

## Mech 4571

### Chapter 4571 The Geist System

Ves could not make a decision like this alone.

For better or worse, Master Benedict Cortez played a key role in empowering the Ghost Project.

He was not only responsible for converting it into a functioning expert mech by integrating resonating exotics into the design, but also mitigated its heavy energy demands by lending his expertise.

Now that Ves wanted to exploit the Ghost Project's circumstances to an even greater degree, he needed to consult with the Master Mech Designer in order to figure out how he could realize his new vision.

He activated his comm and called Master Benedict.

When the older man accepted the communication request, his projection looked closely at Ves.

"I know that look of yours. You came up with another crazy idea again, right?"

"How did you know?"

"I have the same look when I am in this sort of mood. When you are so eager and excited about a new design solution, you become restless and impatient. Any hindrance to your work will make you more irritable. Your new idea has made you so driven that your passion is obvious to everyone."

Ves indeed recognized those traits in himself. He supposed that he hadn't done anything to limit his outward expression of passion.

"I didn't call you to talk about how I look." Ves said as he tried to get to business. "I wanted to talk to you about a new proposal centered around the Ghost Project. Let me explain my new ideas."

Once he outlined his new ideas and intentions, his good friend and frequent collaborator looked troubled.

"I won't comment about the dubious legality of your new plan. Our original one was already shaky enough as it is. The Ghost Project is your mech design so it is your responsibility to gain approval from the MTA. Personally speaking, I am not... opposed to exploiting Object 335 to this end. In fact, I am extremely intrigued in what you can make of it. No matter whether you succeed or fail, we will both be able to learn many lessons from your attempt."

It sounded as if Master Benedict had little confidence that Ves would be able to succeed in his ambitious plan. This was fair as it sounded far-fetched to begin with and the science behind it was extremely sketchy to say the least.

Yet despite how fantastical it sounded, Ves possessed the confidence he could cobble something together. The end result might not match his original specifications, but as long as it enabled the Ghost Project to mess with enemies in the dark, it was enough!

Once they got all of these necessary issues out of the way, Ves and Master Benedict finally engaged in a more productive discussion.

"I am unable to provide much help in the more esoteric elements of your so-called Geist System, but what I do know is that it will have to meet several requirements."

Ves casually named his hypothetical new non-physical attack solution the Geist System.

He initially wanted to call it the Ghost System, but it would probably lead to a lot of confusion if he used the word 'ghost' to refer to multiple different subjects.

"The first requirement is that it needs a vessel, vector or delivery method that can extend the power of the Ghost Project to a distant location." Master

Benedict continued. "The greater the range, the more useful the Geist System becomes. It would be ideal if the Ghost Project doesn't have to move too close to an unassuming enemy fleet to sabotage it from within, but that is probably not a realistic demand."

"You're probably right." Ves reluctantly conceded. "It should already be good enough for the Geist System to have a maximum range of a couple of hundred meters. It will be a lot harder for it to affect the interior of a starship at a range that is lower than 50 meters."

"Do you have any solutions in mind?"

"Not really. I still know too little about this. I need to conduct a number of experiments and try out a few new possible implementations. One of the biggest factors in whether I can get the Geist System to work is if its ghosts are physical or non-physical in nature. It would be best if it is the latter, but if that is not possible, then I have to figure out a way to merge the power of Venerable Zimro Belson with the Geist System to develop small, semi-autonomous physical drones or spurs that can be snuck into an enemy starship and wreak havoc inside. I can make good use of the knowledge traded to me by the Lehrer Foundation to develop effective spurs in a short amount of time."

Spurs was the most commonly used terminology for small and sometimes autonomous drones that were attached mechs. It was a term originally coined by a Rubarthan mech designer to popularize their use.

Master Benedict did not favor them in this project, though. He shook his head in a clear sign of disapproval.

"That is an undesirable result in my opinion. The stated goal of the Geist System is to develop a secretive, deniable attack method. It will be much

harder to prove that your clan has nothing to do with an attempted attack when the Ghost Project has left physical traces behind."

"I will make sure that the remains of the ghosts will self-destruct if they are captured or neutralized." Ves promised as he already came up with a couple of potential solutions. "For example, I can make them out of nanomachines or biotissue that will destroy themselves if there are problems."

"That is still not good enough. Any physical traces can provide a wealth of clues as long as the investigators have the right technology at hand. A technologically advanced opponent might even possess the technology to capture and freeze the spurs intact, and that would be a disaster to you and your clan."

The former Skull Architect unfortunately made a good point. Basing the Geist System around physical spurs almost defeated the purpose. He might as well leave it up to the Black Cats to develop their own small autonomous stealth drones. There was no great need to involve an expert mech.

The only way to justify the existence of the Geist System and the effort put into realizing it was to make its attack vectors completely incorporeal!

"I will investigate the possibilities as quickly as possible." Ves told Master Benedict. "I think it is within my capabilities to make this work, but it is too early to say for certain."

"I hope you will be able to present concrete proof next time. That said, if you happen to make it work, then I believe that energy and power will be the greatest limitations aside from range. There is little point to investing in the Geist System if all it can do is to allow you to spy what is taking place inside a space station or a secret base. DIVA can already perform those jobs without an expert mech."

"Hm, you're right on that as well. It's actually easier to make the Geist System powerful by basing it on physical spurs. We can rely on existing technology to equip them with compact but powerful weapons and energy cells."

The problem with an intangible spur was that it could not easily interfere with the material realm!

Although Ves had witnessed and developed many different ways for spiritual phenomena to create a real difference in the material realm, he needed to develop a host of new solutions to create the Geist System.

As he tried to imagine what he needed to invent in order to create all of the essential building blocks, he thought back on the essential ingredients to make most of them work.

"The Geist System won't work without the power of expert pilots." He said.

"Object 335 is needed to give the intangible ghosts substance. Venerable Zimro Belson might also have to employ his true resonance to enhance their effectiveness and keep them under control. No matter what, I will find a way to leverage the reality-defying nature of the two expert pilots."

"Good luck with that. I may be able to provide assistance with regards to unlocking and channeling some of the latent power of Object 335, but I cannot handle much of the weirdness that is related to your specialty. You are on your own in that regard."

That was not a problem to Ves. "I can do the rest. It is already extremely helpful if you can turn Object 335 into a stable, reliable and fairly powerful energy source. Energy is the root of power and having more of it will certainly give a more powerful kick to my Geist System."

They talked a bit more about the other challenges concerning the Geist System. Ves gained a lot of new insights and ideas on how to turn this highly improbable attack system into a reality.

He still had to do a lot of puzzling, but it was already enough for him to gain more solid directions.

"What do you think about the Ghost Project when it has obtained a working implementation of the Geist System?"

Master Benedict's expression turned serious. "It can be a dangerous weapon. I will be glad that it is on our side, but I am fearful for what it will mean to us all. Once its existence and capabilities become known to everyone, it will be a lot harder to catch your targets off-guard. It will also be harder for strangers to trust us considering that we may have interfered with their development without their notice."

"Everyone that is powerful enough engages in at least some form of skullduggery. It's not as if states such as the Friday Coalition suddenly become a pariah just because it has multiple active intelligence agencies." Ves dismissively shrugged.

"Intelligence agencies are known quantities. They can be created by any state, organization or individual that is powerful enough. What they cannot necessarily reproduce is an expert stealth mech that is equipped with completely new and unprecedented technology that can potentially allow it to infiltrate the tightest barriers, spy on secret operations, steal the data of the most secure databases, hijack the minds of critical officers or leaders or assassinate them outright!"

"...Well, I admit that sounds a little more concerning when you put it that way. That still won't stop me from doing my best to realize this version of the Ghost Project. It is simply too useful for me to forgo the attempt. I at least have to find out for myself whether I have the ability to create the Geist System as I have envisioned. If it turns out that I have overestimated my capabilities, I can always set it aside and wait until I have become a better mech designer before trying again."

He would ideally make this work in the short term as he needed the capabilities of the Geist System the most at this junction.

While he didn't mind too much if it took longer to invent the Geist System, it wouldn't be as useful as Calabast would be much closer to creating her own effective infiltration units.

The urgency drove him to get to work right away. Once he completed his fruitful discussion with Master Benedict, he returned to his design lab and began to devote his time on the Ghost Project.

He conducted a few preliminary experiments and fleshed out his framework for the Geist System.

Aside from that, he also investigated Object 335 in order to determine whether he could actively exploit the power of a hostile expert pilot to give substance to ghosts.

None of this was easy and Ves could already foresee that he needed to invest a lot of time to complete the necessary research, and he had already taken his boosted productivity into account!

"This is going to take a lot of effort and ingenuity."

Just as Ves was about to commence his next experiment, he interrupted his work when he received an important notification.

The expeditionary fleet was about to enter the Ramage Repulsor System.

#### **Chapter 4572 Weak Star**

"What a pitiful star system." Ves remarked. "Then again, brown dwarf systems are all pitiful by definition."

This was not the first time that he had entered a brown dwarf system. The current space environment was disappointingly similar to the environment of the last one he visited.

Ves did not call the star system pitiful for nothing. It was devoid of a rich collection of satellites. It only featured one tiny rocky planet while the rest amounted to asteroids.

The brown dwarf star itself was also rather pathetic. It was on the smaller end of this star type and was quite dim compared to proper stars.

It produced a lot of infrared radiation, but the relatively tiny size of the brown dwarf meant that it was barely competent in its ability to warm up the surrounding space.

"Some astrophysicists are in favor of classifying brown dwarfs as rogue planets. They claim that it is misleading to call them stars." Gloriana noted as she stood at his side.

He could understand the sentiment. Brown dwarfs were essentially Jupiter-like gas giants that were big enough to produce heat through the immense contraction forces generated by their own considerable mass.

Just like how ancient combustion engines heated up gas by exerting pressure through pistons, brown dwarfs were just massive enough to contract all of its gasses by relying on gravity alone.

If the gas giants were a lot larger, then the gravity exerted on the gasses became so powerful that it could trigger runaway thermonuclear reactions!

In other words, a lot of tiny particles fused together into bigger particles, releasing a lot of energy in the process!

This was how real stars turned into bright and warm cosmic lanterns!

The fact that brown stars were so congenically deficient that they couldn't even trigger and sustain nuclear fusion meant that they were basically planets that produced just enough heat for people to confuse them as stars!



The more he thought about it, the more he became sympathetic to the camp that wanted to reclassify them as rogue planets.

They were gas giants that produced just enough internal heat to survive the cold void of space. This was how they managed to maintain their cohesion without access to heat radiated from an actual star.

Ves ultimately shrugged. "I don't really care whether we're talking about a star or a gas giant. I suppose we should stick to treating them as a star as it will be a lot more confusing to treat it as a rogue planet. Hardly anyone in our clan understands the theory behind stars anyway."

"Uneducated boors." His wife muttered.

"That is an uncalled for statement, Gloriana. Mech pilots and other professionals can be just as smart or knowledgeable as us. They just haven't devoted their lives to a technical or scientific discipline."

"That still doesn't change the fact that the vast majority of our clan is too ignorant to understand a theory as basic as nuclear fusion and the basic mechanisms of stars."

"Can you tell me if the proportion of Hexers who understand stars is any higher?" Ves asked in response.

"Uhh... that's not a fair comparison, Ves! The boys of the Hex Federation are dragging down the average!"

The look he gave her made it clear that he was not impressed by her lame argument.

"Whatever." Ves snorted. "We haven't come here to discuss the theory and perception of stars. We have a mission to complete."

"You're right." His wife got back on track as well. "I have already made contact with the representatives of over a dozen different virtual schools. Most of them

are willing to enroll Marvaine into their classes as long as he is able to verify his test results by completing an entrance exam, but their conditions aren't the best. The most accessible schools only charge a yearly tuition of 1 million MTA credits, but the more reputable and renowned ones can cost at least ten times as much. Aside from that, the better schools also impose additional requirements."

Ves frowned. "We are not going to pay 10 million MTA credits just to provide a year of schooling to Marvaine. We will have to sell a lot of phasewater and go deep into debt in order to keep our son in the same school. I would rather put him into one of the cheaper virtual schools if there is no other option. He will at least be able to make more friends with people who come from similar backgrounds."

"That is unacceptable! Marvaine's status will be incomparably greater in the future! He should make friends with first-raters to begin with to ensure that he will have an adequate support network in place by the time he graduates and begins his career as a first-class mech designer!"

That actually made a lot of sense. Even if Marvaine's background was rather poor compared to most of his future classmates, the fact that he was able to get into a better school in the first place meant that he possessed his own advantages.

It didn't matter if Marvaine wasn't able to become the most popular student in his class. As long as he was able to forge a genuine friendship with a first-rater, then he would be able to exploit this connection to an immense degree in the future!

"You don't need to remind me what must be done." Ves said as he crossed his arms. "Our men have already begun the search for our mission objective. Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik is most certainly hiding in this star system. We just need to pin-point his location."

Both of them gazed at the projection of the local space map that was constantly being updated with additional information.

The map became crowded with additional satellites while the appearance of the brown dwarf and its only planet became a little more defined.

To be honest, to call that sad excuse of a vaguely spherical rock a planet was an awful stretch.

If the brown dwarf was reclassified as a rogue planet, then the rock would be regarded as a moon, which was much more appropriate in his opinion.

Ves wondered whether Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik had secretly buried himself underneath the surface of this rocky planet. It was the most obvious hiding space, though if he really wanted to avoid pursuit, he should be hiding among one of the many asteroids that orbited this neighborhood.

"Ylvaine, where the hell is that guy?"

The Larkinsons hadn't been able to determine Lord Pearian's exact location when they hadn't entered this star system. This was because the distance was still so great that Ylvaine was only able to determine a single, relatively imprecise direction.

Yet now that they were no longer light-years away from the failed pioneer's hiding place, Ylvaine should be able to employ his foresight capabilities to provide a much more detailed and precise answer!

Gloriana impatiently waited for Ves to obtain the answer.

"Well? What has your little prophet divined?"

Ves briefly looked uncertain. "For some reason, Ylvaine still isn't able to determine the precise coordinates of his hiding place. I only know he is hiding in that direction."

His thumb pointed almost straight towards the brown dwarf and its closely orbiting 'planet'.

Gloriana understood how challenging the search may be. "If he is hiding on the only major satellite of this star system, then we will have to conduct a search in close proximity to the brown dwarf. Our mechs and search parties will have to work under challenging gravitic conditions. No matter how inadequate a brown dwarf may be, it is still a massive stellar object that generates enough activity to produce strong gravitic activity, especially in close orbits."

It was like standing in close proximity to the main thrusters of a capital ship. Even if Ves had calculated that he maintained a safe enough distance, no one would feel comfortable with hovering so close to the powerful emissions of a massive starship!

"I will instruct our mech legions to harden their mechs against gravitic and heat damage. They will have to endure additional stresses to their internals and exterior frames."

It wasn't a big problem in the short term. Most of the mechs fielded by the Larkinson Clan possessed solid, quality designs, though the mechs of the Cross Clan were even more robust on average.

After Ves and numerous members of the Eye of Ylvaine confirmed that they needed to move closer to the center of the star system, the expeditionary fleet was on the move again.

It didn't take a long time to approach the center of the Ramage Repulsor System. The mass of a brown dwarf star was exceptionally low, so any ships or fleets that traveled to it arrived at a much closer distance from the start.

This also made it so difficult to navigate towards. The brown dwarf star's gravitic profile was so small and narrow that it was incredibly easy for FTL drives to miss and overshoot.

In any case, Ves and many other people did not need to test their patience too much in order to get closer to the only planet.

While the expeditionary fleet ultimately opted to orbit the brown dwarf star at a generous distance, a number of combat carriers had continued to move ahead until they reached the orbit of Ramage Repulsor I.

The ships proceeded to engage their scanning systems. At the same time, scout mechs hailing from the Flagrant Vandals started to deploy from the combat carriers.

Once they entered into space, they split up and began to scour the surface of the planet up close.

The search was just beginning before Ves received a surprising piece of information from a Legion Commander.

"Sir, I hate to interrupt you, but the Great Prophet has revealed to me that our men are searching in the wrong place!"

"What?!"

Ves sat up straighter in his observation seat. He looked skeptically at the projection of the tiny planet. Although it didn't look like a good hiding place, it was the only viable place for a starship to make itself scarce.

"Where is he hiding, then? Has he fallen into the entrance of a phase whale enclave? Is there another Purgatory hiding in plain sight in this star system?!"

He already became excited at the thought. The Golden Skull Alliance managed to harvest a lot of phasewater as well as other valuable goods from the last time it had plundered an alien pocket space.

However, Taon Melin immediately shook his head. "That is not the case, sir. I don't know whether there are any phase whale enclaves in this star system, but Prophet Ylvaine has determined that Lord Pearian is still residing in the same dimensions as us. We don't need to enter a hidden portal to reach his location.

"Then where can we pick him up?" Ves frowned. "Do you have the answer?"

Taon looked around until he faced the large star map projected on the bridge. The expert candidate and legion commander slowly lifted his arm until he pointed past the planet that was being searched.

"The man you wish to find is located here."

"...Where is 'here'? There's nothing in this pocket of space. Is his flagship orbiting the brown dwarf under stealth?"

"No, sir. You misunderstand. He is located... here."

Ves looked at Taon's finger and extrapolated it towards the projection.

If Lord Pearian wasn't hiding on a starship under cloaking in open space, then that meant...

"Wait. Are you claiming that Lord Pearian isn't orbiting just outside the corona of the brown dwarf star, but is instead hiding inside the star itself?!"

Taon's nod was all of the confirmation that Ves needed.

His jaw practically dropped as he took a much closer look at the brown dwarf star.

At first, it sounded absolutely ludicrous, because most stars were too powerful and destructive for starships to dive underneath their outermost layer for an extended period of time!

However, he suddenly recalled that brown dwarfs weren't really proper stars at all. They didn't fit into the category of 'most stars'!

Just as Ves accepted the truth that Lord Pearian may actually be located in this extremely unusual hiding place, he soon began to suffer a headache.

"How the hell do we pull him out of this star?"

#### **Chapter 4573 Four Parties**

The discovery that Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik might actually be hiding under the outermost layer of a brown dwarf came as a surprise to Ves!

Ves pulled a small totem of Ylvaine and contacted the self-proclaimed prophet himself to verify whether the design spirit accurately located the missing first-class scion's position.

"Did you find the right guy? Have you mistaken him for another person that happened to bear the same name?"

The answer he received from the design spirit was the same. The noble that had sent the entire border region between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone was hiding somewhere underneath the surface of the failed star!

No, Ylvaine did not mistake the noble for an impostor that happened to bear the same name.

The man's name was both unusual to begin with. The Yorul-Tavik Clan did not have the habit of recycling its names like many other family organizations, so Ylvaine definitely did not home in on an uncle or a great-grandfather who happened to be called Pearian as well. Anyone outside of the clan was also unlikely to carry this highly distinctive family name.

The man was also one of the most wanted and sought-after people in this part of the Red Ocean. The man acquired a sort of metaphysical mass that had

grown so much that he was like a star that could not be ignored by those that possessed the right vision!

No, Ylvaine did not misestimate Lord Pearian's position. The brown dwarf may be a powerful stellar object that was massive enough to bend spacetime to a significant degree and energetic enough to produce lots of emissions, but it was not that special from a spiritual perspective!

There was no fog obscuring Ylvaine's foresight. The design spirit was also unable to sense any sign of third party interference. There weren't any dark gods or phase whales trying to weave a web of deception while lurking in the dark as far as he knew.

Of course, there was always a chance that a much more skilled and powerful entity had succeeded in pulling the wool over Ylvaine's eyes, but that was such an unlikely occurrence that Ves quickly dismissed the possibility.

There were other possibilities that might explain why Ylvaine managed to get it wrong, but Ves ruled them out after exploring them in further detail.

As unlikely as it sounded, Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik was actually hiding inside the star that sat at the center of the 'star system'!

Once Ves reluctantly ruled out all other possibilities, he called for an emergency virtual meeting with the most important leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance right away.

The others did not take the news well.

"He's INSIDE a star?!" Patriarch Reginald said in a perplexed tone. "Even if a brown dwarf star is not as good as a red dwarf star, shouldn't a ship get torn apart or cooked into slag after staying so long in such a hazardous place?"

Galina Rovon-Hartul of the Glory Seekers was much less skeptical. "First-class starships can take a much greater beating than the vessels in our



possession. The Yorul-Tavik Clan is wealthy enough to fund the commissioning of carrier vessels that can withstand sustained attacks from first-class multipurpose mechs. It is not that far-fetched to believe that they can also endure the constant pressures of the outer layers of a failed star. Don't forget that the 'star' we are talking about is on the smaller end and only exhibits a surface temperature that is far below 1000 degrees Kelvin."

Ves nodded in agreement with the Glory Seeker Journeyman. "People often equate stars to large fireballs that burn hot for an extremely long time. Brown dwarf stars aren't like that. They are much more similar to radiation heaters that are scaled up to planetary proportions. Even though they are huge and generate an immense amount of infrared radiation all of the time, it disperses much of that heat and light across a wide area. As long as the defenses of a starship are up to standard, it can reluctantly survive the hostile environment, though probably not for long."

The pressures generated by a failed star might not be as exaggerated as a normal star, but it was still not an environment that was conducive to the longevity of a technological object!

Unless the starship was purpose-built to survive inside stars, Ves doubted that a typical first-class fleet carrier or combat carrier could safely linger in this crazy environment for more than a couple of weeks!

Numerous people speculated on the nature of the starship that Lord Pearian used to make himself scarce.

"We know that Lord Pearian's pioneering fleet suffered defeat at the hands of a nunser fleet, though not all of the human ships fell in battle." Calabast said. "The remnant vessels that managed to escape from the battlefield endured persistent pursuit from the nunser warships. It was only after one of the MTA's own fleets stepped in that the nunsers suffered their own defeat. Still, numerous faster and more elusive nunser warships managed to escape this

retribution and continued their pursuit despite the obvious dangers of traveling deeper into human-occupied space."

General Verle looked at her projected form. "We all know that, Calabast. What is it that you are trying to convey?"

"We do not know much about the circumstances surrounding Lord Pearian's defeat and flight. What is the context behind the initial encounter between the two fleets? How did they come to blows and was there a specific reason why they came to blows? What caused the nunser fleet to become so enraged by Lord Pearian and his men that it persisted in its dangerous pursuit? Why have the remnant nunser warships decided to continue on their extermination mission even though it has become clear that it is a suicidal endeavor?"

All of these were important questions. The galactic net was filled with different answers. There were plenty of people who presented interesting answers, but it was difficult to settle for any single conclusion due to the lack of reliable information.

"Do you have the answers, Director Calabast?" Ves asked.

The spymaster shook her head. "No. I have my own theories, but it is irresponsible for me to present them to you all without any proof. What I am actually trying to point out is that there are at least four parties involved in this entire affair."

"Four?"

"Yes, four." Calabast nodded with a smirk. "First, there is the most obvious party, which is Lord Pearian himself. This 33-year old wannabe pioneer clearly does not have the qualifications to roam the deep frontier of the Red Ocean, but managed to do so anyway by taking advantage of his high status and incredible wealth. He's a spoiled brat in almost every sense of the word, which means he does not lack for much. We know that his personal starship is

extravagant, powerful and above all else fast, which translates to an excellent escape vessel."

Lord Pearian's personal ship was an oversized yacht according to the intelligence gathered by the Black Cats. The only problem was that she was not equipped to serve as the flagship of an entire pioneering fleet, so the spoiled brat likely served on a larger and more appropriate mobile command center.

"Then there is his pioneering fleet." She continued. "Lord Pearian may nominally be in charge of it, but it is actually gathered and organized by the Yorul-Tavik Clan itself. Everything the scion has received in his life came from his clan, and the pioneering fleet that he insisted on forming is no different. At most, the spoiled brat placed his trusted confidantes in crucial leadership positions to reinforce his control over the fleet, but it is probable that most of its members are more likely to listen to the instructions of the clan over that of their supposed leader. The crew members manning much of the flagship most likely consist of loyal retainers to the clan, and have probably received secret instructions to protect Lord Pearian against any possible threat, which might also include his own stupid self."

"I see." Ves looked thoughtful. "If Lord Pearian has made a string of bad decisions, it may be possible for the crew to take action against his will. Also, unlike his personal yacht, he probably doesn't possess a strong grip on the fleet carrier that serves as his flagship. There are simply too many crew members for him to replace with his handpicked subordinates."

Calabast resumed her listing. "The third party that I am taking into account is the Mech Trade Association. We know from numerous reliable sources that an MTA fast response fleet has responded quickly to calls for help and smashed the dangerous nunser fleet. It may be that one of the ships of the MTA went out of her way to evacuate Lord Pearian, only to get into trouble

herself. The nunsers may have driven the rescue ship away from the MTA fleet and driven her into a corner. If this MTA ship is residing inside the brown dwarf star, then she is probably trying to evade alien pursuit while waiting for reinforcements from the Association."

"That sounds extremely unlikely." Ves immediately spoke. "The MTA is not known for leaving their own out for dry. The initial incidents happened so long ago that the mechers had plenty of time to divert one of their many powerful ships to this star system. They are only a couple of portal jumps away at most."

Master Benedict Cortez agreed with the younger mech designer. "The MTA is not present here. I am sure of it. The mechers generally don't waste their time on rescuing people that have a negative influence on human society. Lord Pearian embodies several of the worst traits of humanity. His many foolish actions and decisions easily remind people of the excesses of the Age of Conquest."

That was also true. The MTA was a meritocracy and took an extremely dim view on space peasants and other people that weren't productive enough. Useless people who only wasted resources in vain had no business being in charge of anything.

Calabast smiled. "I merely mentioned the MTA to remind you of this possibility. In any case, the next party is a lot more important. You see, out of all of the parties that wish to evade pursuit in human-occupied space the most, I can think of no better candidate than the enemies of mankind."

Ves and several other people widened their eyes.

"Are you suggesting that there is a nunsers warship hiding inside the brown dwarf star?!"

"Use your logic. A vessel belonging to the previous three parties that I have mentioned earlier has little reason to hide in such an obscure space. Safety should be their highest priority, and it is much better for them to flee to a well-defended human star system. The only plausible reason for Lord Pearian's escape vessel to stay away from those locations is if the scion is pursued by a rival of the Yorul-Tavik Clan. Even then, there are better places to flee towards."

General Verle looked grave. "Aliens have the greatest reasons to hide from everyone. It makes too much sense. We may have stumbled on a ship crewed by desperate nunsers that are isolated from their pack. We are not in danger yet because their priority is to hide from all of the pioneering fleets that are searching for the missing scion, but that can change as soon as we reveal that we have found their hiding place."

That was an important observation! The Golden Skull Alliance could not afford to take action unless it was prepared to deal with the consequences of exposing the ship that was trying her best to remain hidden!

"What do we do?" Patriarch Reginald frowned. "Are we just going to sit here and do nothing because you are all afraid to poke the nunsers?"

"We need confirmation." Calabast stated to everyone. "We should not make any definite moves before we can confirm who is in control of Lord Pearian."

#### **Chapter 4574 Limited Answers**

Ever since the Golden Skull Alliance became aware of the possibility that they might be in proximity of a hostile nunsers warship, the entire expeditionary fleet immediately raised its alert level.

Many civilians temporarily lost a lot of privileges and weren't allowed to roam freely aboard their starships anymore.

Everyone was forced to wear protective clothing such as vacsuits, hazard suits or protective armor in case the expeditionary fleet came under attack.

The atmosphere across the Larkinson Navy had noticeably become a lot more serious and subdued. Nobody wanted to make a mistake or get caught off-guard.

More mechs went on patrol while many expert pilots reduced their free time to ensure they could respond quickly to any crisis.

As all of this was taking place, the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan largely continued their duties as much as possible.

"Meow."

Lucky floated over to a suited Ketis, who had just arrived in the main design lab and took a seat at the main table.

Before the gem cat could snuggle up to one of his favorite humans, Ketis' companion spirit sprung out of the Bloodsinger and playfully greeted her 'friend'.

"Sharpie! Sharpie!"

"Meow meow."

The miniature spiritual copy of Sharpie hopped onto Lucky's back and pretended to ride a mount.

"Sharpie! Sharpie! Sharpie!"

While that was taking place, a couple of other Larkinson mech designers took their seats.

"So why did you call us over, sir?" Sara Voiken asked. "As far as I know, our services aren't needed for the time being."

Ves nodded. "That is correct. The Black Cats and other other departments are carefully trying to gather more information about the ship that is lurking inside the brown dwarf star. They must work carefully because they cannot use any obvious methods of investigation. So far, we are pretending to search the planet as well as the surrounding asteroid fields for anything suspicious. If the possible captors of Lord Pearian have maintained the ability to observe what is taking place outside, then we want them to think that we know no better."

That caused Ketis to look skeptical. "Are you sure that we can hoodwink a group that is powerful and advanced enough to hide one of its starships inside a brown dwarf star?"

"Well, all of us are wearing our protective suits in case we got it wrong." Ves replied while knocking his armored fist against the surface of his recently repaired Unending Regalia.

This safety rule made for a rather strange sight in the design lab. Both Ves and Ketis had opted to wear their combat armor, causing them to look more at home in an infantry barracks!

Gloriana and Sara Voiken looked much more at home in this environment. Their hazard suits were relatively thin and functional while still offering plenty of protection against lab accidents and other typical hazards.

They also happened to look stylish!

Though Ves had suggested his wife to switch to wearing a bulkier and more protective hardsuit, she refused to compromise fashion in exchange for greater function!

"How much time will it take to gather the necessary information?" Gloriana impatiently asked.

"No one can say for sure. From what I know, Master Benedict Cortez and his engineers are quickly trying to cobble together probes that are robust enough

to withstand the pressure and radiation of the outer layers of a brown dwarf star while possessing the ability to blend in its environment well enough to escape detection."

"That sounds difficult." Sara Voiken stated. "I can tell you that I am unable to design a mech that can fulfill the same requirements. I can reluctantly develop a mech that can temporarily survive the hostile environment, but it would not be difficult to detect its presence. The demand to make the machine as undetectable as possible is too unreasonable. I don't have anything close to the tech and materials available for the job."

Gloriana turned to Ves. "You've become a lot more proficient in stealth systems as of late, right? Why aren't you involved in this project?"

"My services aren't needed, Gloriana. Master Benedict is the best man for the job, so he is in charge at the moment. I offered to lend my assistance, but the probes won't be making use of traditional stealth technology."

"Why not?"

Ves sighed. "Sara is right that probes that make use of active stealth systems simply aren't tough enough to survive the punishing circumstances of the brown dwarf star. The probes only need to be tough. As long as they are small enough, it will be difficult for sensors to detect their existence amidst all of the radiation and other strong activity."

"That won't help with preventing them from getting detected while on approach to the brown dwarf star." Ketis pointed out.

"They don't have to do that, Ketis. DIVA has agreed to transport the probes as close to the stellar object as possible with the help of its stealth shuttles. They will most certainly take a lot of damage in the process, but they will only require an extensive repair cycle before they can be put to use again."



"That is convenient. I can see now why our assistance isn't needed. We would only get in the way."

It was frustrating for people like Ves to be relegated to bystanders. They could do nothing but wait for other people to succeed and fail in their own endeavors.

This was nothing new to many of the other mech designers, though. Their importance lay in preparation rather than execution. It was already enough for them to provide the powerful mechs that gave their clansmen the confidence to tackle many challenges.

It still made this waiting period a bit awkward for Ves. He couldn't do anything as it remained critically important for the expeditionary fleet to look as clueless as always. Any change from its established pattern might be interpreted as an indication that the Golden Skull Alliance discovered the truth about Lord Pearian's precise whereabouts."

Gloriana spoke up again. "By the way, Ves, why are we incurring delays and risking discovery when we can just ask Ylvaine for additional information?"

"Don't you think we already thought of that? Ylvaine is not an omniscient observer, Gloriana. He is far from it. He has already exerted a lot of effort in providing us with accurate directions of our main target. While he still has the strength to glean a few more details on Lord Pearian's immediate circumstances, his answers have been... vague."

"Vague in what way?"

"We didn't obtain a clear answer on whether the starship where Lord Pearian is on is built by humans or aliens." Ves answered. "Ylvaine also isn't able to tell us much about his captors."

"Why not? Shouldn't that be easy to discover? He has managed to find Lord Pearian easily enough."

"Lord Pearian is just a guy who has vastly overestimated his capabilities. Whoever captured him is not as trivial. We are dealing with a big player that apparently possesses enough strength to resist Ylvaine's peeping."

That immediately caused the handful of mech designers around the table to frown.

"Is it possible that there is an ace pilot stationed on this mystery ship?" Gloriana asked with concern.

"It is within the realm of possibility. To be honest, Ylvaine is getting back a lot of garbled data that is hellishly difficult to interpret. The only fact we know for certain is that we are not dealing with anyone weak, hence why we must maintain caution at all times."

This had already made Ves a lot more nervous. Anything involving stronger powers most certainly posed a greater threat to him and his fleet, but he wasn't willing to pull back at this early junction.

At least Ylvaine had been able to determine that the source of interference was not overwhelmingly powerful. If an opponent at the level of a god pilot or a True God was hiding inside the mystery ship, then he would have insisted everyone to turn the fleet around and depart as soon as possible!

Ves and the other mech designers exchanged a few more opinions about the current situation, but it was pretty pointless for them to delve too deep without more information.

Their conversation slowly drifted towards their work.

"How is the Samurai Project doing, Ketis?"

"It is progressing steadily enough." She replied. "I'm not as fast as the new you, of course, but all of our work is proceeding according to schedule."

"Do you have a good handle on the new tech that you wanted to use for the Samurai Project's primary armament?"

"There is a substantial learning curve to stormblade technology. It is new and substantially different from any other weapon tech that I have handled before. I am not dealing with a traditional cold weapon such as a plain alloy sword or a true energy weapon like a plasma sword. What I have instead is a solid alloy sword that can enhance its damage potential by energizing it, allowing it to inflict heat damage and electrical damage on top of physical damage."

Ves looked a bit thoughtful at that. "What is the effect of stormblade technology on the damage potential of a swordsman mech project? Does it help with allowing a blade to slice through obstacles with greater ease?"

"Stormblade technology is helpful, but not as helpful as I hoped. Don't get me wrong, Ves. It's still useful. Its main purpose is to add a relatively low-cost damage boost to the performance of the sword. As long as the blade strikes a target, it can inflict a lot of additional damage. It will take much less sword attacks to defeat an opponent. As for penetration, the story is more complex."

"How so?"

"The nature of stormblade technology means that it is only mildly helpful in increasing the penetration power of a sword. However, it is able to break energy shields with considerably greater effectiveness. It also has a moderately disruptive effect against electrical systems. Anything that isn't sufficiently shielded against EMP attacks may get knocked out if it has suffered a glancing blow from a stormblade weapon."

"That sounds useful." Gloriana remarked. "Is it worthwhile for us to replace all of the plain alloy swords equipped by our swordsman mechs with stormblade equivalents?"

Ketis immediately shook her head. "I wouldn't advise that. Stormblade weapons may not be as troublesome as plasma swords, but they still drain the energy reserves of a mech. When the swords aren't energized, they are weaker and less sharp than normal swords. I think we should limit the use of stormblade technology to my current design project and see how it fares."

"Are you confident in the success of the Samurai Project?" Ves asked.

"I am. I already have a decent understanding of what stormblade technology can bring to a mech. The Samurai Project will definitely satisfy a need within the Larkinson Army. It will have the damage potential of an axeman mech but retain much of the agility and maneuverability of a swordsman mech."

"What mech do you think can win in a duel against each other, your Second Sword or your upcoming Samurai Project?"

Ketis made a disgusted noise.

"It's almost meaningless for you to ask that question. Both of these mechs have high skill ceilings. They are only as good as their mech pilots. If they are piloted by excellent swordsman mech specialists, then they will be able to use their respective advantages to defeat a more powerful opponent. The Samurai Project has better peak performance and raw offensive power, but the Second Sword has better endurance, mobility and versatility. If I was a mech pilot, I would prefer to pilot the latter because it better complements my sword style, but there are still plenty of others who can make better use of the Samurai Project."

"I see. Thank you for the clarification. How long will it take for you to complete this project?"

"Not much longer than average. While I still have to get used to working with stormblade technology, it won't take long for me to understand the essential theories."

## Chapter 4575 Meeting Demand Vs Creating Demand

From what Ves could determine, the Samurai Project did not appear to be a gamechanger.

Its addition to the Larkinson Army's mech roster would not spark a revolution or a comprehensive boost in combat effectiveness.

It mostly added more choice to the Larkinson mech pilots while also giving them the option to embrace a different style of mech combat.

Ves actually thought favorably of the Samurai Project. Its stormblade technology added more variety to melee mechs and allowed them to inflict at least partial energy damage.

The enhanced effectiveness of stormblade weapons against energy shields was also particularly useful in the Red Ocean. The native alien warships generally relied on transphasic energy shields to mitigate large amounts of damage, so anything that gave his mechs an edge against this powerful protection was good news in his eyes.

The only major shortcoming of the Samurai Project was that it would drain its energy reserves faster while engaged in combat. Ketis already made sure to increase her work's longevity as much as possible by ensuring the sword only became energized when making contact with obstacles.

"Stormblade weapons can be a lot more powerful and destructive when wielded by the right warriors." Ketis remarked. "An expert pilot with the appropriate expert swordsman mech can break the limit of this tech and inflict devastating attacks. A part of me is eager to see whether one of our swordsman mech specialists will be able to soar with the help of the Samurai Project once it is finished."

That sounded interesting to Ves as well. He could always choose to facilitate a mech pilot's breakthrough with the help of the transcendence glow, but he

preferred to wait for natural breakthroughs in order to avoid promoting anyone unworthy.

The conversation soon turned to discussing other ongoing mech design projects.

Ves gave brief updates on the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project. Ketis looked surprised at how he altered their original concepts and intended to add untested new tech to them both.

"You always taught me that we should never bite more than we should chew. Aren't you making the same mistake by becoming up with the Empowered Blood Sharing System and the Geist System? Neither of them sound easy to invent as you will need to build up entirely new theoretical frameworks in subjects that you have never explored in the past."

He understood her skepticism, but he maintained his confidence in his ability to succeed in his new ventures.

"You don't need to be concerned for me, Ketis. While my earlier advice still rings true, a stronger mech designer does not have to hold back as much. Due to some recent...changes, I've become an even faster learner than I was in the past. I have already mastered all of the basics of biotechnology, so the EBSS probably won't be an issue. I am a bit less confident about realizing the Geist System, but I think I will manage to cobble something together."

The swordmaster shrugged. "It's your problem. This has nothing to do with me. Frankly, a part of me looks forward to seeing you fail. Your mech designs are becoming more and more ridiculous. Sometimes, I get the impression that you have become more passionate about bringing literal monsters to life rather than meeting the needs of the mech pilots that are just asking for solid and reliable mechs."

She brought up an important point about the mismatch between the decisions of a producer and the expectations of the end users.

"I know what you are trying to say." He said with a serious expression. "This has always been one of the problems afflicting every industry, not just mech design. It is not enough for creators like us to design mechs that straightforwardly give mech pilots what they have asked for. Our customers do not know what mech designers are capable of, and have limited awareness and imagination of what mechs they could actually obtain if they make the right demands."

Sara Voiken briefly directed her attention away from cuddling with Lucky to add her voice to this discussion.

"While it is important to listen to the feedback of mech pilots, it is the mech industry that is the greatest driving force of innovation. Mech designers are constantly pushing the limit and exploring completely new ways to make mechs stronger. In the past, no one thought about designing a mech that is entirely made out of nanomachines, but once a mech designer developed the first successful smart metal mechs, an entirely new market came into life. The same applies to biomechs, striker mechs, stealth mechs, heavy artillery mechs and etc. It has always been inventive mech designers who created them before there was any strong demand."

Her argument emphasized the leading role of mech designers in driving innovation. There were a lot of mech designers in human space, and many of them constantly worked on breaking or expanding the existing paradigms of mechs.

Most of them ended up failing and producing nothing of value, but a few exceptional mech designers succeeded in creating a new subset of mechs that fulfill a need that the general mech community never thought about.

A good example of this was living mechs and glows. Ves came up with both of these signature design solutions long before millions of mech pilots came to embrace their unique advantages!

Gloriana held a slight view on this matter.

"I do not disagree with you, Sara, but we should not dismiss the importance of listening to our customers. Not every innovation from a mech designer is a good fit for the market. One of the greatest annoyances of mech pilots is being forced to pilot a bad mech that those who have no understanding of their profession think is good."

This was a familiar topic of contention to everyone. Hardly anyone occupied the extreme positions, but it was clear that different mech designers leaned towards different sides.

Innovative and creative mech designers such as Ves tended to believe that they knew better than their customers. They were more willing to invest in the development of radical new design solutions in the belief that they had accounted for all of the variables.

That was not always the case, as evidenced by how Patriarch Reginald Cross mutilated the original version of the Mars, but Ves was one of the few innovators who possessed a positive record.

Most mech designers tended to err on the side of caution, however. There was nothing wrong with meeting the more immediate demands of mech pilots. The biggest advantage of mechs that did not become hijacked by the selfish desires of a maniacal mech designer was that they were stable, consistent and reliable.

Gloriana normally leaned in this direction as she was a big believer in doing fewer jobs well than doing many jobs poorly.



"We won't be able to surpass the competition if we keep doing what most of our rivals are already doing." Ves said as he crossed his arms. "There are Master Mech Designers and Star Designers that enjoy head starts of at least several generations. They have become a lot more skilled at meeting the existing demands of the mech market. Do you think it is a good idea to try to outperform them in all of the areas that they have spent decades if not centuries on improving? That is a fool's dream. It's a lot more realistic to branch out by creating your own niche in the mech market before working to expand it to the point that it becomes mainstream."

That was his strategy for the most part. His living mechs might not be as tough, fast or hard-hitting as the mainstream mech models released by all of the most prestigious and successful mech companies, but he wanted to be damned sure that no competitor could sell mechs that were more alive than his own products!

The gathered Larkinson mech designers eventually went back on track and updated each other on the remaining ongoing mech design projects.

The Greenaxe Project and the Bloodripper Project were both proceeding nicely as well. No one involved in them had anything special to say for the time being.

As people such as Ketis and Sara went back to working on their respective mech design projects, Ves turned towards his wife.

"Do you want to work on the Dullahan Project with me? I think I can use your input in my attempted implementation of the Empowered Blood Sharing System. I think I can optimize the layout of the blood veins so that they will take up less capacity and lower the burden on the mech design."

His wife immediately made a disgusted expression. "I do not know anything about biotechnology and have no desire to get caught up in your latest hobby."

I will do my best to adapt the conventional internal architecture so that it won't get mangled by your hamfisted attempt to insert bioparts into our work, but I won't touch any of them myself."

"Are you sure you don't want to expand your repertoire with biomechs or cyborg mechs? I can somewhat understand your resistance against the former, but the latter can give you the opportunity to get the best of both worlds."

"Biomechs are not consistent enough!" Gloriana shouted at him. "Cyborg mechs are admittedly much better in this regard, but they are still partially tainted by the inconsistencies and mutations that are inherent in the growth of any bioproducts."

That was a pretty clear rejection on her part. Ves was disappointed that his wife wasn't willing to share in one of his new passions. It would have been incredibly useful if he could extend his collaborative relationship with her to biomechs. They would have been able to design fantastic organic mechs that boasted more optimized physical structures.

Oh well.

He and his wife simply proceeded to work on separate aspects of the Dullahan Project.

Ves had already done most of the essential work on integrating the Empowered Blood Sharing System into the internal architecture of the Dullahan Project. He had made sure to leave enough room to ensure that the expert space knight did not suffer a significant drop in basic performance.

However, Ves did not dare to settle the design of the EBSS. He first needed to test the performance of the Blood Knight Project in reality.

Though Ves was close to completing this side project, it would probably take months for the Larkinson Biotech Institute to grow adequate copies of the Blood Knight design.

This was an awful long time and Ves did not know if he had the patience to settle down for a long wait just so that he could obtain proof.

As Ves struggled to determine whether he should lock in the current design of the organic parts, a notification interrupted his work session.

"What is it, Verle?"

"The Cross Clan has the development of the probes. Master Benedict Cortez is already in the process of fabricating them in person. They will probably be finished within the hour upon which the probes will be loaded into a handful of DIVA stealth shuttles so that they can be delivered to their intended destinations."

"Mhmm. Understood. How long do you think we need to wait until we have obtained any solid results?"

"That is hard to say. It will take several hours to deliver the probes to the surface of the brown dwarf star. After that, they will have to conduct a slow and cautious search in the approximate area where Lord Pearian's is purportedly located. I've been told that while the probes can be relied upon to blend into the background, their detection range is not particularly impressive. They also have to ascend to the uppermost layer of gas to transmit a tightbeam signal to our fleet in order to discreetly relay their findings to us. All of this will probably keep us busy for at least a handful of days."

"I see. I guess we don't have much options if we want to avoid triggering any alarms."

## Chapter 4576 Subtle Probes

The probes were impressively designed. Master Benedict Cortez only spent a short amount of time on their design, but his deep understanding of engineering along with his amazing understanding of energy allowed him to whip up a device that reluctantly met all of the criteria.

The most important demand was that it could survive the hostile environment of the upper reaches of a brown dwarf star. The second most important demand was that it would remain as obscure and unnoticeable as possible.

Under normal circumstances, Master Benedict would have preferred to design the probes and each of their individual components from the ground up, but he had opted to license existing probe and component designs to save a lot of time.

Starting off with existing parts and frameworks also enabled Master Benedict to split up the workload among many different mech designers and engineers. As long as he supervised the work and made a final pass on each individual assignment, he was confident that the quality would be sufficient.

He ended up making surprisingly small and low-profile probes.

When Ves shuttled over to the Hemmington Cross in order to gawk at the probes as they were being fabricated, he still struggled to wrap his mind around their design.

He initially expected that the Crossers would be making probes with the volume of an armored footsoldier, but they ended up as thin and sleek cylinders that were only as long as his torso.

Ves had a growing affinity for metal, so he was instinctively able to sense that the cylindrical probes contained surprisingly little alloys. Much of their structure was made out of non-metallic composites that were as durable as

Master Benedict could make them without increasing their mass and density by too much.

When Ves whipped out his old Vulcaneye and scanned one of the probes, he saw that his device took a bit of time to make its readings, and that it had difficulty defining a lot of parameters.

He believed that the probes would truly be able to do the job. Their ability to resist the hostile environment of a brown dwarf star while blending in the background was excellent.

"This is truly impressive work." Ves spoke as he did not hold back in his praise. "My clan and I would have never been able to develop probes that perform so well while maintaining such a low profile."

Master Benedict nodded in satisfaction. "You are good at coming up with new and highly unorthodox inventions, but the fundamentals are also important. By building up a greater understanding and mastery of fundamental human science and technology over several decades and many different mech design projects, we can create products of engineering the likes that normal people can never make. Since we have mastered the creation of mechs first, it is much easier for us to develop other devices with common elements. If you go far enough, you will eventually reach a point where the boundaries between mechs and other machines begin to blur."

Ves looked up at Master Benedict with a solemn expression. "Is that... how a Master Mech Designer evolves into a Star Designer?"

"Hehehe." The Cross Clan's head designer. "It is far more complicated than that. The gap between the two ranks is enormous. Star Designers are not simply Masters who have broadened their specialty from mechs to technology in general. They are reality engineers who have somehow gained the capability to access a deeper and more fundamental layer of the laws of

nature. The transition from being a civilian who has to obey these laws to being an administrator that can alter the expression of those laws is... immense."

Though Ves really wanted to hear more about the older man's views on Star Designers, Master Benedict controlled himself and refrained from saying more.

The reason for that was understandable. A Journeyman wasn't supposed to worry about this at his current stage.

Ves wasn't an ordinary Journeyman, though. He strongly believed that his recent sublimation that had partially turned him into a design spirit unlocked a lot of limitations that normally hindered the evolution of humans.

When Ves compared himself to the Polymath, he estimated that the gap between the two was still enormous, but not as much as before.

He already recognized that he acquired a few traits that he spotted from the Polymath during their only meeting thus far. The magnitude was still great as Ves was just starting to develop these additional extraordinary traits. He was like a baby who needed to design a lot more mechs and flesh out his design philosophy to a greater degree before he could come close to reaching her level.

When Ves briefly studied Master Benedict from a spiritual perspective, he could clearly sense the man's blazing power radiating from his mind. He was like a miniature star that could shine its light across the whole galaxy and perhaps beyond.

Yet as much as Master Benedict had grown by leaps and bounds compared to when he was just a Senior, Ves had met many Masters who were much stronger and more impressive in this regard.

It was rather interesting to compare the spiritual signatures of Master Benedict Cortez, Master Carmin Olson, Master Moira Willix, Master Termaneo Dervidian and the Polymath.

He met enough Masters in person to build up an incomplete model of the progression of the upper half of the mech designer profession.

Master Benedict had grown quickly over the past five years, but he was still at the beginning stages of his current phase in his career.

Ves could even discern a few more details about the progress he had made since he had initially broken through a few years ago. The man had worked hard to expand his theoretical knowledge. This made sense as the MTA was willing to give Master Mech Designers much greater access to its extensive library of high technology.

However, the downside of spending so much time on book learning was that Master Benedict did not have much room for designing lots of mechs or conducting new and original research.

Master Benedict's ability to design mechs hadn't improved that much because he essentially spent much of his time on preparation.

Once he was done with catching up on his homework, he would probably enter into a growth spurt as he combined all of that learning with his specialty to crunch out all kinds of new and amazing design solutions!

That was when Master Benedict's mech company would also take off. The Living Mech Corporation would probably have to contend against a more powerful competitor, especially one that was highly familiar with living mechs and came up with viable alternatives.

"What are the weaknesses of these new probes?" Ves asked as he saw that a couple of crew members cautiously packed them up and transported them over to the hangar bay.

"Their effective observation range is smaller than I would have liked."

Benedict admitted without shame. "I had to make a tradeoff between range and undetectability, and considering that we may be stumbling upon a hidden nunsen warship of immense power, I erred on the side of caution and leaned towards the latter."

Ves would have made the same choice. A probe that possessed powerful observation capabilities inevitably stood out a lot more, and that was extremely bad in this situation.

Master Benedict had taken excessive precautions because the nunsens mastered technology that was equivalent to that of the first-raters when they were at their best.

There was no easy way to make the probes good at detecting ships at longer ranges, so Master Benedict did not even bother to do so. He instead chose to go for quantity and fabricated many small probes that could be spread out over a wider area like an invisible net.

"Creating a network of probes solves multiple problems at once." Benedict said as the 3D printer he was operating was just about to complete the final batch of probes. "It lowers the performance requirements of each individual probe. It mitigates the limited range of each probe. It also allows us to create a daisy chain of probes that will allow us to maintain a longer active connection to all of the probes."

All of this sounded good, but Ves knew it wasn't easy for the Cross Clan to produce all of this on short notice.

"These probes may be small, but you have to fabricate a lot of them, and none of them appear to be cheap. These composite materials must definitely cost a lot for them to be so resilient."



"I originally stocked up on these materials for use in the development of the next iteration of the Conavis Mer." Master Benedict replied. "I updated it to Red Ocean standards not too long ago, but as the need to counter alien warships grows stronger, I have been exploring a potential new design application that can give our expert light skirmisher an immense advantage against tough opponents such as the V'gahnt-Zezne. To be honest, these materials are actually related to one of my more unrealistic ideas. I only procured a limited amount of high-quality composites so that I can experiment with them. If my idea turns out to be unworkable, then I wouldn't have wasted too many materials."

Talk about mechs always got Ves excited. He tried to figure out what Master Benedict had in mind by combining these composites with the Cross Clan's expert light skirmisher.

"I don't understand how these materials help with making the Conavis Mer stronger. Are you trying to reduce its mass, density and signature so that it is harder to track and hit?"

"It is not as simple as that." Master Benedict shook his head. "Developing the expert mech that you have described will only give us an inferior imitation of your Dark Zephyr. While Venerable Imaris Cross probably wouldn't mind piloting such a machine, our expeditionary fleet does not have a great need for such an addition. What we really need is a better way to solve the problem of heavily shielded alien warships. In my opinion, one of the most effective ways to counter them is to render their powerful transphasic shields irrelevant."

Ves suddenly had an inkling of what the Master had in mind. "Wait. Are you trying to design an expert light mech that can actually phase through energy shields as if they don't exist?! Can you even do that with your skillset?!"

Master Benedict laughed in an indulgent manner.

"Hahaha! It is a good idea, do you not agree? It is not as impossible as it sounds. Most energy shields are highly attuned to blocking dense and metallic metal objects as well as destructive amounts of energy. Their developers have not paid as much attention to blocking lighter and less metallic materials."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that a mech that is made entirely out of non-metallic composite materials can pass through energy shields without any effort." Ves critically pointed out. "I am pretty sure those energy shields are also attuned to blocking things like biomechs and other organic stuff."

"That is true." Master Benedict conceded. "There is much more to my concept and framework than I care to explain to you. Suffice to say, I think I can use my specialty to exploit a fundamental weakness of energy shield technology to enable a future version of the Conavis Mer to... slip through the cracks, as it were. It is as if the expert light skirmisher's entire frame has automatic permission to open a door and reach the other side of a typical energy shield."

If this worked... then the Cross Clan would gain a powerful weapon against any alien warship!

It would even help against many human starships as well, given that more and more pioneering fleets were adopting energy shields derived from alien technology. They had proven to work for the indigenous population, so humans did what it had always done and appropriated the new transphasic shields for themselves!

Given this inescapable trend, it became more important than ever to develop countermeasures against transphasic energy shields, and it sounded as if Master Benedict Cortez was pursuing an inventive way to circumvent their existence!

#### **Chapter 4577 The Same Kind**

Ves held a fruitful discussion with Master Benedict Cortez.

Even as the DIVA shuttles covertly picked up all of the freshly fabricated probes and went on their way to deliver them to the brown dwarf star, the two mech designers continued to talk shop with each other.

They initially talked more intimately about the various challenges of the Ghost Project and the Geist Project. Both of them had a bit of time to think more about how to tackle them, though they were still short on empirical data to do much more.

They talked about their ongoing collaborations on the other Larkinson expert mech design projects before Ves turned the conversation towards the Cross Clan.

"I take it that the Conavis Mer isn't the only expert mech that your clan intends to overhaul."

Master Benedict nodded. "That is correct. The Amphis Mark II along with our other expert mechs have shown their limitations in the last two battles. I am satisfied with their ability to keep up with the expert mechs of professional military mech organizations such as the Sundered Phalanx, but they are not specially designed to fight against alien warships. I do not mind if they are unable to threaten large and imposing battleships, but they should at least be able to defeat frigates and destroyers on their own with no significant effort."

Some of the Larkinson expert mechs could reluctantly do this. The Amaranto when armed with the Instrument of Doom came to mind.

"It will be difficult to turn them into ship-killing machines." Ves remarked.

"Expert space knights and expert light skirmishers excel when fighting against opponents of the same caliber or smaller. Their mech types don't really take the raw power of warships into account at all. The Age of Mechs has caused us to forget about their threat."

The opening of the Red Ocean had caused an increasingly greater portion of humanity to remember that there were more war weapons out there than mechs. The terror and the immense destructive potential of warships had led to the downfall of many unprepared pioneering fleets!

Even the Larkinson Clan was still not ready to fight against warships on an equal playing field.

This was why Ves intended to make good use of the hundreds of kilograms of phasewater that his clan recently obtained from Operation Lighthouse.

It was high time for the Larkinsons to equip more ranged mechs with transphasic armaments!

Master Benedict adjusted his expressive lab coat that hung loosely on his custom protective suit.

"What we truly need are expert heavy artillery mechs. The Thunderer Mark II has given us a solid reminder that larger caliber guns are much more efficient in overcoming the defenses of warships. Just one of them is enough to enhance our ability to fight against powerful warships. We could use one of them right now I suppose."

That was true. Ves glanced in the direction of the brown dwarf star that the Golden Skull Alliance was about to investigate. Who knew what kind of powerful supervessel might be hiding beneath the hot layers of gasses.

"Do you think it is a good idea for us to persist in our investigation?" Ves asked.

Master Benedict smirked. "I never expected to hear that from you. Aren't you always in favor of pursuing these kinds of opportunities? You have never shown that much restraint in the face of great benefits."

"That's not entirely correct! I can control myself quite well, you know. I advocated that we should kill the unclean whale that was buried within the Palace of Shame rather than attempt to keep him alive."

"That was only because we did not possess the confidence to control a creature as powerful as a phase whale."

"Can you answer my question, please?"

"Fine. You want to know what I think? I am okay with it. We have clearly evaluated the risks and rewards and concluded that the latter outweighs the former. We are not going in half-cocked but with a clear and sober understanding of the dangers involved."

Ves looked a bit surprised. "I didn't know your risk tolerance has become so high."

"I am merely realistic about the fact that we cannot progress further without doing more." The older man shrugged. "If we happen to have provoked a disaster that we cannot escape from... then so be it. At least we tried to improve our station. That is much better than many of our colleagues who have become satisfied with their routines and have stagnated in their work."

It was strange, but Ves felt a sort of kinship with Master Benedict. The man understood and embraced his viewpoint in a way that almost no one else could.

Both of them were mech designers who possessed great dreams and ambitions, so that made it easier for them to understand each other.

They recognized that they were the same kind of people. While they were separated by several generations, that did not stop them from sharing similar interests and passions.

Both of them were mech designers. There were even times where they thought that their lives and their wellbeing simply weren't as important as their work.

"I am glad to hear that I have your support in these endeavors." Ves smiled at the man who had provided a lot of help to him and the Larkinson Clan over the years. "Can I ask you what has caused you to adopt this stance?"

"It is nothing complicated, Ves. I am on a time limit. I have a clear awareness of what I need to do to advance to the rank of Star Designer, but the hurdles that I must solve are so overwhelmingly difficult that I can never solve them all if I adopt a regular approach towards my work. The only way to break this pattern is to follow your example and proactively seek out new and promising opportunities as opposed to letting them come to me in a passive manner. Only in the front will mech designers such as ourselves be able to discover and exploit rare and useful opportunities first."

"And you think that whatever we find inside the brown dwarf star is another such opportunity?"

"I can feel it." Master Benedict grinned again. "I am not an ordinary mech designer, as you well know. I have experienced my fair share of danger and adventure. This side of me has only grown stronger after the Trailblazer Expedition commenced."

"I feel the same way, though I am not as certain as you. Still, if both of us are able to sense something unusual in the brown dwarf star, then the likelihood that the hidden vessel is alien in nature is probably great."

A part of Ves preferred to stumble upon a human starship, but the gains he could make from that simply wouldn't be as good.

The two talked a bit more about their expectations of what they might find inside the brown dwarf star before they ended their discussion.

As much as Ves wanted to stick around longer, he still had to be back on his own ship to preside over the clan when the probes finally returned a positive result.

Once his shuttle brought him back to the Spirit of Bentheim, he spent his time as usual as he waited for another development.

Hours went by as the cylindrical probes all drifted inside the brown dwarf star. The stealth shuttles predictably incurred a fair amount of damage for coming so close to a large stellar object, but they at least managed to maintain their active stealth until they safely returned to the Glory Seekers fleet.

Ves was on edge and so were many other Larkinsons. They were all afraid that the probes might become exposed and trigger a violent response from the vessel that was trying her best to remain incognito.

He tried his best to distract himself from his concerns. He worked on his mech designs and played with his children.

When he finally received a notification, it turned out that a different development took place this time.

"The probes haven't shown us anything yet." Calabast spoke to Ves. "The brown dwarf star might not be as big as a real star, but it is still larger than a typical gas giant. You need to give the devices more time."

"The news that you have just shared to me will make that more difficult! Are you really sure the Cenatus Prospecting fleet is on their way to this star system?!"

Calabast nodded with a serious expression. "The stealth vessel and listening devices that we have left behind in the previous star system have all made the same observation. All but a handful of Otrus Magrin's starships have oriented their bows towards the Ramage Repulsor System before transitioning into

FTL travel. The Cenatus personnel have shown their determination to follow our footsteps."

Ves almost wanted to curse. He and his expeditionary fleet really didn't need the attention of a vulture fleet, especially in this sensitive period of time!

"I thought it would have taken longer for the Cenatus Prospecting fleet to get back into shape again."

"Normally, that is the case, but the circumstances are different this time. According to the intelligence that we have gathered, Otrus Magrin has forced his men to rush the preparations for departure. He has correctly surmised that our sabotage action was meant to hold him back as long as possible. As such, he has tried his best to counter that by departing as quickly as possible. He has even opted to give up on trying to rush the repairs on his 9 heavily damaged combat carriers."

That was a decision that Ves would never casually make. It was one thing to lose a bunch of combat carriers in combat. It was another thing to abandon them and throw them to the wolves just because he was in a hurry!

"What about the fleet carrier that DIVA managed to impair?"

"Apparently, Mr. Magrin has allocated a large amount of personnel to the Roaring Berann in the hopes of making her travel-worthy again. Pressured by their employer, the engineers pooled all of their abilities and cut as many corners as they could to shorten the repair of the damaged FTL drives by a couple of days."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "That sounds dangerous, Calabast. Those capital ship-grade FTL drives still need to be tested. To make immediate use of one of them without undergoing any serious debugging, calibration and testing is reckless to the extreme!"



"Tell that to Mr. Magrin." The spymaster scoffed. "At least he had the wisdom to mitigate the damage if anything goes wrong. Cenatus Prospecting has relocated much of the non-essential personnel assigned to the Roaring Berann. If it turns out that the fleet carrier fails to enter this star system with the rest of her compatriots, then I suppose it is an acceptable loss to the other side."

"Ugh. Filthy vultures. It is no wonder that DIVA managed to bribe its personnel so easily. An organization like Cenatus Prospect lacks a noble purpose."

The confirmation that Cenatus Prospecting would likely be crashing the party in the Ramage Repulsor System in the near future had massive implications.

While it was unlikely for the vulture fleet to attack the expeditionary fleet outright considering the disparity in numbers, who knew what Otrus Magrin might do to disrupt the exceedingly delicate and dangerous attempt to find the captors of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik.

"We need to have a plan in place to deal with whatever Cenatus Prospecting may do once its fleet arrives."

Calabast remained confident. "We have already formulated a number of contingency plans, Ves. You don't need to worry about this. We can do the planning ourselves without your assistance. Just let us take care of this. We have so many tools and manpower at our disposal that there may be more ways for us to neutralize the threat of the vulture fleet."

"I will be counting on you, then."

#### **Chapter 4578 Strange Discovery**

The mood across the fleet had dropped as soon as it became known that a suspected vulture fleet was heading straight towards the Ramage Repulsor System.

If there were Larkinsons who previously held doubts about the malicious intentions of the notorious Otrus Magrin, much of that had been dispelled.

There was no other reason for pioneering fleets to randomly travel to brown dwarf star systems.

They were the smallest and most resource-poor places in the Red Ocean, beaten only by the cold and naked void of interstellar space.

While it may have been suspicious for the Golden Skull Alliance to travel to this dark and relatively cold corner of space, that was not necessarily a valid reason for Cenatus Prospecting to follow suit.

As Ves thought about the intelligence provided by the Black Cats, he began to make a disconcerting guess about Otrus Magrin's motives.

"Why are you fretting so much lately, Ves?" Gloriana softly asked after she had just put their children to bed.

She moved over to the living area of their grand stateroom and seated herself onto a couch next to her husband.

Ves had been brooding all of this time. Clixie attempted to cheer him up by climbing onto the lap of his Unending Regalia.

"Miaaaooow..."

Unfortunately for her, the sight of a cute and fluffy cat did not provide any comfort to Ves at this time. How could he indulge in his cat fancy when there was a hostile fleet with an ace mech on the way?

He sighed. "Maybe we should have refrained from sabotaging the Cenatus Prospecting fleet. If we didn't provoke Otrus Magrin so much, he might have chosen to let us explore this star system in peace."

Gloriana snorted. "The Black Cats already told you that the Cenatus Prospecting fleet abruptly changed its course and headed straight in our

direction. Magrin had already set his sights on us. We were well within our right to make a preemptive strike. At least we have managed to reduce the amount of mechs that he can field in battle against us. With any luck, one of his fleet carriers won't make it and we will have even less to worry about."

"I suppose you are right."

Since Clixie wasn't able to attract Ves' attention, she hopped over to Gloriana's lap and tried to earn the woman's affection.

Gloriana simply put her palm on Clixie's side and rudely shoved the cat aside.

"Miaow!"

Seeing that she wouldn't be getting any attention here, Clixie moved towards Aurelia's bedroom so that she could cuddle up with her favorite Larkinson.

Ves meanwhile continued to think about how he should respond to the incoming vulture fleet. Doing nothing was probably not an option anymore, but he didn't feel any desire to enter into an open confrontation either.

"What do you think we should do when Cenatus Prospecting arrives in this star system?"

"It depends on what we will find in the brown dwarf star." His wife replied. "If we find out there is something worthwhile, then we should stand our ground and defend against anything our uninvited guests might throw at us. If retrieving Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik is not an option, then there is no reason to linger here. We should just leave and try our best to shake off the vulture fleet."

"That will be difficult. The vulture fleet is smaller and faster. It is designed with pursuit in mind and has less dead weight than us. We will only be delaying a confrontation at best."

"Then what do you want me to say, Ves?" Gloriana grew annoyed. "There are no easy answers here. Otrus Magrin has a reason to attack our fleet and we have a reason to attack his fleet. Both sides are hostile towards each other. As far as I am concerned, this means that a conflict is inevitable. The only decision that you need to make is when you want to start the battle. Do you want to postpone the conflict at the risk of giving our adversary more time to prepare, or do you want to initiate a confrontation right away?"

Ves couldn't decide on this matter.

Fortunately, he didn't have to. People such as General Verle and Marshal Ariadne Wodin were professionals in this regard and could make the best and most rational decision on everyone's behalf.

Although he took a short and restless nap that night, he finally received a bit of good news the next day.

"The probes have made a discovery!"

Ves rushed his breakfast and quickly kissed the heads of his complaining children before he raced off to a command center.

Once he arrived, he walked over to the middle of the compartment where a number of projections displayed grainy live feeds of several different probes.

The high degree of interference produced by the brown dwarf star extensively degraded the signals. It took a lot of processing power to clean up the footage, and even then there was still a distinct lack in detail.

Nonetheless, the weak sensors of the various probes had unmistakably stumbled upon a large artificial object floating at a decent depth beneath the upper layers of the brown dwarf star.

Ves immediately tried to ascertain whether the ship had moved into action once the probes caught sight of her hull, but the large vessel remained in place as far as he could see.

She was not completely inert. The sensors of the probe could clearly detect an active energy shield protecting the vessel from the heat, radiation and gravitic energies released by the failed star in close proximity.

"Tell me what you have discovered."

A tactical officer succinctly reported the expeditionary fleet's findings. "Our probes initially managed to catch a trace of this unknown ship due to the distinctive emissions produced by her active energy shields. The Crossers repositioned multiple probes so that they could wrap around the recently discovered vessel while also spreading out others to verify whether she was alone. So far, we have yet to catch any trace of another starship underneath the surface of the brown dwarf star, but we are not ruling out the possibility that she has company."

"That is a reasonable precaution to take." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "What can you tell me about the ship herself?"

"According to our preliminary findings, she is approximately 1.7 kilometers long or tall depending on how you interpret her. She is a fairly slender and narrow starship and is not designed to function as a carrier. She is a pure warship as far as we have been able to determine, and our probes have identified numerous primary and secondary weapon batteries across her hull. She is likely built for maneuvering through battlefields rather than slugging it out with other warships, and she boasts powerful thrusters to support that role."

The way the tactical officer described the basic properties of the discovered ship immediately exposed what kind of ship they were dealing with. No private human starship was allowed to mount any weapon batteries!

"So she's an alien vessel." Ves deeply frowned at this revelation. "Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik is residing on an alien warship."

"That appears to be the case."

"The nunsers or whoever owns this warship has gone out of their way to capture Lord Pearian alive." Ves said in an increasingly more concerned tone.

"Do you know what this means? It means the aliens have gained an understanding of the structure and the hierarchy of human society. For some reason, these aliens can not only tell pioneers apart from other humans, but also recognize their greater value. This is extremely disconcerting!"

"There is more, sir. Our men have been doing their best to analyze the ship and her many features, and what we have managed to uncover is... difficult to believe. I think it is best if I give the word to one of our foremost experts on starships in our clan."

The projection of Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai came to life. The woman had already prepared a short presentation for the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

"Oh hey, Vivian." Ves said as if he wanted to distract himself from the many implications swirling in his mind. "What is so strange about this alien warship that you need to come and provide clarification?"

"Let me show you, sir."

The projection of the Larkinson Clan's main ship designer called up a basic wireframe model of the warship discovered by the probes.

"Are you familiar with the basic structure and overall design patterns of the warships of the major races of our current galaxy?"

"I do." Ves nodded. "If I look at this model, I think it closely resembles that of the so-called home ships of the nunser race. The vessel is awfully thin, though."

"A lot of races tend to build their ships vertically as if they are towers." Vivian quickly summarized. "This is because they treat their starfaring vessels as their houses or their apartment complexes rather than a successor to oceanbound ships. The nunsers share this tradition. Given their size and their heavy preference for communal living, they tend to design 'fatter' and 'wider' home ships so that they have enough room to accommodate large herds."

Ves pointed his armored finger towards the ship model. "That doesn't exactly look like a fat or wide vessel."

"That is true. While the basic structural layout matches that of a typical nunser warship, the relative sleekness and other diverging attributes has caused us to wonder if we misidentified the vessel. It isn't until a few probes have managed to hover closer and send back clearer footage that we have a better understanding of the nature of this vessel."

She pointed towards another part of the projected model. Several elements across the hull lit up in red.

"These parts are almost never found on nunser warships. Their presence on the surface of the hull of this ship has perplexed us for a moment, but it wasn't until we recognized where they are more typically used that we have cleared a few doubts."

"Wait, are you saying that a nunser warship contains surface modules that are derived from the ships of another alien race?"

Vivian nodded and projected an oval-looking starship. "Take a look. This is a typical home ship of the puelmer race. Do you recognize anything familiar?"

"Damn! This starship incorporates the technology of two major alien races at once! Is there any other tech that is derived from another race?"

"Well, once we discovered that this ship appears to be a product of a multiracial group, we performed additional investigations and managed to glean more details on the hull plating that protects the ship from damage."

Another projection came to life. It detailed the approximate technical parameters of the hull plating. The data all showed estimates of the hardness, density, mass, material composition and other properties of the alloys used to form the shell of the ship.

Ves frowned. "What am I looking at here? The armor is tougher than we can typically find on alien starships, but it doesn't appear to be too amazing."

"It is not the strength of the hull plating that I am trying to direct your attention towards, but its origin. The properties that we have managed to derive from the raw footage closely match that of an existing formula for starship hull plating."

"Uhh..."

"A human-developed alloy formula."

"..."

"Sir, if these readings are accurate, then we may be looking at a warship that is developed with both human and alien technology. We have already identified tech of three different races, and we cannot rule out the possibility of more. This Frankenstein ship hasn't even integrated them in a seamless manner. Whoever is responsible for designing her was only concerned with mashing them all together in a brute force fashion."

"What does that imply, Vivian?"



"No human designed this crude vessel." She stated in a clear tone. "Any shipwright should be ashamed of making such a monstrosity. It is much more likely that either the nunsers or the puelmers have designed her. No matter what, neither of these two races are weak."

#### Chapter 4579 The Hybrid Tower

"Are we looking at an alien or a human warship?"

This question was surprisingly hard to answer.

Mech designers such as Ves possessed a great understanding in engineering, but their expertise did not encompass shipbuilding. There was too much about starship design that still eluded their understanding.

Though Ves and many other mech designers formed their own theories, they could not speak with authority on this issue.

They mainly leaned on their resident ship experts to make sense of the grainy, low-quality readings transmitted by the low-profile probes.

It just so happened that the Larkinson Clan's versatility and comprehensiveness became a boon at this time. The Larkinson Navy had brought along an entire ship repair and shipbuilding vessel in the form of the Diligent Ovenbird.

This recently upgraded capital ship previously functioned as a stationary shipyard in Davute, but when the preparations for the Trailblazer Expedition commenced, the Larkinsons had converted her back into a mobile capital ship, though at the cost of compromising much of her shipbuilding capacity.

Nevertheless, the Diligent Ovenbird still retained much of her shipbuilding crew. Thousands of ship designers, naval engineers, ship system specialists and technicians crewed the vessel.

These days, many of these workers busied themselves with repairing the combat carriers that incurred damage in the previous battle. They also worked

on studying, breaking down and recycling the alien warship debris from that same battle.

The shipwrights under the lead of Vivian Tsai mainly developed new and interesting starship designs for the Larkinson Clan. Even if the Larkinson Clan faced heavy constraints in ship production, it did not stop the ship designers from increasing the stockpile of effective ship designs.

However, the ship designers also spent a lot of time on analyzing the design and construction of alien vessels. The Battle of the Boryan Belt had given them excellent access to different alien warships. They had access to a huge amount of high-quality battle footage, but more importantly than that they also had actual samples of warship debris to examine and deconstruct in person.

While it was difficult for most people to imagine how all of this would convert into tangible benefits, Ves was thankful that he had invested so much into building up the Naval Design Department.

Compared to where it was in the past, the Naval Design Department had undergone an extensive period of expansion and professionalization.

The department hired many shipwrights, some of whom even possessed greater experience and qualifications than their relatively junior head.

Ves saw no reason to replace Miss Tsai with any of these highly competent shipwrights, though. He trusted her and was familiar with her. He also believed that she would continue to grow into the role and be able to serve the clan well for many decades to come.

Given the importance of figuring out the identity and the details of the unknown hybrid warship, Ves personally marched over to the hangar bay so that he could shuttle over to the Diligent Ovenbird.

The vessel looked a lot more industrial than the other ships in the fleet. The Ovenbird might have a silly name, but she had become as important to the Larkinsons as the Spirit of Bentheim!

Right now, the critical ship repair vessel was being flanked by both the Gorgoneion and the Graveyard. These two bulky capital ships physically protected the relatively fragile civilian-grade vessel from multiple angles.

No capital ship had docked at her Big Oven at this time. It was highly inconvenient to repair and conduct maintenance on starships during this tense and dangerous period.

When Ves stepped out of his shuttle, he noticed that much of the industrial gear had been locked down or stowed away.

Fewer workers were moving around as there just wasn't as much work to do at the moment. Everyone in the fleet had to be ready to respond to any emergencies at any time.

An air of uncertainty and oppression had descended onto the Golden Skull Alliance. Each of them had already witnessed the enormous firepower of an alien battleship.

Even if the flagship of the Unspoken was considerably larger and more powerful than the unidentified alien warship hiding underneath the surface of the brown dwarf star, the latter was much more modern and up to date!

A direct conflict against the unknown hybrid battleship would go a lot differently than the fight against the V'gahnt-Zezne.

In the last battle, a temporary coalition consisting of six pioneering fleets dispatched seven impressive ace mechs against the massive orven battleship.

With many of these powerhouse machines harassing the V'gahnt-Zezne at close range, her powerful but extremely sluggish and inflexible primary armaments were completely unable to retaliate against the fast and agile ace mechs!

The situation was completely different this time. The Golden Skull Alliance was on its own and could not dispatch more than a single ace mech.

The hostile environment of the brown dwarf star prevented the mech forces of the expeditionary fleet from getting close and using their mobility to their advantage.

This essentially meant that the Golden Skull Alliance had little choice but to engage the strange battleship at long range, which was exactly where warships held the greatest advantage!

Any ship with primary weapon batteries that were larger than several heavy mechs put together loved nothing more than to sit back at a comfortable distance and bombard their targets with overwhelming firepower.

This was the reason why everyone was so nervous at this time. A battle against a single alien battleship might cause the expeditionary fleet to incur horrendous damage.

As a precaution, the expeditionary fleet had already taken the initiative to move behind the rocky planet so that much of its bulk would shield the vulnerable starships from direct strikes.

This was not a permanent solution, though. Any decent alien warship possessed the ability to maneuver surprisingly rapidly on the battlefield as long as there weren't any powerful warp inhibition effects.

Given the enormous threat level of the hybrid battleship, Ves sped up his pace and quickly arrived at a compartment where numerous ship designers and other specialists were quietly analyzing the data collected by the probes.

"Sir. You are here. Please come and sit." Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai waved her suited arm at a central table.

When Ves moved forward and sat down on a sturdy chair, he glanced around before focusing his sights on the table projection.

Enough time had passed for the relevant experts to expand the details of the technical schematic of the hybrid battleship. They had identified many more smaller weapon batteries, sensor modules, exterior hatches and other interesting traits.

Vivian Tsai eventually finished her discussion with her leading subordinates and moved over to the table.

"How are you doing, Vivian? Is the ship giving you a lot of trouble?"

"You don't know half of it." The fairly young but already maturing woman said with a grimace. "The environment where the unknown battleship resides is making our jobs much more difficult, and I wish the probes were better equipped to make long-ranged observations. I know better than to ask whether we can move the probes any closer, but it is still frustrating to know that we can deduce at least twice as much information if those probes are willing to move just a few kilometers forward."

Ves shook his head. "That's not a good idea. The probes are currently hiding in the periphery of the alien battleship's detection range. The gasses of the brown dwarf star helps a lot with reducing their chances of getting detected, but moving them forward just a little bit will quickly double or triple the probability of exposure."

Vivian Tsai already knew that as she possessed a good understanding of sensor and detecting technology, but she still felt the need to complain.

She did not forget her duties, though, so she quickly moved on to business.

"I am sure that you are wondering who has designed, built and crewed this battleship that we have temporarily codenamed the Tower of Babel." She began. "While we do not have enough information to say anything solid about the latter two, we can at least form a fairly solid conclusion about the former. This... is a ship designed by a collaboration of shipwrights hailing from different alien races."

Ves frowned when he heard that. "Didn't you tell me earlier that you believe that this is primarily a nunser warship? The basic ship structure is built like a tower, which is exactly what the nunsers prefer."

"That is true, and I have no doubt that the nunsers likely played the greatest role in the design of the Tower of Babel, but she contains several elements that violate core nunser design principles."

She gestured towards the projection and caused the outline of the ship schematic to glow in red.

"Let us start with the silhouette and contours of this vessel. We have collected a lot of evidence that she is a vertically arranged starship, which means that the bow section is the top while the stern section that holds the main thrusters constitute the bottom."

"Why is that important?"

"It is highly inconvenient to construct a relatively long and narrow starship but arrange her internal structure in such a vertical fashion. The amount of stairways, ramps and elevators needed to facilitate movement will be excessive."

That did sound strange. It was the result of two poorly matching design choices.

"Why is this relevant?" Ves asked.

"I am getting to that, sir. The nunsers are evolved herbivores. They are like cattle that have quickly grown intelligent and managed to carve their own place in the Red Ocean. That said, they still retain many of the instincts and customs of their more primitive selves, one of which is the desire to live in large and expensive open plains."

"Well, this narrow tower-shaped ship certainly won't be able to offer that if she is vertically arranged."

Vivian curled her lips. "Do you see? The implication here is that the Tower of Babel is not crewed by nunsers, at least not in great numbers."

Ves was impressed by this deduction. "That makes a lot of sense. What else have you found?"

"Let us look at the elements that are obviously derived from the tech developed by other races. Let us zoom in on their main weapon batteries, which we have tried to reconstruct in this schematic as best as possible. What stands out in your eyes?"

The projection changed to zoom in on one of the primary armaments. The turret looked a bit too oversized on the relatively slender hull.

"The base of the turret is rounded. It's a cylinder pretty much." Ves observed. "The top of the weapon battery is shaped like a domed half-circle. That makes it pretty good at deflecting blows at an angle. There are three large kinetic cannon barrels, but instead of being placed in a row, they are installed in a triangular pattern, which is pretty perplexing as it will just make fire control more complicated."

Vivian nodded. "This is a classic puelmer kinetic weapon battery. It sort of fits onto the Tower of Babel. Normal nuser warships are generally much broader. They have the volume to mount larger and more massive weapon

batteries. The puelmers on the other hand are fine with smaller warships and their weapon systems are scaled accordingly."

"I see." Ves looked intrigued. "I suppose that all of these puelmer weapon systems need puelmer crew members to operate them. Maybe other alien races will be able to operate them adequately enough, but it is really better to put those who know them best in charge of their controls."

"That is also probable." Vivian Tsai said. "There is more, though. Let me highlight these modules to you. They are fairly small and difficult to notice, but when we performed comparison analysis with the help of archival footage of the Battle of the Boryan Belt, we came across several suspicious matches."

The ship schematic highlighted dozens of strange, flat surface modules.

"What are they?"

"They are sensors that are specifically designed to facilitate the operation of energy shields, more precisely segmented transphasic energy shields. We have found similar if much older types of modules on the exterior of the V'gahnt-Zezne."

Ves already began to groan. "So what you're saying is that the Tower of Babel is protected by orven energy shield technology?"

"That is correct. While transphasic energy shield technology is so widespread that every technological race has developed their own applications of it, the orvens are particularly good in this field. You can never go wrong with mounting orven energy shields onto a starship."

Hearing that the orvens were involved with the Tower of Babel complicated this entire affair even further. What the hell had his expeditionary fleet gotten itself into this time?!



## Chapter 4580 Who Built This Ship?

Ves studied the schematic of the 'Tower of Babel' with an increasingly more complicated expression.

His specialists had only scratched the surface of this mysterious hybrid warship so far, but what they managed to uncover so far was already enough to create an uproar among the pioneering community of the new frontier!

From what he had learned from keeping up with the news, most of the major alien races were incredibly proud of their own technological advances and disliked making use of products developed by other species.

If they were forced to adopt a powerful technological innovation that had the potential to alter the balance of power, their respective scientists and engineers preferred to adapt the tech and develop their own products based on the same principles.

That was not the case here. The Tower of Babel nakedly made use of tech derived from several alien races that did not have a history of working together, at least to this degree.

The only alien race that explicitly incorporated technology derived from other alien races was the puelmers. The ball-like aliens possessed no shame and often rushed the implementation of alien technology into their latest vessels.

The next element only reinforced the suspicion that the puelmers might have built this ship.

"What of... the hull plating?"

"Given the alarming implications of our initial conclusions, we performed a careful investigation with many different specialists who have expertise in this area." Vivian Tsai stated. "After an exhausting search where we have made extensive comparisons between the sensor readings of the exterior plating

and technical data available in many different databases, we have found a tentative match."

She waved her hand again, causing a new projection to appear that displayed a short product summary of a relatively recent starship hull plating formula.

"This... is a first-class commercial-grade product!" Ves gasped. "The materials used to produce all of this hull plating is unaffordable to us. Many of the key materials consist of first-class exotics that are only found in the upper zones."

"That is correct. Gugar Systems released the Arma-Lite DTT-F4 as a fairly premium option to clad a starship with decent protection without requiring too much mass. It is designed to be applied to fairly thin and light hull plating, though it can also be employed in thicker plating in order to add better protection to more critical ship sections. In any case, Arma-Lite DTT-F4 hull plating has proven to be a cost-effective solution. The fact that it does not incorporate phasewater is both a cost-saving measure and a significant weakness."

"Hmm. I understand."

If the warship was clad with transphasic hull plating, then the ship would truly be invincible. Her defensive performance would definitely be on par with the performance of MTA and CFA warships!

It was well-known that the Big Two had developed vastly superior hull plating that made their warships several times tougher than the starships of typical first-class states.

This was already the case well before phasewater became widespread. Ves could scarcely imagine how much tougher they would become once the MTA and CFA accumulated enough phasewater to fund the construction of a previously unheard-of superdreadnought!

"The defensive properties of DTT-F4 hull plating is good but not exceptional." Vivian continued her explanation. "However, that only applies in cases where the ship in question only has access to old school human energy shields. When DTT-F4 hull plating is working in tandem with orven energy shield generators, this 1.7 kilometer warship may just as difficult to destroy than the 3.2 kilometer long V'gahnt-Zezne."

Ves looked alarmed when he heard this conclusion. "The Tower of Babel's estimated mass and volume is several times smaller than the orven battleship that we had previously managed to take down. Are you sure about this claim?"

The chief shipwright did not show any doubt. "I know what I am talking about. Just as you are able to deduce the outcome of a duel between two different mechs, I can simulate the performance of a warship quite well in my mind. According to my judgment and that of others, the defensive strength of this warship is several times better than the outdated V'gahnt-Zezne that we managed to put out of her misery. It also helps that the Tower of Babel is much more modern. Since DTT-F4 has only been released to the public less than four years ago, it is highly probable that the battleship that we are examining is even younger."

A new alien battleship. Great. Combined with the fact that the operators of the Tower of Babel were so obviously familiar with humans that they already figured out how to fight against human mech forces, Ves would not want to confront this intimidating warship on an open battlefield!

He looked up at Vivian again. "Have you identified any other alien or human tech?"

"We did find a number of suspicious matches, but we cannot confirm our guesses due to the poor-quality observation data. It's probably not that important. The tech and design elements that I have previously mentioned are

the most dominant factors that have shaped the exterior of the Tower of Babel."

"How effective is she in combat? Does our fleet stand a chance against this powerful vessel?"

"I do not think we stand a chance if we attack her by ourselves." Vivian said.

"We don't have the firepower. We would need the Thunderer Mark II as well as the other ace mechs we fought alongside with not too long ago to make a dent in the Tower of Babel's powerful orven transphasic segmented energy shields and human hull plating. In the meantime, her puelmer weapon batteries will wipe our mechs, shatter our fleet and overwhelm the defenses of the Mars."

Ves frowned deeper. "The Mars truly doesn't stand a chance?"

"No. We are talking about a true first-class battleship. Even if she is on the smaller end of battleships, the scale and the estimated power of her armaments are so overwhelming that the Mars at least needs the support of a half-squad of ace mechs to put the Tower of Babel at a disadvantage."

The Golden Skull Alliance clearly did not have 6 additional ace mechs on call. The old temporary coalition had broken apart a few weeks ago. There was no way for Ves to call the gang back together as all of them had left the Boryon System in different directions.

The closest acquaintance that he could call upon was the Third Fleet of the Adelaide Mercenary Corps, but even then it would take at least two weeks or so for it to arrive in the Ramage Repulsor System.

Ves did not trust any of the other pioneering fleets that were lingering in the surrounding star systems. They were more likely to screw his fleet over than to cooperate honestly.

The more Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai outlined her estimation of the Tower of Babel's combat performance, the more Ves became discouraged about this entire situation.

The Golden Skull Alliance had not only managed to track down the whereabouts of Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, but also found a relatively unique battleship that was made up of a hodgepodge of different alien technology.

The value of either of them was incredible as long as the Golden Skull Alliance managed to capture either of them intact!

If the Tower of Babel was much weaker, then Ves wouldn't hesitate to go in guns blazing, but that wasn't the case.

The hybrid battleship was too powerful and her current location was too hostile to approach. Whoever was in charge of the Tower of Babel sure picked an excellent hiding place!

Ves needed more information about what he was dealing with. What he learned so far wasn't enough.

"You mentioned earlier that you did not have any good ideas on who built and crewed this vessel, but can you make an educated guess?"

"I do not wish to taint your perception of this formidable ship."

"Don't worry about that. I'm a mech designer. I understand the dangers of making decisions based on faulty and unreliable information, but we don't have much choice here. Just tell me your best guess. What does your gut tell you, Vivian?"

She paused for a few seconds. "The obvious conclusion we can make is that she is a puelmer creation. The narrow profile of the battleship is not that big of a hindrance to this race. The puelmers are also the most likely to rip off good tech from other races. It should not be a surprise to any of us that they have

even resorted to stealing a human alloy formula. Our race's greater dependence on physical defenses has allowed us to outperform the indigenous alien races in this regard."

Ves looked carefully in her eyes. "I take it that you are not in favor of this potential answer."

"No. There are still elements that contradict this possibility. The puelmers usually don't build their home ships in this shape. Their vessels are predominantly shaped like eggs and feature an abundance of soft curves. The Tower of Babel is a bit too angular and boasts plenty of sharp angles. The puelmers really hate that, so I seriously doubt that they would stoop to crewing such an antithetical vessel."

The argument made sense. The puelmers tended to get angry about a lot of different issues. There was no way that a majority of them would willingly serve on a ship that was shaped so awful in their eyes.

"If it is not the puelmers, then what is next?"

"It could be a human warship." Vivian Tsai proposed. "She most definitely wasn't built by the Big Two, but we cannot rule out any nefarious parties from other parts of human space. The overall tech level of the Tower of Babel suggests that she may be built by first-raters. Gugar Systems, who developed the Arma-Lite DTT-F4, is a Rubarthan development company. The exotics needed to produce DTT-F4 are mostly widely available, but there are a few materials that have only been found in a couple of human-controlled upper zones."

Okay, that definitely sounded shady to Ves. For a moment, he imagined that the Tower of Babel might be a ship constructed by traitors or profiteers who wanted to obtain a battleship of their own without tying this illegal vessel to their identities.

That didn't make much sense, though. The human plotters wouldn't have included any obvious human tech if that was the case.

"If humans aren't responsible, then what is your next guess?" Ves asked.

"The answer that I think is most likely is that we are dealing with a multi-racial alliance." Vivian said. "Different groups from different alien races have pooled their resources together to build a ship that encapsulated the best of what they can offer. The Tower of Babel may be a joint project that serves to unite the squabbling indigenous alien species that have treated each other with hostility for many generations."

Ves tried to imagine what life aboard the Tower of Babel would be like with so many different aliens working together.

"My thoughts coincide with yours. I am glad to hear that you have the same idea."

Vivian did not look so pleased, though.

"We are in greater danger if a multi-racial alliance is responsible for the Tower of Babel. No average alien leaders are involved in this matter. We may be interfering with the operations of the Red Ocean equivalent of the Big Two."

That... was a good point.

Ves just happened to know of one alien alliance that fit that description.

"The Red Cabal."

"Pardon, sir?"

"Do you remember the Unspoken? This orven pirate group had secretly been tasked with guarding the Palace of Shame, and it has done so for over a millennium. We learned that the Unspoken took orders from a phase whale, and that both of them were members of this supposed Red Cabal."

"What is the purpose of the Red Cabal?"

"We are unclear about that, but..." Ves hesitated for a moment. "There are suggestions that they are concerned with the protection of the Red Ocean and its native inhabitants as a whole."