

The threat of this lance was too great. Ves could easily guess that not even the Mars would be able to withstand a charge attack from the Unrelenting!

If the Unrelenting was ever caught in a brawl where it had no opportunity to pull off any further charge attacks, then it switched to wielding a hammer that inflicted relatively slow but brutal impact strikes.

The ace mech was also equipped with a round shield that offered additional defensive power.

As for its ranged options, it mainly relied on its shoulder-mounted gauss cannons to pound enemy mechs and starships at range.

It also came equipped with a pair of wrist-mounted flamethrowers that allowed it to engulf close targets with damaging and destructive flames in a wide cone.

Though the Unrelenting never exposed any weapon systems that were integrated into its torso itself, that did not necessarily mean that they were absent.

Perhaps Saint Neville Magrin never encountered an opponent that was challenging enough to expose a trump card.

Although Ves found it reasonable to assume that the Unrelenting had already filled up its capacity with too many features, he still could not discount the possibility that it was equipped with hidden chest-mounted weapon systems.

Regardless, the offensive configuration of the Unrelenting made it clear that it heavily relied on physical weapons to vanquish its adversaries.

This was quite a break from the Mars which consistently relied on its ARCEUS System on to flood enemy targets with sustained energy attacks.

The weapon selection of the Unrelenting made a lot more sense when Ves examined its mobility.

Its transphasic flight system was not inferior to the Pulsvar V-1 equipped on the Mars, yet that wasn't all. Ves could spot elements onto the frame of the Unrelenting that were usually found on light mechs!

The Unrelenting's maneuverability in combat must be insane due to the addition of powerful and prominent maneuvering thrusters.

It might not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that its maneuverability came close to that of an ace light mech!

Of course, an authentic ace light skirmisher like the Jedda Sandivar was still significantly faster and more agile than the Unrelenting, but that was not important.

The Golden Skull Alliance didn't field the Jedda Sandivar. All it had was the Mars, and while it was faster than any other expert mech, its mobility was only moderately above average when compared to other ace mechs!

Ves was quite thankful that he had become a lot more exposed to different ace mechs. He was able to witness them in battle in person and collected useful data on all of these exquisite machines.

He also had the opportunity to examine their frames or at least a part of their weapon systems up close!

This granted him a much better understanding of ace mechs in general and allowed him to make an accurate assessment of the Unrelenting.

For all of its hard-hitting weapons and amazing mobility, its defense couldn't keep up with the rest of its performance.

As long as the Mars exhausted the Unrelenting's Saint Kingdom and kept striking its relatively weak armor plating with accurate strikes from the ARCEUS System, the guardian of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet should fall!

However, as Master Benedict Cortez had reminded everyone earlier, the strength and experience of Saint Neville Magrin should not be underestimated.

Ves too couldn't imagine a scenario where the Mars would be able to crush the Unrelenting in a one-sided mech duel.

He generally agreed with Master Benedict's estimate that Patriarch Reginald only had a 60 percent chance of winning against his opponent. Perhaps this figure was a little too optimistic because Saint Reginald couldn't stomach anything lower.

#### **Chapter 4565 Reinforcements From Home**

The strength of Neville Magrin and the Unrelenting was the chief reason why the Golden Skull Alliance struggled with the Cenatus Prospecting fleet.

The suspected vulture fleet was too strong to be ignored. Its threat towards the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers meant that it was impossible for the expeditionary fleet to relax.

For all of the talk and arguing during the meetings, the leaders came no close to agreeing on a single strategy.

It was clear what the Cross Clan wanted. Patriarch Reginald Cross was spoiling for another duel against an ace mech and he didn't care too much about the circumstances. Since Reginald supported a direct confrontation, that meant that the rest of his clan was also behind this extreme decision!

The Larkinson Clan preferred to ignore the Cenatus Prospecting fleet as much as possible. There was little profit to be gained from attacking a fairly powerful pioneering fleet and it was considered dishonorable to launch an unprovoked attack against another human force.

"We have already made enough enemies." General Verle argued. "The last thing we should do is turn a possible opponent into a certain enemy by antagonizing Cenatus Prospecting with our actions."

The Glory Seekers leaned towards the stance of the Larkinsons but preferred to be more proactive. They suggested that they should employ covert methods to inflict damage onto the target fleet.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin shook his head. "I am sorry General Verle, but we do not agree with your passive approach. Cenatus Prospecting and its leader are anything but honorable and innocent. Their past record is replete with impropriety. Otrus Magrin is a vile and deplorable brute with many victims to his name. Who is to say we won't be next? We must show him that we will not let him trample over us as easily as his previous targets. The best way to do this without triggering an all-out battle is to infiltrate enough ships and sabotage their FTL drives so that they will remain anchored to this location."

"That is too aggressive, marshal! There is no way we can deny our involvement in such a strike if we somehow manage to pull it off. Otrus Magrin will definitely set his sights on us and do everything in his power to retaliate."

"We only need to delay his fleet long enough for us to finish our business and depart from this border region." Marshal Ariadne calmly pointed out. "The Red Ocean may be smaller than the Milky Way, but it is still enormous. The chances of encountering Cenatus Prospecting once again is minimal."

All of this talk about sabotaging the starships of the opposing fleet sounded extremely difficult to Ves.

There was no way that Cenatus Prospecting was incompetent in terms of internal security. Otrus Magrin would have lost his forces a long time ago if they were vulnerable against infiltration and sabotage!

While it was true that Saint Neville Magrin could not possibly prevent infiltrators from sneaking aboard every possible ship in the Cenatus Prospecting fleet, Ves was sure that the defenders prepared other countermeasures to catch infiltrators before they could do much damage.

Ves turned to his spymaster.

"Director Calabast, are the Black Cats up to the task?"

The woman frowned. "No. I suspect it will not go well. In the last few years, we have invested enormously into expanding our intelligence network and bolstering our information gathering abilities. If you want to obtain the inside details of Cenatus Prospecting, then we will be able to hand over a detailed report about much of this group's dirty dealings within the week. If you want us to sabotage their starships with infiltration teams, then I cannot guarantee success. My agents will do it if the necessity is great, but they will make great sacrifices in the process."

This was less than ideal. Ves was disappointed by the lack of confidence from the Black Cats, but there was a limit to everything. It took a lot more effort to train an excellent infiltration force.

"Let us take responsibility for this operation." Marshal Ariadne Wodin said.

"Unlike your Black Cats, we have the support of an entire colonial state. The Hex Federation has provided us with new generation warp-capable stealth vessels that can deliver elite DIVA commandos onboard the target ships. You of all people should know how effective they are, Calabast."

As a former DIVA agent, Calabast most certainly knew. She had been trying to raise the Black Cats to the standards of the intelligence agency that she used to work with in the past, and she had made a lot of progress over the years.

However, it wasn't as if DIVA stood still. The need for intelligence services only grew over time.

The Hexers were surrounded by many different colonial states and pioneering forces now that they had relocated to the Magair Middle Zone. It was essential



for them to develop a good understanding of all of their neighbors and ensure that none of them would have any reason to gang up on the Hex Federation!

If there was one lesson the Hexers had learned from the disastrous Komodo War, it was that relying too much on brute force could be counterproductive. Finesse could be just as effective.

If a goal could be achieved by employing a scalpel rather than a rocket launcher, then it was best to use the former!

Several people glanced curiously at the Glory Seeker delegation.

Ves couldn't help but ask for clarification.

"I think I vaguely read a report about the new corvettes and frigates that has joined your fleet as of late, but are they truly up to the task?"

The marshal maintained her confident expression. "Those vessels are developed by the state institutions of the Hex Federation. They have incorporated the latest stealth systems developed by our state and are also equipped with warp drives that allow them to reach their targets sooner and quickly escape enemy pursuit if detected."

These new stealth vessels were purpose built for ambushes, infiltration and other forms of skullduggery.

In a show of goodwill, Marshal Ariadne Wodin shared a few more details about the expanded stealth strike capabilities of the Glory Seekers.

"It is no secret that we Glory Seekers have not done a good job at keeping up as our Golden Skull Alliance has continued to grow stronger and more significant." The Hexer leader frankly admitted. "Part of that is because the Wodin Dynasty and by extension the Hex Federation badly needs more carrier vessels and high-ranking mechs to stabilize the situation at their new homes."

Everyone else nodded. It was pretty much inevitable that the Larkinsons and the Crossers had both grown increasingly dissatisfied with the weakest link in their alliance.

Marshal Ariadne gave them a brittle smile. "That is why we have recently decided to bolster our stealth and infiltration capabilities. It is one of the areas that our state is good at and it is not too costly to divert a few assets in our way. I am proud to say that our DIVA detachment is ready and eager to prove its lethal capabilities in this mission."

Ves quickly read through the electronic documents that Marshal Ariadne sent in his direction. This was a remarkable sign of trust, but then again he was the 'son' of the Superior Mother so it was not as if she was leaking any information to outsiders.

From what little he could figure out from studying the data sheets of the DIVA stealth vessels, their stealth systems were certainly up to standard.

His considerable expertise in stealth and clothing systems told him that these vessels were so good at their jobs that they could even fool the sensors of the ships of the Larkinson Navy!

Of course, that was assuming that the Blinding Banshee did not engage in active scanning where she swept the entire surrounding space with powerful sweeps!

Nonetheless, a spy and surveillance ship like the Blinding Banshee was an uncommon sight in many fleets. Many pioneers preferred to invest their energies into acquiring another fleet carrier rather than a highly specialized capital ship that was not able to contribute much in any open battles.

According to multiple intelligence sources, the Cenatus Prospecting fleet actually possessed multiple starships that possessed powerful scanning capabilities.

However, they were mostly civilian-grade vessels that were mainly geared towards detecting phasewater and determining the mineral composition of asteroids and larger satellites.

They could be used to make life harder for stealth vessels, but they weren't specialized at the job!

As long as those newfangled DIVA stealth vessels stayed far away from those mineral prospecting ships, they should be able to remain unnoticed.

Ves looked at Calabast. The woman's expression had grown a little more ambiguous ever since Marshal Ariadne brought up the DIVA detachment.

Calabast eventually locked eyes with Ves before subtly nodding her head.

She essentially backed up the marshal's claims and expressed her belief that the DIVA operatives had a good chance of completing the mission without any major complications.

That was a significant vote of confidence.

Ves raised his hand, causing the ongoing discussion to fade.

"I really don't want us to deal with the vulture fleet." He stated to everyone. "I feel there are many ways for us to avoid open conflict with Cenatus Prospecting. However, trying to ignore them will only cause us to play into Otrus Magrin's hands. Keeping our heads down and allowing this fellow to act with impunity will only increase our risks over time. The moment we suffer any setback, the vultures will strike and finish us off. That is too great of a threat for us to ignore. The main reason why I didn't want us to be more proactive was because I thought that our other options were too risky."

He turned to the Glory Seekers. "It is a different story if DIVA can live up to its reputation. If your stealth ships and DIVA operatives are as good as you

claim, then I am willing to give them a chance to resolve this problem with as little cost as possible."

The Glory Seekers all smiled. This was a chance for them to prove their worth in the Golden Skull Alliance!

Not everyone approved of this proposed sabotage action, though.

"All of this sneaking around is too convoluted." Patriarch Reginald complained. "Even if it succeeds, Otrus Magrin will know that we are responsible and will do his best to bite us back. Cenatus Prospecting doesn't even need to bring all of its ships in order to hinder us. There is only one threat that we must take seriously!"

"Saint Neville Magrin must always remain with the main fleet in order to protect his father and the many spacefaring assets." General Verle retorted. "In order to keep the ace pilot in place, it is much easier to target the weaker elements of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet as opposed to its strongest asset."

"And what if you are wrong?" Patriarch shot back. "What if Otrus Magrin is vindictive enough to take a risk and command our son to pursue our fleet? He only needs to dispatch a single combat carrier to allow the Unrelenting to attack us from a distance. Don't forget that the enemy ace mech is faster than any other mech in our possession. If Saint Neville is dishonorable enough, then he will be able to use his Unrelenting to harass our fleet from a distance and run away before my Mars ever gets close. Rather than let us happen, we should move to their fleet and force a duel in a situation where the Unrelenting cannot afford to move away! We can either do it in this star system or the next one. Preferably the next one as that will basically confirm that Otrus Magrin is up to no good."

Patriarch Reginald's argument was surprisingly sound, so much so that Ves actually struggled to choose between the two proposals.

Should the Golden Skull Alliance resort to sabotage or should it put its faith behind its ace pilot once again?

#### **Chapter 4566 Distant Nanny**

Though the proposals presented by Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross both sounded good, Ves ultimately sided with the one that came with the least cost.

Risking the lives of a bunch of sneaky women was much less serious to the Golden Skull Alliance than playing with the life of its only ace pilot!

As brutal as it sounded, the DIVA stealth vessels and commandos were expendable. They belonged to the Hex Federation to begin with so Ves had no emotional attachment to their survival.

The overall strength and survival chances of the Golden Skull Alliance also wouldn't drop that much if the DIVA assets suffered a complete defeat.

In contrast, Patriarch Reginald Cross played an indispensable role in the success and safety of the Golden Skull Alliance.

The man's sheer strength and ability to defeat opponents of a much greater caliber than normal conveyed a lot of advantages, both on and off the battlefield.

His effect in battle was obvious, but he also improved the status and negotiating positions of the Cross Clan as well as the Glory Seekers and the Larkinson Clan.

Each of them were able to do business with larger trading partners and receive better treatment than if they weren't covered by an ace pilot!

Aside from all of that, once Patriarch Reginald died or became unable to fight as well as before, the expeditionary fleet would lose a powerful source of deterrence!

This was bad news in ordinary times but it was especially inconvenient when the expeditionary fleet was stuck in the middle of a chaotic, conflict-ridden border region!

As such, the Glory Seekers or more precisely the Hexers finally gained an opportunity to prove their value to the alliance.

"You won't regret this decision." Marshal Ariadne Wodin stated.

It actually felt nice to rely on others to complete an important job. Although Calabast and the Larkinsons offered their assistance to the upcoming sabotage operation, the Glory Seekers politely declined the offer.

"We can complete the job ourselves. More importantly, DIVA must do this without your help, or else this test of our capabilities will become invalid."

The marshal made a good point. Ves had little to say to that. Though his clan possessed a couple of unique technologies that might give DIVA an edge, they probably wouldn't be able to play that big of a role. The Hexer intelligence agency was more than competent and experienced enough to prepare its own solutions for the many challenges ahead.

When Ves met with Calabast an hour later, she expressed the same confidence.

"If the matriarchs of the Hex Federation had any sense, then they wouldn't send run-of-the-mill DIVA units to our fleet." The spymaster said. "It is highly likely that we got the cream of the crop. DIVA has sent its very best to us because we are that important to the future of the Hex Federation. If we fall, it will inflict a heavy blow to the ambitions of the Hexers who have fled to the Red Ocean. The trauma of losing the Komodo War still weighs heavily on them. A second catastrophe will most definitely demoralize them while also emboldening the Friday Colonies."

That sounded logical. The Hexers did not help the Golden Skull Alliance out of the goodness of their hearts. Not entirely, at least. Sending over its crack DIVA troops advanced multiple objectives.

In any case, DIVA was still a large intelligence organization even after the Komodo War. The Hexers could train plenty of replacement agents to make up for the shortfall.

"How long has it been since you were last up to date with DIVA's internal situation?" Ves curiously asked.

"You should already know the answer to that question. I joined you when you were still a silly Apprentice." Calabast smiled wistfully as if she was recalling the good old days. "Once I cut ties to my old life, I officially had nothing to do with DIVA anymore."

That last part sounded a bit suspicious.

"What about unofficially?"

Her smile turned into a smirk. "I may have conversed with a few of my old colleagues from time to time. It's not as significant as it sounds."

"So what have you learned about your former employer? Did you learn anything juicy?"

"Not as such. DIVA has become relatively more important to the Hexers now. This is not just due to the greater need for intelligence services in a new and more dynamic environment. The biggest impetus behind this wave of expansion is the realization that acting without proper intelligence is one of the reasons why the Hexers badly lost the Komodo War."

Ves laughed in front of her face. "A random person off the street could have told you that!"

"I'm being serious here! There is no shortage of Hexers who respect DIVA, but too many of our military leaders overestimated the strength of the Hex Army and underestimated the capabilities of the Fridaymen. The biggest failure was the complete inability to predict the magnitude of foreign assistance that the Friday Coalition was able to obtain."

That sounded like a huge oversight, but that sounded typical of the Hexers.

"Well at least you Hexers have opened up your eyes and possess enough humility to recognize your shortcomings."

Calabast patted her hand at Ves in frustration. "Oh, shut up, Ves. Don't lump me in with the people that I have left behind. The surviving Hexers may have improved a lot as of late, but it is not that easy for them to change their fundamental nature. I would much rather stick to my identity as a Larkinson. At least you and your clan are a lot more sensible."

"Do you truly believe what you have just said?"

"I do. Sure, you occasionally make decisions that seem foolish at first, but as long as you keep winning, they will seem great in hindsight. That is the difference between the Larkinsons and the Hexers. The former are winners while the latter are losers."

"Is it that simple?"

"Well, it helps a lot that I am in a key leadership position within your clan." The former Hexer clarified. "If you or any of your Larkinsons do anything that is exceptionally stupid, I will at least be in a position to stop anything catastrophic from happening. I consider that to be one of my current responsibilities. Someone has to be around to keep you in check, and in the absence of a strong counterweight within your own organization, it is up to me to prevent you from throwing away your clan and everything that you have built."



That sounded rather strange to Ves. "I don't recall any moments you did what you have just said."

Calabast huffed. "I don't need to spell everything out to you. There are subtler methods available. If I can change your mind without letting you know my true agenda, why shouldn't I resort to this option?"

"Have you been manipulating me all this time!?"

"Oh, don't sound so angry, Ves. You knew exactly what you were getting by accepting me as part of your team. Information is power. By curating the intelligence that I have prepared for you, I can effectively influence the decisions that you make. I don't even have to twist the facts most of the time. I just have to present the information in a specific way to nudge you in a specific direction of my choosing. It is even better if I can offer my biased opinion whenever you ask for advice."

Though Ves was at least a bit aware that this had taken place all of this time, he still felt upset when Calabast explained it all without any ambiguity.

It sounded so... manipulative to him. It was as if Calabast prioritized her own agenda over his own interests.

"You know I like honesty, right? How can I trust you when you continue to pull off this crap?"

"Oh, grow up. Everyone around you does this. From Minister Shederin to your chief ministers, each of them are selfish enough to adopt deliberate strategies to manipulate and influence your decision-making. It won't ever stop, so the best way for you to handle this situation is to get better at recognizing that you are being manipulated. Don't worry. If someone truly goes too far in their attempts, I will be sure to step in and prevent you from making a mistake that you will regret."

"Uh huh. Where were you when Gloriana inserted herself into my life?"

"That wasn't a mistake." Calabast claimed with an utterly serious tone and expression.

Ves was tired of talking about himself. He wanted to learn more about Calabast for a change. He hadn't really checked up on her personal life as he was constantly busy with work and other affairs all of the time.

"So what has been going on in your life lately? How are Cassie and Cleo doing?"

Calabast clearly recognized that he was trying to divert from the current topic, and allowed it to happen.

"Nothing much. I love my little girls. They truly help me keep myself sane after everything I have to deal with on a typical day. I wish I could spend more time with them, but my obligations to our clan are more important than my desire to be a mother. I make sure that they are well taken care of. That is one of the aspects that I like about your clan. There is a lot of support for young and growing families."

Ves smiled. "I'm a parent as well, so I made sure that people like us can devote ourselves freely to work."

"The Larkinson Clan is more special than you think. It's not just the plentiful daycare facilities and the cooperatives where elderly and retired Larkinsons volunteer to supervise our children. The biggest and most important factor that is sustaining our families is the Golden Cat."

Ves blinked at this mention. "Goldie is quite helpful in binding so many former strangers together, but what do you mean, exactly?"

"Goldie is... great for children." Calabast said as she looked away and leaned against a nearby bulkhead. "When you 'made' her, you probably only accounted for her influence on the members of the clan who are already adults. However, she is connected to every Larkinson, including the ones that

are growing up inside the bellies of pregnant mothers. I should know. I asked her myself one day."

"I... never thought about that. I probably should have. What have you figured out, then? What effect does Goldie have on infants and children?"

"You should probably know better than me, seeing that this is one of your specialties and all." Calabast shrugged. "From my perspective, there is a subtle but profound difference between the children of the Larkinson Clan and other kids. It is... difficult to describe, and it is also a challenge to ascribe the positive changes to Goldie alone. I have not been able to conduct a formal scientific study. I merely have my guesses."

"And what is your biggest guess?"

"Our children are happier, healthier and will have better opportunities when they grow up. I don't know how, but I think the Golden Cat is actively affecting them in various ways, from influencing their opinions to showering them with love when they need it the most. She is like a distant but ever-present nanny to us all. I certainly have to worry less about the wellbeing of my own daughters because I always know in the back of my mind that Goldie will not let anything grievous happen to them. That doesn't stop me from being paranoid and making precautions, but that is more out of habit."

Ves frowned for a moment. He never intended for Goldie to play such an outsized role in the early development and growth of the children of his clan.

He questioned whether it was even desirable for her to play such a role. He feared that many children would become dependent on her help. That would be bad because the next generation of clansmen would need a lot more handholding than their parents!

## Chapter 4567 Genetically Predisposed

The DIVA detachment quietly went into action. Since the operation had to proceed with the greatest possible secrecy, the Glory Seekers tried their best to obscure the departure of the stealth vessels.

This was quite easy to do as the ships were small and unassuming to begin with. It was easy to lose track of them once they entered an asteroid belt or swung behind a planet.

The Larkinsons in the know wouldn't have even noticed the departures if they hadn't specifically tuned their sensor systems to catch the specific emissions that denoted their passage.

It would take a few days before the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance learned of the results of this risky sabotage operation.

That was an agonizingly long wait for Ves. Hexers or not, the DIVA commandos that chose to do their duty without hesitation were all risking their lives on behalf of a cause that they might not be personally invested in. He hadn't even met any of them in person as there wasn't enough time to waste on any pleasantries.

Would these highly trained DIVA agents put the completion of their dangerous missions above their own survival?

From everything he had heard about them, this sounded likely. That made Ves feel even more ambivalent.

As he looked down towards the deck of his grand stateroom, Marvaine was in the middle of presenting his new Mekanos to Andraste.

"Look look look! I'm a Mekanos designer now! Aren't these mechs cool, sister?"

The slightly older red-headed girl looked skeptical as she held a toy swordsman mech.

"...It looks lame."

"Oh, come on, sis!"

"Ketis' mechs are much more awesome." Andraste unsparingly said to her brother. "Even her simpler mechs are great. Do you know why? She actually knows how to fight with a sword, unlike you. While I have only started to learn swordsmanship myself, I can already tell you that a swordsman mech as top-heavy as this will easily get beaten. Those skinny legs don't have the strength to support the maneuvering needed to make this mech good."

"That's not true!" Marvaine protested!

"Oh, you think I'm wrong, do you? Why don't you let it fight? Let me go to my room so I can grab another toy that will smash your stupid mech!"

Ves smiled in amusement at his children. He was pleasantly surprised that Andraste already figured out a couple of the basic principles of melee mechs.

He didn't particularly blame Marvaine that he had made a lot of fundamental design errors with his swordsman Mekanos. He was still a little boy, after all. How would he be able to know any better?

Ves and Gloriana could easily set him right by teaching him, but they had both decided to be more sparing in their guidance.

Both of them understood that the best mech designers tended to be ones that learned how to solve their own problems. Lessons were useful but they would do more harm than good if the student became too dependent on a higher authority to resolve a problem.

The two parents knew from personal experience that making mistakes were much more effective teaching moments than being told what was wrong.

Of course, in order for Marvaine to be able to recognize his mistakes and find a way to do better, he occasionally needed a bit of guidance to set him on a

better path. That was what Ves and Gloriana were waiting for. No mech designer had to do everything by themselves.

"Papa?" Another young voice called.

"Yes, my sweet little pumpkin?"

Aurelia looked as lovely as ever. Upon the instigation of her mother, she had taken to wearing slightly formal dresses that allowed her to get used to carrying herself around with dignity.

It just made her look cuter as she was still too young and short to be taken seriously by adults.

Right now, Aurelia was sitting next to him on the couch. Clixie leisurely rested on her lap and allowed the little girl to brush her fur with a comb.

"Miaow~"

"Why are you so sad?" She asked as she looked up at him with her expressive gray eyes.

Her pupils almost seemed to glow due to her notably strong spirituality. Ves already noticed that weaker people tended to get affected by her stare in different measures. It was as if their subconscious minds already noticed that she had already risen above the confines of ordinary humans.

"I'm not exactly sad. I'm worried about the success of the upcoming operation. I don't want the people responsible for sabotaging the fleet that belongs to Cenatus Prospecting to encounter a mishap."

"DIVA is doing its job, right? Mother said that DIVA agents are like soldiers. They fight to make our lives better."

Normally, a kid like Aurelia shouldn't have the right to learn about a confidential operation. Only the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance along with

the Glory Seekers that were directly involved in the attempted sabotage attempts knew of its existence.

Aurelia was different, though. She was not only growing smarter and more knowledgeable at an impressive rate, but also developed a greater interest in assuming responsibility over the clan one day.

Her designer baby genes along with Gloriana's persistent expectations continually encouraged her to develop an interest in leadership. She showed no signs of rebelling against all of those influences. She never said anything about wanting to become a mech designer or an artist or anything.

Those designer baby genes were too effective. When Witshaw & Seneca developed their products, they tried their best to give the designer babies derived from them a disposition to make good use of their artificial advantages.

There were many subtle methods to ensure that designer babies embraced the professions that they were born to embrace, from injecting dopamine into their brains whenever they engaged in related activities to giving them an instinctual rejection towards radically different jobs.

It reminded Ves too much of the caste system of the orven race. They had divided their species into multiple subspecies that were divided by birth, ability as well as genes.

Their best leaders were literally born to lead while their soldiers were pretty much engineered for combat.

It was extremely hard for orven subjects to rise above their castes or pursue jobs that they were genetically not predisposed to perform.

Was this the future of humanity? Would children like Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine have their futures decided from birth without ever giving them a fair opportunity to determine their own path in life?

Ves felt a little guilty for giving in to the many temptations of designer babies. He significantly underestimated how extensively their genes manipulated them into pursuing a specific life trajectory.

He should have advocated harder to give his three kids a more open-ended designer baby package so that they would be able to have a real choice.

At least none of them seemed unhappy with the courses that their parents had set for them. That made this perverse situation a lot easier for him to stomach.

It may already be too late for his current batch of children, but he resolved to do better for his next batch of offspring.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute had already set up a fully fledged Human Genetics Division. Ves had allocated a lot of money into it after obtaining a 'starter pack' on how to formulate designer baby genes from the Gemini Family.

It would probably take years for the geneticists and other specialists to learn all of the specialized knowledge and verify all of the basic designer baby templates that they had received.

The biotech experts also needed a lot of time to identify useful genes and integrate them into the designer babies that would eventually become a new and universal standard throughout the Larkinson Clan!

As Ves thought about how he could use his own newfound expertise to help the Human Genetics Division develop designer babies that were different and possibly superior to the products of Witshaw & Yeneca, he did not forget about his daughter's inquiry.

"Treating soldiers as if they are disposable tools is not... right." Ves gently replied as he placed his hand on her back. "They are people just like you and I. They may have chosen or been encouraged to serve in a dangerous occupation, but that does not mean we should make use of them so easily."



"I don't understand..." Aurelia said. "They are similar to mech pilots, right? Many people want to become mech pilots even if it is dangerous. They won't complain about being sent into battle. The Larkinson Army has lots of soldiers who eagerly want to fight for the clan."

"That is because their leaders such as General Verle do their best to make it worthwhile for them to risk their lives."

"How?"

Ves smirked. "There are many ways. We never take our troops for granted. In order to increase their willingness to fight, we indoctrinate them into the importance of fighting for the survival and the future prosperity of the clan. We incentivize them by paying them rich salaries and pairing them up with fantastic mechs. We pick our battles carefully so that they will never have sufficient cause to refuse their missions. Finally, we try our best to make sure that they will feel as little guilt or remorse for the battles they fought, although we have not always succeeded in that. That is how critics like Venerable Jannzi come into being."

All of this sounded a bit too expensive for Aurelia, but that was not a big problem. She would receive lots of lessons about leadership in the future where she could learn all of these methods herself.

"Are the DIVA agents the same?" The adorable little girl asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, pumpkin. They're not my subordinates. I imagine that the Hex Federation treats them rather well, though. Each operative is expensive to train and replace, and this applies especially to the elite commandos that have become attached to the Glory Seekers. Their superiors have a vested interest in making them last as long as possible. Still, professions like these are inherently dangerous. I am already taking into account the possibility that not all of the DIVA agents will return alive."

"Isn't that a part of their jobs?"

Ves grimaced. "That is correct, but that doesn't entirely make it right. You see, we could have prevented this from happening in the first place if we decided not to pursue a specific objective. The main reason why I want our fleet to find the missing scion of the Yorul-Tavik Clan is because of your little brother."

"My... brother?"

"Yes. Sure, there are other benefits to making the Yorul-Taviks happy, but right now my main motive is to become friends with these first-raters."

"Why is that important?"

"Because the Yorul-Taviks can help Marvaine get into a good first-class virtual school." Ves explained. "Do you know what this means? It means that your younger brother has an opportunity to become an elite and powerful first-class mech designer. He would be able to design machines that are much stronger than the ones I have made!"

Aurelia looked impressed. She had frequently heard about how the first-raters were much more powerful. She also knew that her parents worked hard to uplift everyone to this level.

It didn't take long for her to figure out the implications of this motivation.

"I think it is good that DIVA is risking their lives for us." She said in her young but eloquent voice. "By removing a potential hindrance to our goals, we can complete our objective and obtain the gratitude of the Yorul-Tavik Clan. This will allow Marvaine to study in first-class schools and become a first-rater ahead of everyone else. Once my brother has graduated from his studies and established a footing in a first-class society, he can open a channel for the rest of us. Once our clan has become a first-class pioneering organization, we can provide greater assistance and cover to the Hex Federation. Ultimately,

this is what the DIVA operatives are risking their lives for. They are serving their people, much like how our mech pilots are serving our clansmen."

"..."

"What's wrong, papa?"

"Oh. Forgive me. You were just so cute just now!"

#### **Chapter 4568 Linaresa Warden**

Linaresa Warden carefully stalked the passageways of a commercial combat carrier. Her invisible form closely followed a specific crew member that she had sought out beforehand.

It was much more difficult for the infiltrator to enter the more sensitive areas of the ship by herself.

DIVA originally targeted the less important vessels that were inherently more vulnerable and located away from the core vessels of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet.

Elite infiltrators such as Linaresa secretly drifted through open space and managed to land onto their targets before sneaking inside through a combination of trickery and advanced technological gadgets.

Getting inside one of these ships had been a considerable challenge to all of the elite Hexers involved in this sabotage operation.

The chances that any of them would get detected on approach was low, but the consequences of exposing the existence of just one of them could threaten them all. If Cenatus Prospecting realized that its fleet was under attack by hidden elements, its personnel would be able to sweep the other DIVA agents!

People like Linaresa Warden were therefore shouldering multiple burdens.

They needed to do their best to sneak as impeccably as possible in order to keep their presence a secret from the oblivious Cenatus employees.

They also had to put their trust in their fellow DIVA operatives to maintain their own cover at the same time.

It was fortunate that Linaresa Warden did not harbor any doubts. She had absolute faith in her skills and the skills of her colleagues.

Some of the DIVA agents had even prayed to the Superior Mother in the hopes of getting her blessing, but Linaresa saw no desire to follow suit.

She needed no blessing to pull off her mission. She was already capable enough to succeed by herself.

Her invisible and undetectable form continued to stalk through the corridors of the rather boring and average combat carrier.

Despite the lack of sophistication of the combat carrier, the owners and crew had done their best to bolster the internal security of the ship over the years.

They installed additional sensor systems that could detect all kinds of suspicious signs. Strange occurrences such as displaced air, gravitic activity, a minute elevation of heat and more could all give away the presence of an intruder that didn't belong.

If these constantly active detection measures weren't enough, there were also the security checkpoints that controlled the passage to important compartments such as the engineering bay or the data vault.

These security checkpoints forced everyone and everything to pass through high-powered scanning gates.

While all of these security measures sounded incredibly troublesome to circumvent, the DIVA agents that had snuck aboard the various combat

carriers of Cenatus Prospecting did not worry too much about these challenges.

No system was perfect. There were many developers who constantly tried to come up with better ways to spot intruders, but there were also a lot of developers who tried to defeat these efforts!

The Hex Federation had inherited a lot of industries and know-how from the old Hexadric Hegemony. It had never given up on researching methods to defeat all of the common detection methods and always equipped its best DIVA agents with their latest advancements.

Once upon a time, An agent known as Calabast snuck around while wearing an infiltrator suit that was capable of circumventing many detection methods.

Nowadays, it was up to Linaresa to carry the torch. She trusted in the technology developed by her fellow Hexers to automatically exploit the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of the detection methods employed by Cenatus Prospecting.

It was not as difficult as it sounded.

The Hexers mainly developed their infiltration tech to defeat the advanced detection methods of powerful states like the Friday Coalition.

As powerful as Otrus Magrin may be, he was only a single private individual. He may have amassed a sizable vulture fleet as well as various organizations that were able to provide him with more legitimate sources of income, but all of this could never equal the efforts of an entire state!

Therefore, Linaresa slowly snuck her way through many corridors and compartments. She made sure to employ techniques and take precautions that increased her chances of remaining undetected.

Even if her advanced infiltrator suit already took care of most of her problems, it never hurt to minimize her chances of detection even further.

She eventually reached a point where she could go no further. While her infiltrator suit was powerful enough to circumvent most detection methods, it wasn't quite up to the task of defeating the more powerful and expensive scanning gates that guarded the entrances to the engineering bay!

Of the handful of DIVA infiltrators that had quietly snuck aboard this particular combat carrier, she assumed the most important responsibility.

Her objective was to render the vessel's FTL drive inoperable.

The ship system was so critical to the functioning of the combat carrier that only a select few drive engineers received permission to approach this massive device.

Cenatus Prospecting had also installed an enhanced security suite around the FTL drive that was much more difficult for her infiltrator suit to defeat.

Linaresa could not justify the risk of sneaking up on the FTL drive with the help of her infiltrator suit, so she did not make the attempt.

She instead executed a different plan that DIVA had prepared.

Her invisible form quietly moved away from the security checkpoint and moved to a quiet and fairly private maintenance compartment.

She removed a few devices from her suit and planted them around the space in order to ensure that any active monitoring systems would loop fabricated sensor data.

She waited 13 minutes until the hatch quietly slid open. A female crew member wearing the uniform of an engineer in the service of Cenatus Prospecting entered the compartment.

Once the hatch slid shut, the woman tried to maintain as calm as possible as she scanned the space with her handheld scanning device.

"You won't be able to detect me with that gadget." Linarosa said as she spoke while remaining undetected.

The engineer almost released a cry!

"Where are you? Are you the person that I was expected to meet?"

"You have come to the right place, Miss Elster. I do not need to expose myself to you, but rest assured that you are in the right place. Let us show our codes before we proceed."

Both women pulled out small cards that were printed with a bunch of symbols. This allowed them to verify that the other person was part of the plan.

The drive engineer hardly calmed down. What she had embarked upon constituted a naked betrayal against her employer. Otrus Magrin had never been merciful to the people who plotted behind his back!

Linaresa Warden did not ask the engineer why she decided to betray her employer and lend her assistance to this operation. Another department of DIVA had been responsible for turning this woman into a collaborator.

All the DIVA operative needed to do was take advantage of this situation to sneak up to the FTL drive.

It would have been ideal if the drive engineer used her existing access rights to sabotage the FTL drive herself, but she was unwilling to risk her life.

She wasn't willing to let herself get used by DIVA!

As such, her first question was related to her safety rather than the planned act of sabotage.

"Can you get me out of this ship?" She hissed.

"You can make your way out as long as you follow the instructions that we have passed to you." Linaresa replied as she opened up a pack mounted on her back.

The DIVA agent pulled out a thin and folded infiltrator suit to the drive engineer. "This should allow you to jump into space and remain unnoticed by the detection systems of this fleet. Just keep drifting away and one of our stealth vessels will quietly scoop you into its hold."

The drive engineer accepted the suit and handed over a data chip. "This contains the information that I have promised to provide."

"This isn't all I need from you. Are you prepared to let me borrow your identity?"

"...Let's get this over with, please."

The engineer reluctantly sat down and allowed the DIVA agent to place a strange device onto her head.

"This will make you feel uncomfortable for two to four minutes. Please bear with the sensations. The lower your resistance, the faster the process will complete."

The head device soon became active, causing the engineer to clench her teeth in an effort to suppress her screams.

Soon enough, the torture came to an end. Linaresa picked up the head device and slotted it back onto her head through a special mount built into her infiltrator suit.

"That should be all." She spoke to the recovering drive engineer. "I suggest you take 5 to 8 minutes to recover before exiting this compartment. Please follow the plan that we have devised for you and make your way out of this ship no later than 78 minutes from this moment. We will try our best to adapt



to any unexpected deviations from the plan, but we will not guarantee your retrieval if you are too late or triggered an alarm."

"I understand. Just get me out and we won't have a problem."

Shortly after the female drive engineer donned the infiltrator suit left the compartment under stealth, a copy of the woman nonchalantly exited the compartment while holding a plain-looking toolbox.

Linaresa still wore her infiltrator suit, but it had morphed to show a close copy of the engineer's body and work uniform.

The imitation was scarily accurate, and Linaresa was able to mimic the drive engineer's movements, tics and other behavioral characteristics to an exceptional degree with the help of the data chip that she had received.

Her training allowed her to completely assume the identity of the collaborator to the point where only her closest friends and colleagues might vaguely detect anything amiss.

When the disguised DIVA agent walked up to the security checkpoint, she remained calm as if this was just another necessary routine in her life.

The bored and inattentive security guards who manned the checkpoint did not have any reason to suspect anything amiss, but they went through the motions anyway because their superiors would punish them if they skipped any of the steps.

The DIVA agent put her full trust in her disguise and successfully managed to get through the checkpoints.

Not even the dreaded scanning gate detected anything out of the ordinary!

"Are you going to catch the game tonight, Johnny?" The disguised DIVA operate asked in a tone that conveyed just the right amount of informality and familiarity.

The security guard on the right snorted. "I am not a masochist, unlike you. I don't want to see the Redram Fanatics get humiliated by the Sikka Boys. Ever since the team replaced one of its star marksmen with an old has-been, it has lost all of its synergy. Call me when it is the turn of the Mad Lads to show what they are made of. At least they have the sense to contract the best mech athlete of last season's Fanatics team."

Linaresa finally entered the engineering bay.

She did not head straight towards the guarded enclosure where the FTL drive was resting.

Instead, she made the rounds and stood behind a work station while performing highly technical work as if she was a true professional.

It was only when she managed to confirm that she had drawn no special attention and that the security measures around the FTL drive remained unchanged that she executed the most crucial step of her plan.

She approached the FTL drive while greeting and talking shop with her 'fellow' naval engineers and pretended to inspect the device.

"Has it just completed its cycling process?" She asked one of 'her' seniors.

"It did. We managed to reach a new record. We managed to shorten it by another two seconds."

"That is still within the margin of error." Linarosa said in a distinctly unimpressed tone. "Let us wait until we have managed to shorten the cycling time by 5 seconds before we celebrate."

As the two continued to talk, Linarosa gained many opportunities to mess with the FTL drive. She did not act with haste but continued to maintain her act until she recognized an excellent window of opportunity.

None of the nearby crew noticed anything amiss.

Less than hour later, a bomb detonated inside the FTL drive, destroying crucial coils and several other parts that were notoriously difficult to repair and calibrate!

"WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!"

"SECURE THE ENGINEERING BAY!"

"ALERT OUR FLAGSHIP!"

As alarms erupted throughout this combat carrier as well as numerous other starships, Linarosa's invisible form quietly drifted away from the disarrayed fleet.

A stealth shuttle eventually scooped her up, allowing her to relax and disengage her active stealth before she completely drained the energy supply of her suit.

A DIVA officer walked up to the elite operative. "Welcome back, Agent Warden. Any complications?"

"Negative."

"Good work."

"Status of other missions?"

"All successful. Few complications. None compromised."

"As expected."

"As expected."

### **Chapter 4569 The Power Of State Support**

As the fleet of Cenatus Prospecting became beset by explosions and other nasty incidents, the Golden Skull Alliance remained as calm as always.

The expeditionary fleet's starships had cycled their FTL drives by now and were prepared to transition into FTL travel at any moment.

While the timing of their departure made it impossible for the main fleet to retrieve the DIVA stealth vessels, they could take care of themselves.

In fact, it was better to maintain a separation between the expeditionary fleet and the culprits responsible for sabotaging so many carrier vessels!

It wasn't until the expeditionary fleet initiated the journey to its target destination that Ves tried to relax as best possible while discussing the results with Calabast and General Verle.

"Can you repeat that?" He asked as he looked at Calabast's projection in disbelief.

"DIVA has managed to cripple 9 different combat carriers with a capacity of 60 mechs. Its infiltrators have managed to knock out the FTL drive, the workshop or machine shop, a number of life support systems as well as at least one power reactor on every combat carrier. The damage is extensive enough to render the vessels inoperable for several days to two weeks. The exact speed depends on whether Cenatus Prospecting has stockpiled spare FTL drives."

The temporary crippling of the combat carriers was not that big of a deal in the greater scheme of things.

Certainly, the loss of 9 combat carriers meant that the Cenatus Prospecting fleet would have to leave behind carriers with a combined capacity of 540 mechs if it tried to follow the Golden Skullers.

However, there were ways to mitigate this loss. If Otrus Magrin was determined to pursue the departing expeditionary fleet, he could order his subordinates to transport as many mechs to the cargo holds of starships with any available space.

Given that it had been a while since Cenatus Prospect had a big score, there was plenty of available cargo space. This was especially considering that Magrin was most certainly preparing to take advantage of another victim. How

would he be able to harvest enough valuables if his starships weren't able to take on any significant cargo?

This was why the temporary loss of 9 combat carriers was not entirely sufficient.

DIVA had taken this into account and implemented an extra measure that would definitely ensure that Magrin's fleet would remain locked in the current star system!

"My Black Cats have independently managed to confirm that one of their fleet carriers, the Roaring Berann, has suffered damage to both of her FTL drives. While the DIVA operatives have only managed to inflict light damage onto the drives due to their greater size and redundancy, it will still take at least a week to repair the battle damage and verify whether the fleet carrier can safely engage in FTL travel again."

There was no way that any pioneering group would abandon an entire fleet carrier. Leaving her alone with only 9 combat carriers to keep her company was just asking for the next pioneering fleet to drop into the star system to take advantage of the situation!

While the Roaring Berann was the smallest and least significant fleet carrier of Cenatus Prospecting, she was still a capital ship, so her symbolic value was far greater than a combat carrier!

Otrus Magrin had a reputation for never tolerating a loss. It would be beyond intolerable for others to steal one of his capital ships without too much resistance!

"A week of guaranteed delay is good news, but I'm not sure whether it will be enough." Ves said as he started to worry about what he might encounter in the Ramage Repulsor System.

Hopefully, Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik was merely drifting in the middle of an asteroid belt or something. If he ended up in a difficult-to-reach place like Aeon Corona VII, Ves would go crazy!

"If a week isn't enough to complete our objective and if there are enough indications that we are under threat, then it may be wise to abandon the mission and pull out." General Verle voiced his opinion.

That did not sit well with Ves at all. His son's future was at stake. He would miss out on a much brighter future if he lacked the backing of an established first-class group.

"We'll make that judgment when we find ourselves in that situation." Ves noncommittally said. "Perhaps it won't be as bad as we feared. If we can complete our mission quickly and if the Cenatus Prospecting fleet declines to follow us to the Ramage Repulsor System, we'll be able to take our time."

Calabast shook her head. "That's not necessarily true, Ves. We have been focusing on Mr. Magrin's forces for good reason, but that doesn't mean we should lose sight of other possible threats. There are other pioneering fleets in the neighborhood. A few of them are close enough that they can potentially jump to the Ramage Repulsor System in a single hop. While they shouldn't have any reason to travel to an obscure brown dwarf system, you can never know what will actually happen."

"Hm, I guess you're right. We need to maintain our vigilance regardless. Do you at least have a way to observe the departure of all of these potentially threatening pioneering fleets?"

Calabast smirked. "Do you have to ask? My Black Cats have posted numerous scout vessels and listening posts in the surrounding star systems. Each of them will be able to register the departure of different fleets and roughly determine whether they traveled in the direction of our target system."

"Good. Make sure to pay close attention to the possibility that Otrus Magrin spread our whereabouts in an act of spite."

There was no way that Magrin would fail to spot the obvious connection between the sabotage action and the Golden Skull Alliance.

One of the best ways the awful man could damage the interests of the Golden Skull Alliance was to determine the expeditionary fleet's destination through long-ranged observation and spread the news to nearby pioneers.

While it was questionable whether any of those pioneers would find it worthwhile to follow the expeditionary fleet, if Magrin was persuasive enough, the Ramage Repulsor System might end up hosting a lot more visitors than any other time in its entire existence!

It was the job of the Black Cats to warn Ves and the rest about these potential dangers in advance, and so far it did not seem as if they were unable to fulfill this responsibility.

That reminded Ves to inquire about the effectiveness of DIVA.

"Did you expect your former comrades in arms to pull off their sabotage operation so neatly and cleanly?"

Calabast smirked. "I was 80 percent confident in their total success. The only way they would fail is if Cenatus Prospecting has employed more effective observation devices than normal or if Saint Neville Magrin conducted an unexpected sweeping patrol. Neither of these scenarios happened, so the DIVA operatives have done what was expected of them. If they are who I think I am, then it is practically a certainty that they will succeed. They will never make a mistake of their making. They are just that good."

"Are they better than the special operations units of your Black Cats?"

The spymaster nodded, though not entirely willingly. "DIVA is substantially different from our Black Cats. Our homegrown intelligence and special operations organization is equivalent to a paramilitary group. That means that our Black Cats come close to the level of a proper state-backed intelligence agency, but we are not quite able to close the gap. DIVA enjoys many advantages that the Larkinson Clan simply can't provide at its current scale. It also helps that DIVA has existed for many more years."

When she put it in this way, it was unfair for Ves to hold the Black Cats to the standards of DIVA. He shouldn't expect Calabast's subordinates to be able to complete the same challenging missions as her former colleagues in the Hexer intelligence agency.

...Then again, wasn't this another case of manipulation by manipulating the delivery of information?

Calabast had a vested interest in painting the Black Cats in the best possible light. It wouldn't be good if Ves started to get disappointed in her unit again after investing so much money.

Thinking about the disparity in capabilities made him more and more upset.

He wanted to be able to count on DIVA-esque commandos as well!

He decided to take a firmer stance.

"I can be patient, but I am not going to tolerate the same excuse forever." He told Calabast. "I understand the emphasis on information gathering, but it won't necessarily help if we don't have the capabilities to act on intelligence."

To her credit, Calabast accepted the need for improvement.

"I am already in the process of setting additional training programs and cooperating with numerous development companies to equip our commandos



with superior and more technologically advanced infiltration gear. This won't be easy, though."

"What's the problem?"

"Infiltration tech is highly demanding and expansive." Calabast explained. "It's not just about developing a stealth suit and calling it a day. You need the help of multiple research teams or research institutions to develop and update all of the individual stealth solutions that go into an infiltrator suit. Then you need to develop other essential equipment such as hacking tools and stealth vessels. Buying standalone products is never enough because surveillance and security technology are constantly being updated. A stealth shuttle that is effective today may instantly become obsolete tomorrow due to a single software update for common sensor systems."

He started to understand what she was talking about. He was a mech designer, after all. He was not unfamiliar with this particular issue.

"Only an extensive network and infrastructure centered around the relevant tech can keep it all up to date. It's easy for DIVA to lean on the strength of the entire Hex Federation, but we are not so lucky."

"Do you understand my dilemma now, Ves? We can either take the easy way out and ask the Hexers to share their technology with us, or we can try to cobble together a complete infiltration suite by entering into a contract with multiple different third-party development companies."

Neither of these options sounded attractive to Ves, but he definitely had a preference.

"We are not going to depend on Hexer technology any further than necessary." He stated in a firm and unrelenting tone. "I would rather try our luck with private companies."

"That decision comes with its own host of problems, you know."

"I am well aware of the risks. In time, we should set up our own development companies that can work on providing us with better infiltration technology in-house. It's too soon, though. Our clan isn't large enough to support such a massive R&D operation."

Though Ves occasionally compared his clan to a state, the truth was that the Larkinsons weren't numerous enough to reach this standard.

It would take many more years for the Larkinson Clan to grow large enough to significantly close the gap with the Hex Federation.

For now, it was better to focus on what the clan could accomplish in the short term.

"I hope we can pause the Trailblazer Expedition and return to safe harbor after this is over." General Verle spoke to Ves. "We still haven't recovered from the Battle of the Boryan Belt and we won't be able to unless we can stop and recuperate for an extended period of time in an open port system."

Ves frowned. "I suppose you're right, but I don't want to lose too much momentum. How long do we need?"

"It would be ideal if we can recuperate for 3 months."

"That sounds too long for my liking, but... if that is for the best, then I suppose we might as well enjoy a lengthy break."

Ves already had enough of this chaotic border region. It might be good for his sanity if he could let down his guard in a safe and quiet star system.

#### **Chapter 4570 Ghosts And Specters**

When Ves read learned a bit about how the elite DIVA infiltrators managed to complete their challenging and risky sabotage missions with ease, he developed a new appreciation of covert operations.

Not every problem had to be solved by throwing a mech army at the enemy. It was impossible for him to use the Mars as a cudgel to bash in the heads of everyone who got in his way.

There were many times where confronting an adversary head-on amounted to a cure that was worse than the disease.

In such situations, the ability to solve a problem through finesse rather than brute force became a lot more valuable.

As much as the Black Cats had grown and expanded by an immense degree under Calabast's stewardship, the former Hexer was only human.

Setting up a network of informers and recruiting a lot of spies was not that difficult as long as the people in charge knew what they were doing.

Raising a bunch of elite infiltrators that could perform many different essential tasks with great skill and confidence took a lot more than just throwing a lot of money around!

As his latest talk with Calabast illuminated, there were many situations where having the ability to sneak aboard an enemy stronghold and surgically target strategic objectives might create huge advantages.

It was a pity that the current version of the Larkinson Clan was unable to form its own version of DIVA's impressive infiltration units.

The Larkinson Clan had its own strengths and weaknesses.

One of its greatest downsides was that its infrastructure was severely lacking in terms of scientific research and industrial production capabilities.

However, there was one thing the clan happened to be good at, and that was developing and making use of new and innovative mechs.

Ves had always managed to solve many of his problems through designing mechs that solved problems in ways that no one had ever done before.

It was his greatest strength and it was one of the pillars that made the Living Mech Corporation so profitable.

When Ves thought about how he could resort to mech design to complete the same kind of covert operation missions through different means, he recalled the Ghost Project.

As his only ongoing stealth mech design project, the Ghost Project was a mech that became necessary after Venerable Zimro Belson successfully advanced to his current rank.

As one of the few mech pilots in the service of the Black Cats, Venerable Zimro stood out among other expert pilots in that he possessed a much more flexible attitude towards combat.

Due to his complicated past where he and his fellow Xona Stalkers had been exiled to the Nyxian Gap, Zimro Belson became complicit in many shameful acts. He would have to bear this stain for the rest of his life.

Yet rather than allow this scar to cripple him forever, he seemed to find honor in redemption. From what Ves could tell of the man, he was the kind of person who believed in the notion that the ends justified the means.

"I am comfortable with my place among the Black Cats." The rather slim and unassuming expert pilot spoke to Ves during their first talk about the configuration of his first expert pilot. "Our clan has its protectors in the light, but they cannot protect our clansmen against every possible threat. That is where my fellow Black Cats and I come in. We do what is necessary to keep us all safe. Our jobs may not be glamorous and recognition is also in short supply, but we who walk in the shadows have no need for honor. We are only guided by our duty. I will break any rule and commit any taboo so long as the outcome helps our clan in the end."

"That... is quite an extreme statement, Venerable Zimro." Ves replied at the time.

Venerable Zimro smiled at the clan patriarch. "You have built a remarkable clan where any stranger can come and feel at home. We are all family, and that is something that the former Xona Stalkers and I cherish deeply. Director Calabast has done much to give us a new and better purpose. She has taught us that deplorable methods can also be noble as long as they are used for the right reasons. I am deeply honored for the trust that I have received from you all, and wish to continue serving in this capacity."

"Do you have any special requests for your upcoming expert mech?"

"Please rest assured that I have little to no objection to anything you decide to add to my future machine. No matter how dirty and despicable it turns out, I will make use of its capabilities to the fullest to complete the missions that no other expert pilot is willing to get involved in. I may not be able to serve as your sword, but let me be the dagger that you can use to stab your opponents in the back."

A dagger that a person could wield to stab people when they least expected it. That was what Ves wanted more than anything else at this time.

Sure, Ves wouldn't say no to adding another battle-oriented expert mech to his mech roster, but that was like throwing in another sword in a box that was already filled with similar-looking blades.

It was much more helpful to add a dagger or a completely different weapon to his equipment locker. The additional variety unlocked lots of new possibilities that were previously unthinkable.

When Ves thought about the Ghost Project in this context, he became inspired to add new features and functionality to its design.

While he hadn't changed his mind about turning it into a silent killer on the battlefield, that didn't mean it was incapable of performing covert operation missions.

Ves just had to design an expert stealth mech that possessed enough overlap to gain the qualifications to perform both roles.

This was a lot more challenging than it sounded because stealth mechs were inherently cramped designs to begin with. Much of their capacity was taken up by all of their stealth systems and other necessary measures to prevent enemies from detecting their emissions.

He had previously decided to design the Ghost Project as a more fragile and stealthy version of the Dark Zephyr.

This meant that the design of his expert stealth mech had to devote much of its limited capacity to enhancing its speed and maneuverability. It also had to possess enough mechanical strength to inflict lethal blows onto powerful expert mechs and other tough opponents.

Ves was unwilling to make too many compromises in these areas, so he had little choice but to be more inventive and resort to unorthodox solutions to enhance its subterfuge capabilities.

This was why he paid close attention to a particular object that he had obtained as a side effect of receiving the plasma sword that used to belong to the Neo Amadeus.

After transforming this excessively powerful weapon into the Scarlet Ember and handing it over to the Everchanger, Ves was left with the living head of an actual Fridayman expert pilot.

To a mech designer and spiritual engineer like him, this was an especially precious resource. There were many possible ways he could take advantage of this living organic treasure, and he had already decided to combine his

expertise with that of Master Benedict Cortez to create a fantastic new system that could empower the Ghost Project in unprecedented ways.

That cooperation proceeded quite well at the moment. Both Ves and Master Benedict held multiple meetings and brainstorming sessions where they sought to come up with new methods to unlock the hidden potential of this unique resource.

It was quite fortunate that Venerable Zimro Belson was able to tolerate a lot more than other expert pilots, so the Ghost Project was the perfect expert mech to integrate an enhanced and expanded version of Master Benedict's Original Energy Bridge System.

"I can still do more with this system."

Once Ves and Master Benedict had their way with the living head of an expert pilot, they could do much more than provide an additional source of energy to the Ghost Project.

Ves already thought of a brand new way to leverage its unique circumstances. He began to conjure up images of a starship becoming haunted by rampaging ghosts. Each of these strange and unkillable specters were sustained by the power and fury of a captured and enslaved expert pilot!

There were several pros and cons to making this come to life.

The biggest advantage was that it was a way to attack a starship while remaining under stealth.

Instead of sending over infiltration teams that could always be exposed and caught at any time, it was much easier to command the Ghost Project to hover close to a starship before sending in ghosts to do all of the dirty work!

Even if the defenders discovered the ghosts and managed to subdue them through the use of special weapons, the Larkinson Clan wouldn't suffer any significant damage!

After all, the specters that had been doing all of the work were disposable combat units that could easily be reformed.

Another advantage was that it conveyed a lot of plausible deniability.

As long as the Ghost Project remained under stealth, who would be able to tie the appearance of killer ghosts to an expert mech of the Larkinson Clan?

Even if the existence of the Ghost Project became exposed due to its appearance in battle, there still wouldn't be an obvious connection!

The next major advantage was that ghosts that could potentially phase through solid obstacles and affect people on a non-physical level could accomplish feats that could never be reproduced by elite DIVA operatives.

From taking over the minds of enemy crew members to assassinating critical personnel by strangling their spirits, there were many potential ways for spiritual ghosts to mess with people!

"There are also a lot of downsides, though." Ves frowned.

He wasn't entirely up to date with all of the laws of the MTA, but he was pretty sure that twisting a mech to this extent was not entirely right.

When Master Huron augmented the main weapons of the Neo Amadeus by integrating them with the living heads of different expert pilots, he at least made use of volunteers.

Ves wouldn't have that luxury. It was far too wasteful for him to decapitate one of his existing expert pilots just because he wanted to turn them into the power source of an unorthodox attack system.



The only 'power source' available to him was a captured enemy. By twisting the Fridayman expert pilot's force of will, Ves was pretty sure he could figure out a way to make his latest idea come true, but it would be unethical to the extreme.

That wasn't enough to stop him, though.

"The biggest problem isn't my conscience, but the MTA's reaction."

The mech community took a dim view on anyone who abused or tarnished the dignity of high-ranking mech pilots.

Mech designers took great care in making sure they never got on the bad side of expert pilots and ace pilots. They would never be able to earn the trust of these powerful heroes if it became known that they had caused deliberate harm with their work!

There was no way Ves could hide something so big from the MTA. There were too many ways for the mechers to monitor what took place inside the Larkinson Clan.

The only way he could proceed with his ambitious new plan was to obtain the buy-in of the Mech Trade Association.

In other words, he needed to figure out a way to obtain an exemption from at least one faction of the MTA.

He grimaced when he understood what that meant. "If that is the case, then I will have to make further concessions. At least I shouldn't be lacking in this area."

Ves thought about his Blood Knight Project and its many implications.

"The Transhumanist Faction will definitely be interested in this work!"