

The Mech 5091

Chapter 5091 Acting On A Hunch

Venerable Zimro Belson may have made an explosive discovery!

If his intuition did not lead him astray, then Zimro had a strong hunch that the Hidden Smile had never been alone since she entered this star system.

What if the aliens had sent a scout ship into the Corellix System in advance?

What if that scout vessel possessed stealth capabilities?

What if this hidden ship not only managed to track the Hidden Smile's movements, but quietly followed the Hexer-built stealth frigate from a distance?

It sounded too ludicrous to be true, but Venerable Zimro couldn't think of any other way why a hostile alien ship in stealth just happened to be drifting in this specific area of the Corellix System!

"Meow meow meow?" Lucky questioned as he looked up at the expert pilot in doubt.

"I don't know what you have just said, Lucky, but I do not think my instincts are leading me astray." The expert pilot responded in an increasingly more certain tone.

The more he thought about his guesses, the more he wanted to stand by them. He felt that the adversaries that the Golden Skull Alliance attempted to challenge this time might be considerably more formidable than they expected!

The Larkinsons and their allies may have gotten too complacent by the relatively decisive victories attained in past battles against the native aliens of the Red Ocean.

That may have given the entire Golden Skull Alliance a distorted perspective on the competence and the threat level of their opponents.

Venerable Zimro Belson quickly tried to think why this opponent may be a lot different from the ones that came before.

The expeditionary fleet managed to defeat the wheednar raiding fleet with relative ease by employing a set of unconventional but highly effective tactics.

The Red Cabal who monitored and coordinated the deployments of alien forces in its ongoing war against red humanity may have received the details of what the Golden Skullers had done to secure victory against the wheednars.

The aliens may have developed the suspicion that the Golden Skull Alliance, which they have most certainly taken notice of, was on the hunt again.

It wasn't all that difficult to confirm whether this was the case. As long as the native aliens kept their eye out on the movements of the many scouting vessels of the Golden Skull Alliance, it may even be possible to figure out that the yurzen raiden fleet was next on the list!

"We've become too sloppy and predictable." Venerable Zimro concluded.

A competent and intelligent enough adversary wouldn't allow the Golden Skull Alliance to pick apart the alien raiding fleets one by one at its leisure.

If Zimro was correct about his suspicion that there was a competent alien leader at the helm, then the Corellix System may have turned into a trap for the expeditionary fleet!

He could not hold in his suspicions any longer. He needed to convey his strong suspicions up the hierarchy. The higher ups needed to be alerted right away!

This problem was that it was not so easy for a stealth mech to talk to others.

An open transmission in space would definitely get picked up by an alien stealth vessel that was lingering in the neighborhood!

Even a tight beam transmission that should theoretically keep the Phobos and the Hidden Smile as undetected as possible could still expose the expert mech to the hidden enemy.

"Meow meow." Lucky said as he noticed Zimro's dilemma.

"I think I get what you have just said. Let me try. Kalo! Can you do us a favor?"

The Phobos churned a bit before a ghostly chameleon abruptly landed on top of Lucky's body without warning.

"Meow!"

"Hissss..."

As Lucky started to make indignant noises about getting jumped from behind all of a sudden, Zimro gently reached out and touched the back of the energy manifestation.

"Kalo, you can contact the patriarch, right? Can you serve as my messenger and pass on my warning? I truly think the clan needs to know about my hunches."

"Hissss..."

The design spirit did as Zimro requested. It took a lot sooner than the expert pilot thought for the clan to make contact with his expert mech!

Kalo disappeared as an entirely different energy manifestation appeared into place.

Zimro looked incredibly surprised when a realistic image of the clan patriarch himself appeared inside the cockpit!

He was pretty sure that Ves' current appearance was not a projection. His expert mech was currently operating under full stealth, which meant that the Phobos was not supposed to be able to receive incoming electronic transmissions.

"How are you able to connect with the Phobos, sir?"

The energy manifestation of Ves smirked. "This is only a small trick. What you might not know is that every time I make a masterwork mech, I subconsciously impart a piece of myself into the machine. Not many mech designers can do this, but I can directly with my masterwork mechs and even channel a part of my power through this wonderful connection, especially after the Great Severing has occurred."

"What if the Phobos is not a masterwork mech?"

"Then I would just continue to use Kalo as a communication channel. Design spirits are quite convenient in that sense."

Venerable Zimro no longer wasted his thoughts on this matter. He returned to business and immediately conveyed his feelings.

It gratified him that his patriarch and direct superior did not reject his hunches out of hand.

"You are not wrong for trying to express your misgivings about the current situation. In my decades of experience, I find that expert pilots such as yourself are rarely wrong about predicting threats and dangers." Ves said. "It is best to err on the side of caution. If the situation in this star system is truly as dangerous as you have speculated, then it might not be a bad idea to abort this operation. We can always hang back in order to make more observations."

"No!" Zimro objected with a harsh whisper. "I do not want to condemn the colonists of Corellix III to certain doom. We can still save their lives as long as we navigate the current situation well enough. I believe that there is only a single hostile stealth vessel in this star system. The aliens may not have too much confidence in their guess that our expeditionary fleet would be arriving here. We can still foil the trap that the aliens have quietly laid."

The energy manifestation of Ves fell silent for a few seconds.

"I understand your personal priorities. I would like to save the lives of those colonists as well if possible, but I need to put the interests and the survival of my clansmen ahead of other goals. How certain are you that there is only a single unanticipated enemy ship in this star system?"

Venerable Zimro wanted to dress up his answer, but his pledge to Ves and his personal integrity prevented him from massaging his words.

"I... cannot tell whether there are multiple enemy ships spread across the Corellix System. My intuition doesn't span that far. I only have a vague suspicion that there is one enemy stealth ship floating silently in front of the Phobos."

Ves scratched his head in thought. "Then let's do this. You can try to scout the alien stealth vessel. I don't have that much faith in the stealth system of the Hidden Smile to keep the frigate hidden at closer ranges, but I have a lot more confidence in the cloaking capabilities of your Phobos. I designed him, after all. He has accumulated two Ascension Runes, right?"

Zimro nodded. "That is correct, and both of them are invested in the Path of the Hidden Stalker."

"Very well. So long as the enemy stealth vessel does not have detection tech that is as good as that of the Red Two, your Phobos should be able to remain undetected. We are about to embark in a stealth competition, then. Let us try our best to detect our hidden adversaries before they can find us first."

This was an incredibly risky operation, but it was the only way for the Golden Skull Alliance to intercept the alien raiders and stop them from bombarding another human colony into a crater!

Time was running out. If the yurzen raiding fleet still maintained its expected trajectory and speed, then it would be hitting the minefield pretty soon!

The Phobos needed to find the hidden enemy ship and deal with her in a fashion before it was too late!

The expert mech silently accelerated forward again. Venerable Zimro felt a much greater sense of urgency than before. The stakes were too high, and he could not live with himself if he failed to foil whatever the aliens had in mind in this star system!

Due to this haste, the Phobos was accelerating forward at a dangerous rate. No matter how well his designers had made the machine as quiet as possible, it was impossible to suppress every minor fluctuation.

This caused Zimro to subtly resonate more intensely with his battle partner. He might not share a Blood Pact with his machine, but his strong sense of purpose along with the implicit approval of the Phobos caused them to work a lot better than during their regular training sessions!

The manifestation of Ves briefly glanced down at the console and saw that Zimro's resonance strength had spiked to a new record.

This showed once again that expert pilots progressed the fastest when there were real consequences to their actions.

The Phobos began to slow down and even accelerate in reverse.

"I feel it is becoming increasingly more dangerous for my expert mech to continue forward at a higher pace." The expert pilot spoke. "The enemy must be nearby if my intuition hasn't steered me wrong. I don't know the precise location. It will take too much time to conduct a careful search."

"I know." Ves said. "Let's work together, then. The detection methods of the Phobos are pretty good, but I'm not sure they will be effective here, especially when they have to remain entirely passive."

"Then how should we locate the hidden enemy? Should I activate the Geist System and send out the fiends?"

Ves shook his head. "That won't be necessary. I will connect my companion spirit with the Phobos. He is pretty sensitive and he can sense energies and detect signs of life from a respectable distance. Proceed forward."

The invisible Phobos accelerated forward yet again, but this time Blinky had partially descended on the powerful machine and was using all of the senses he could marshal to detect anything unusual!

The Phobos changed his direction upwards and to the left along the way. Though Venerable Zimro felt increasingly tenser as if he was about to fly into the maw of a gigantic beast, he suppressed his fears and continued to pilot his machine forward.

"Stop." Ves commanded.

The stealthed expert mech stopped accelerating and only slightly tried to arrest his current forward momentum.

The machine tried to do this as gently as possible because even Venerable Zimro could tell there was a hidden enemy starship within a kilometer from his machine!

This was awfully close when it came to space operations!

Ves' expression turned a lot graver this time. "Your hunches did not lead you astray this time, Zimro. I can feel them. There are dozens of living organisms serving aboard an unusual starship that is clearly under active stealth. The closer your expert mech drifts to their coordinates, the clearer I can sense their lives. It is truly amazing that you have been able to lead us to them without possessing any solid proof or traces."

Though Zimro felt proud for receiving validation from the person he looked up to the most, he still had a mission to complete.

"I am ready to deploy my friends on this hidden starship." He said with a sharper edge in his tone. "Can you give me an estimation of her size and the species who built her? I will be able to coordinate the actions of my fiends more effectively if I know what style of alien vessel that we are supposed to sabotage this time."

This request caused Ves to look troubled again.

"Sir?"

"I heard you, Zimro. While I find it hard to believe what my senses are telling me, the species that are crewing the ship that is hiding in front of us is a little more special this time. If my judgment is correct, they are part of a major alien race of the Red Ocean that our clan has yet to meet."

That caused Zimro to feel even less at ease with this situation. "Which race?"

"The Arche, known as the sneakiest turtle-like aliens of the Red Ocean!"

Chapter 5092 The Arche

Of the 13 major races of the Red Ocean, the Arche occupied a rather unusual position in this fairly exclusive club.

Their population was not as high as that of the orvens or the nunsers, but their individual strength did not even get close to a powerful species like the phase whales.

Nonetheless, the arche managed to overcome their initial pressures and produced a civilization that might not be as prominent as many other major races, but enabled them to stay on top of other minor races!

The arche was a typical race that emphasized quality over quantity. This went right back to their biologies.

Due to convergent evolution, they shared a decent resemblance to the turtles of Old Earth. Each member of the arche race grew thick and resilient turtle shells that accompanied them throughout their entire lives.

What made the arche different from the turtles that humans were familiar with was that the arche had evolved to incorporate a large variety of exotic materials in their shells!

The arche could absorb a wide variety of strong and special materials and grow them into their shells in a way that preserved these properties!

This was the most exceptional part about their biologies. Their tolerance for materials that many other species considered toxic was quite generous. The shells they grew and expanded over their lifetimes also functioned as effective bioarmor.

Phasewater was no exception!

Although their tolerance for phasewater was not high, as long as they incorporated it into their shells, they essentially created their own individual forms of transphasic bioarmor, making them practically impervious to all small arms fire!

Relying on their natural advantages, the arche had been one of the few races that managed to resist a voribug invasion of their home star system.

They not only defeated the voribugs and turned them all into their latest delicacies, but also developed an awareness that there was life beyond their own limited planets.

The arche eventually utilized their unusual aptitude towards certain technologies to construct their own starships and travel the stars for the first time.

Their motivation?

To find new kinds of 'food' and eat the diverse species that had evolved on other planets!

As the arche came into contact with many other local alien civilizations in the Red Ocean, they began to have their fair share of advances and setbacks.

It soon became clear that the technology developed by the arche was out of tune with the rest of the local galactic community.

This was because the turtle-like aliens derived much of their technology from the functioning of their own intricate biologies.

They did not even utilize normal electronics and circuitry like other technology-based races like the puelmers.

Instead, all of the tech developed by the arche consisted of solid metallic components that were powered through a strange phenomenon that the Red Two has labeled as 'electronic resonance'.

It was basically a fancy and more advanced version of wireless power transmission. It was directly derived from how the arche powered the more extraordinary abilities from their own powerful shells.

With entire ships built like gigantic exotic-laden shells, the arche enjoyed a powerful defensive advantage compared to other starfaring races!

However, the incredible expense needed to construct these ships heavily limited their production volume.

The arche also weren't that numerous to begin with. Their libidos weren't that high and their mating customs were restricted by the fact that only the arche with more impressive shells received the opportunity to procreate.

All of this caused the arche to turn into prized targets by the other native races of the Red Ocean!

The shells of the arche along with the exceptional materials that made up their highly resilient starships were all considered treasures!

Whether other races wanted to use the 'archemetal' as rare trophies, exceptionally resilient hull plating for their own homeships or components of their own protective suits of armor, the demand for any form of archemetal had always remained high!

This caused the attempts of the arche to roam around the dwarf galaxy in order to eat tastier delicacies to turn into an existential threat towards their race!

In order to prevent their flashy and highly attractive shells and their incredibly valuable 'archeships' from triggering the greed of other races and attract endless aggression, the arche had been forced to turn their formidable technological prowess into avoiding conflict whenever possible.

This caused the turtle-like aliens to produce many breakthroughs in the field of stealth technology.

Once the arche began to integrate their own brand of stealth systems into their normally flashy archeships, the race no longer endured as many attacks as before!

The aliens that had previously been regarded as prey now found themselves regaining the initiative.

After all, as long as no one discovered their presence in a star system, the arche always retained the choice to go into action or sneak away without anyone's notice!

This stabilized this curious race to an extent. Their population no longer declined, but did not grow quickly either.

This was because their material requirements were far in excess of other races. Their high demand for resources was their greatest limitation as a race and as a civilization.

The arche resembled the races of the Milky Way a lot more than the Red Ocean in that sense.

Their archeships required large quantities of higher grades of tough exotic materials. A relatively small dwarf galaxy could never supply too many of them, and many of the star systems with richer deposits were already firmly occupied by the other major alien races.

Phasewater also limited their expansion. The arche apparently did not utilize transphasic energy shield generators.

They instead preferred to integrate phasewater directly into their archemetal-clad homeships, which produced formidable defensive results but also demanded much higher quantities of phasewater!

Interestingly enough, the arche also produced phase lords among their ranks.

The problem with these phase lords was that they diverted a lot of phasewater towards the expansion and strengthening of their turtle-like shells.

As these phase lords grew stronger, the phasewater needed to expand and reconfigure their expanded shells grew at an astronomical rate!

This was why it was practically unheard of for arche phase lords to grow past a certain threshold and turn into a greater phase lord.

The arche did not really possess a lot of enthusiasm towards becoming phase lords. They had little motivation to worship the phase whales as their gods because in their odd alien minds, any species that did not grow strong and beautiful shells were unworthy of their devotion!

Even the few arche that chose to become phase lords primarily did so because they wanted to employ greater spatial manipulation abilities to strengthen and vivify their prized shells even further!

This was also the only reason why the arche phase lords ended up in leadership positions. It was not because they possessed great personal strength or managed to live a lot longer than the already impressive 700 to 1200 year lifespan of most members of the arche race.

The arche phase lords primarily managed to win the respect and obedience of the other arche because their turtle-like shells were a lot larger, stronger and more dazzling in appearance!

These days, the arche could no longer drift around the Red Ocean under complete stealth and ambush different aliens in order to satisfy their endless cravings for delicacies.

The Red Cabal had mobilized every native alien race to defend their common home galaxy.

The vaunted stealth capabilities of the archeships did not prevent the Red Cabal from tracking down the leaders of the arche civilization!

Whatever happened during these discussions eventually caused the arche to 'realize' that their collective survival was at stake.

The arche had begun to contribute to the collective effort to stop subsequent human incursions and drive these aggressive extra-galactic visitors away from the Red Ocean!

The troublesome part about them was that the arche acted so secretly that no one understood the scope of their operations in the hot zones.

Ordinary detection tech wasn't strong enough to expose the presence of stealthy archeships.

If the arche ever launched an ambush, they usually made so many preparations that their opponents did not even have time to transmit their distress in many cases!

Only the mechers and the fleeters possessed the means to restrain the arche, but even they did not record that much information about this elusive and stealthy alien race.

Ves never expected that his expeditionary fleet would bump into the arche at this junction.

Perhaps he should have. All of the major alien races except for the voribugs had risen up against humanity's encroachment of their native galaxy. Each of them had made their presence felt in one way or another in the later stages of the invasion war.

As Ves had accidentally discovered the presence of a hidden archeship in the vicinity of a minefield, he began to entertain a lot of questions.

Was this archeship alone, or was she accompanied by other ships of her kind?

Had the aliens been paying greater attention to his expeditionary fleet and laid a deliberate ambush, or was this merely a solitary initiative organized by a single enterprising arche leader?

What measures did the arche in hiding prepare to turn the tables against the Golden Skull Alliance in the Corellix System?

Ves desired the answers to all of these important questions, but there wasn't enough time or information to satisfy his curiosity.

Time was short and the original sabotage attack against the incoming yurzen raiding fleet was supposed to start very soon.

"The entry of the arche into this star system is completely unforeseen and may have far-reaching effects on our plans." The energy manifestation of Ves told Venerable Zimro. "While it is safest to pull back and forget about the Corellix System, this is a rare and unique opportunity to capture a rare but extremely valuable arche homeship. Are you up to the task of crippling this hidden threat? You need to do this quickly without the benefit of understanding the layout and tech of this strange vessel."

Archeships worked a lot differently than the conventional homeships of the native aliens. Ves was not even sure whether the arche utilized traditional warp drives. They have invented their own ones based on archemetal that was not only entirely solid, but also impervious to light damage!

"We have little choice." Venerable Zimro spoke with a tone of urgency. "I will not allow these alien turtles to get in the way of saving the lives of the colonists of Corellix III. However, you have a point. We don't have enough time to learn the architecture and the technological principles of the hidden archeship. A few minutes isn't enough for me to cripple the archeship while at the same time catch up to the puelmer heavy cruisers that will drop out of warp soon enough. Our only choice is to rely on our cat to complete this crucial job."

"Meow!?"

Lucky rose up from his lazy posture on the armrest and looked a lot more alarmed when he heard this latest suggestion.

There was no way he wanted to infiltrate a completely new and unknown alien ship!

What if the arche possessed powerful tech that could instantly expose his presence and lead to his capture?

Ves directed a disapproving glance towards his cat. "You're going on a trip, Lucky. It will be fine. The arche may be strong in certain areas, but their tech is too uneven compared to the puelmers. I am sure you will do fine in this new alien ship. Just think about what you can gain from this adventure. Archemetal is made out of rich amalgamations of valuable exotics. That makes them superfood to your stomach. As long as you can successfully sneak inside, you will be able to enjoy an all-you-can-eat buffet of exotic alien metals!"

The mention of archemetal soon caused the gem cat to change his outlook.

What would it be like to gorge upon this entirely new category of metals?

Since so many alien races prized the properties of archemetal, Lucky might be able to obtain unprecedented benefits from eating this new type of materials!

"Meow..."

Chapter 5093 The Taste Of Archemetal

A cat was quietly thrown out of a mech and tumbled into empty space.

Lucky already started to have second thoughts about this dubious mission.

Humanity at least managed to collect a large amount of information about the traits, competences and technological capabilities of the more prevalent alien races such as the orvens and the puelmers.

The arche on the other hand remained so elusive that humans barely understood how their unique archeships worked!

What if a handsome cat like Lucky wasn't able to phase through archemetal?

That would pretty much end the infiltration attempt in its infancy!

Not only that, but Lucky would also remain stuck outside of an invisible hull with no way to return to safe harbor on his own power!

As powerful as the gem cat had grown over the years, interstellar travel was still far beyond his capabilities. Getting lost in space was a real possibility.

Even so, Lucky couldn't help but develop a strong desire to take a bite out of an archeship.

According to what little humanity knew about the homeships of the arche race, they were constructed as massively scaled up versions of shells.

The thickness of the exterior layers and the density of the archeships were exceptionally high compared to the typical starships constructed by other races.

The cost of producing them was just as exaggerated, which meant that they largely became as large as capital ships.

According to Ves' investigations, the current archeship was only about as big as a frigate. She was crewed by less than a hundred arche as far as he was able to detect, which meant that the ship was not as strong and threatening as the larger vessels of her kind.

Lucky still maintained his vigilance as his invisible form slowly drifted towards the archeship's suspected coordinates.

It was not until his intuitive sense for metal detected a crazy amount of higher grade exotics that his control began to slip a little!

The cat had to suppress his urges and make sure that the personal stealth generator of his Misfortune Harness still worked well enough to hide his presence from enemy sensors.

Confrontations between opposing units in stealth always centered around detection.

The side that detected the hidden enemy first always enjoyed a great advantage!

Unless the detection tech of the arche race was more effective than expected, it was unlikely for the archeship to notice that a gem cat was secretly drifting closer to her hull.

This was because the archeship could not employ her most effective suite of sensors and scanners!

Any form of active sensors inevitably generated signals of varying intensity that were much easier to detect.

If the crew of the archeship strongly suspected that a hidden enemy already discovered her presence and was attempting to sneak closer, then that might be a reason for engaging in active scanning.

However, as long as the arche thought that they maintained the element of surprise, they had no reason to expose themselves on their own initiative and lose the opportunity to catch the humans off-guard!

Lucky successfully took advantage of the mentality of the unsuspecting aliens and softly bumped against the solid hull of the archeship.

This was the most definite confirmation yet that a hidden alien ship had sneaked into the Corellix System in advance!

As Lucky's armor-clad form briefly touched the surface of the hull of the hidden archeship, the cat did not dare to stand on the surface.

Who knew whether the archeship's sensors would trip if they detected contact with a solid metal object like a certain mechanical cat.

The most important moment had come for Secret Agent Lucky.

Was he able to phase through the thick layer of archemetal and enter the interior of the alien vessel?

The cat had no choice but to take a risk and make a plunge.

After staring at the seemingly empty space in front of him for a few more seconds, Lucky boldly attempted to phase through the alien metal.

The cat immediately wanted to meow out in pain as the outer layer archemetal appeared to be at least slightly charged with energy as it was being used to produce a constant stealth effect.

Lucky's abrupt intrusion not only caused him to get shocked by a moderate amount of current, but also caused the archeship's stealth systems to produce small fluctuations as its energy distribution encountered slight disturbances.

The arche crew members responsible for the crucial stealth systems grew slightly panicked and tried to compensate for the disruptions as quickly as possible.

Lucky tried to get through the outer layers as quickly as possible without giving his presence away.

This was not easy as he couldn't move too fast for fear of producing strong traces. The cat continued to endure the current running through his Misfortune Harness and his metallic body before he finally reached a layer that was not under as much power.

It appeared that much of the power produced by the archeship went towards maintaining her active stealth system.

The layers of archemetal underneath were a lot denser and tougher. They also contained higher concentrations of phasewater, which made it a lot more challenging for Lucky to phase through.

It was not as painful and risky as trying to phase through powered metal, so the cat eventually managed to reach a free and open space without getting detected.

The cat first inspected whether the stealth system and other electronic systems of the Misfortune Harness were still operational.

The little stealth outfit was a lot tougher than it looked. Ves had designed it with dangerous conditions in mind. Shielding its electronic systems from excess current and EMP attacks was a simple matter with the use of enough high-quality materials!

Once Lucky became satisfied that his suit remained operational, he took a good look at his surroundings.

The breathable air consisted of a strange and slightly misty mixture of gasses that was toxic to humans.

The gravity level was a lot higher as well at 1.7 g. This gravity had a profound effect on the evolution and development of the arche race as they always emphasized defense over mobility.

The relatively small compartment was dimly lit. Though that did not hinder Lucky's artificial sensors in the slightest, an ordinary human wouldn't be able to see too far at this luminosity level.

No arche crew members were in the vicinity, which made Lucky a little less tense.

He had little idea about the capabilities of the arche race. He learned that their shells could not only function as armor, but also possess many other functions depending on how extensively they had been developed.

The stronger members of the arche race essentially wore a permanent version of a powerful and multifaceted suit of combat armor!

Lucky did not know whether he could keep himself hidden from these tricky aliens, so he wanted to stay away from them as much as possible.

He soon recalled his main goal.

Before he could do anything else, he needed to cripple the warp drives of the archeship.

The cat still did not have a clear idea of the layout of this hidden vessel, but he could make vague guesses about where they might be located based on the patterns of other alien homeships.

The cat steadily phased through the deck and continued to make his way to the lower levels of the alien ship.

He came across various weird-looking compartments and corridors that were covered by strange and constantly changing mixtures of archemetal.

Though Lucky occasionally encountered archemetal that smelled incredibly enticing to his nose, he resisted the urge to take a bite in order to maintain his secrecy as much as possible.

It did not take long before the gem cat caught sight of the first alien serving on this ship.

The arche was apparently preoccupied with controlling one of the systems of the archeship.

The method of control was much different from the methods employed by humans.

Instead of manning a traditional work station, the arche backed up his shell into an alcove that molded to the shape of his hard and colorful shell.

This created an interface between the archemetal and the organic archeshell that somehow allowed the alien to operate this part of the alien vessel with the least amount of barriers!

To Lucky, this unusual control method reminded him of the man-machine connections produced by neural interfaces.

The gem cat inwardly meowed before he proceeded further downwards.

The homeships of many alien races of the Red Ocean possessed a vertical layout, so they could stand like towers when landing on planets.

The archeship possessed a horizontal layout as her overall shape was basically derived from the quadruped form of her builders.

Lucky made a guess that the warp drives were located in the lower center of the hull. This was where the amount of protection from the surrounding compartments was the thickest.

He eventually phased into a large compartment that vaguely resembled an engineering bay but lacked any obvious power generators.

Instead, the space held two solid metal constructs that somewhat resembled warp drives but looked a lot more alien!

From the way that an alien was interfacing with each metal device, they definitely played an important role in the functioning of the hidden vessel!

If Lucky was visible, people would have been able to notice a devious grin on his feline face.

The cat slowly floated closer to the nearest archemetal construct.

His impressive sensitivity towards all things metal told him that this device incorporated a lot of exotic materials that were typically used to construct alien warp drives!

Not only that, it incorporated higher concentrations of phasewater than normal!

This was definitely the arche version of a warp drive. It was completely solid and looked a lot tougher than any warp drive that Lucky had encountered up until this point!

This presented the cat with a problem. How could he sabotage it without exposing his presence too soon and risk getting captured?

Lucky put his mind to use and tried to identify the most critical pieces of solid archemetal that were necessary to make the warp drive work.

If he ended up eating less important pieces of archemetal, then he wouldn't be able to complete his goal.

If the arche became alerted to his intrusion and activated powerful defensive measures that prevented the cat from engaging in any further sabotage, then that would be extremely bad for Lucky!

The worst-case scenario would be if the arche got cold feet and decided to warp away from the Corellix System.

If that happened, then Lucky would turn into a stowaway on an alien ship that was traveling all the way back to alien-occupied space!

Trying to find his way back to the expeditionary fleet or human space would be almost impossible!

To prevent that from happening, Lucky had to take out the warp drives!

His invisible eyes eventually grew more determined.

His limited technical understanding did not give him much of a clue on how to effectively sabotage this weird warp drive, but the cat made a rough guess that the phasewater-rich pieces of archemetal at the center were crucial to its functioning!

The cat quietly dove inside the complicated metal construct and felt glad that it wasn't currently used at this time.

Once Lucky reached the center, he began to take solid bites at whatever phasewater-enriched archemetal reached his maw!

Meow!

The taste of archemetal was indescribable. It was like entering into a completely foreign country and trying out the local dishes for the first time.

Many of the exotics that comprised of archemetal were fairly familiar to a connoisseur like Lucky, but the way the arche processed the materials and combined them into unique biometal alloys capable of producing electronic resonance was both novel and tasty!

Meow meow meow!

Lucky almost went mad with desire and hunger as he bit through the abnormally tough metals with ease.

Alarms began to sound inside the alien warp drive chamber.

The arche engineers began to show signs of distress and alarms. They used the connections between their archeshells and the archemetal to perform scans and activate a few emergency safety measures, but none of their actions were able to stop Lucky from creating a hollow space inside what used to be a solid and reliable alien warp drive!

Meow!

As the arche engineers continued to remain bewildered, the gem cat phased into the deck and sneakily made his way over to the other suspected warp drive and began to repeat his earlier feat.

Meow meow meow!

Archemetal was so tasty to Lucky that he didn't want to stop. Once he finished off the second warp drive, he fully intended to gnaw at the other parts of the archeship.

Perhaps he might even try to take a bite out of the colorful archeshells of the funny looking turtle aliens!

Chapter 5094 High Alert

As a certain hidden alien starship was beginning to suffer from a severe case of gem cat infestation, the Phobos had already moved on from the immediate area.

Just as the DIVA crew members of the Hidden Smile had planned, the transphasic mines planted at a specific set of coordinates managed to strike true!

Each of them exploded as soon as their sensors detected even the tiniest hint of a warp bubble.

By the time the mines actually exploded, the alien fleet in transit failed to move away in time to escape the abrupt destabilization of the local fabric in space.

The violent spatial activity immediately threw just over 63 percent of the alien starships out of warp!

This caused the remaining alien starships in transit to manually drop out of warp a few seconds later.

The yurzens all became alarmed at what had happened. The relatively weak aliens had been promised that it was unlikely that they would suffer problems during their raiding runs.

The hateful humans were all supposed to be occupied by the main forces of the Red Cabal and the major alien races.

The relatively small and less developed colonies established by the humans were supposed to be vulnerable and ripe for plundering.

So many other alien raiding fleets had managed to return from human-occupied space with cargo holds filled with precious loot that the yurzens desired to obtain easy riches as well!

The fact that their fleet had bumped into a small minefield quickly caused them to have second thoughts about this race.

What if the humans discovered their movements and laid an ambush in advance?

The yurzen starships quickly went into high alert. Most of them already activated their transphasic energy shields and prepared for a large-scale ambush that eventually did not arrive.

Venerable Zimro Belson and the Phobos showed little interest in the activities of the yurzen warships.

They were not their primary goals. The key to preventing the entire fleet from resuming its advance towards Corellix III was to take out one of both puelmer heavy cruisers!

Yet as the expert stealth mech quietly drifted towards the site where the alien fleet initially dropped out of warp, Venerable Zimro was immediately met with a complication that significantly hampered his next steps.

The alien fleet had split in half.

The larger group of alien vessels had dropped out of warp a little sooner than the smaller group, but this time delay was enough to put a lot of kilometers of distance between the two elements!

The aliens didn't appear to be in a hurry to reunite either. Any alien with a decent brain could deduce that if an unknown party had prepared an ambush, it was best not to allow the entire fleet to get caught in a prepared massed attack!

This was actually one of the favored ambush methods of the arche race.

In response to that, the aliens had eventually determined that it was best to split up their starships a bit so that they could cover each other from multiple angles.

This time was no different. Not only did both halves of the alien raiding fleet maintain a noticeable distance from each other, the starships had all gone on full alert!

Hundreds of starfighters deployed from the hangar bays of the warships that accommodated them. Each of them patrolled the immediate surroundings and directed as much power to their sensor systems as they could in order to detect any subsequent traps.

The puelmer heavy cruisers meanwhile not only activated their formidable transphasic energy shields at a remarkable speed, but also scanned the surrounding areas of space with their most powerful active scanners!

All of this made Venerable Zimro and the Phobos a lot less confident in their ability to sabotage either of the two puelmer homeships.

Even if they managed to succeed in crippling one of the vessels, the other one would certainly go on full alert!

"We've predicted this response to an extent." The energy manifestation of Ves calmly spoke as he took in the enemy movements. "The response of the aliens in charge of this fleet indicates that they possess a good understanding of what our forces have previously done to the wheednar raiding fleet. It turns out that the aliens are quite effective at sharing information for the purpose of learning from each other's mistakes. This is bad news. It is likely that the puelmers and the yurzens have prepared multiple countermeasures against our expeditionary fleet."

"Do you think the yurzens and the puelmers are in contact with the nearby archeship?"

Ves shook his head after a few seconds. "Their current movements do not suggest that this is the case. They may look like they belong to a united bloc on the surface, but don't forget that the arche used to be persecuted for a long time. These turtle aliens invested so much into developing their stealth capabilities in order to stop getting hunted for their valuable archemetal. I seriously doubt that all of the recent changes in the past decade has caused the arche to drop all of their mistrust towards the other native alien races. I bet that an unscrupulous technology-oriented race like the puelmers possesses the greatest greed for this rare material type."

That might not prevent the arche from sounding the alarm and transmitting a distress signal to the nearby yurzens and puelmers out of desperation.

Once the archeship joined forces with the other native alien warships, then that would make them a lot harder to deal with, especially if most of them still retained warp travel capabilities!

The situation in the Corellix System was getting more and more complicated. Ves began to entertain increasingly more doubts about whether the Golden Skull Alliance should even proceed to wade into this increasingly messier and more dangerous situation.

Yet as soon as he thought about the rare but incredibly valuable archeship hiding not too far away, Ves reluctantly shoved aside his unease and thought on how to proceed.

"It will be difficult for us to act at this time." He said as he continued to analyze the situation. "The aliens are aware of us and suspect that we have waylaid their ships in an attempt to sabotage them just like we did with the wheednar vessels."

That caused the expert pilot to frown. "If that is the case, then the aliens will never drop their transphasic energy shields. At this point, I am already happy if I can cripple the warp drive of one of

the puelmer heavy cruisers. That is probably all we need to do if we want to prevent Corellix III from getting raided."

The Geist System that turned the Phobos into such a highly effective sabotage and assassination tool was incredibly effective at bypassing material obstacles.

However, just like how energy shields blocked Lucky from phasing through under most circumstances, they were also capable of blocking the passage of the Geist System's fiends.

This was a massive restriction that severely limited the ability for the Phobos to sabotage alien starships!

Seeing that the waylaid aliens continued to remain alert towards infiltration, Ves knew that the current capabilities of the Phobos did not suffice anymore.

It needed to be able to overcome the transphasic energy shields one way or another.

So long as one of the fiends of the expert stealth mech managed to pass through the energy shields without getting detected, there would be a great opportunity to sabotage the puelmer vessel's crucial warp drives!

Ves began to think back on the design features of the Geist System.

He could think of multiple possible ways in which a change in the operation of the Geist System might allow the Phobos to push one fiend through a transphasic energy shield.

Many of these possible ideas sounded a bit too complicated or impractical in the current situation.

Ves regretted that he did not explore all of these options under lab conditions in the past. It was a lot harder for him to work them out in the field!

For example, he theorized that introducing the Phase King as an additional design spirit might enable the fiends to phase through an active energy shield without causing a disturbance.

Ves did not dare to do so though as Kalo was the principal design spirit of the Phobos. The Ghost Chameleon played an essential role in minimizing the emissions and the detectability of the expert stealth mech as much as possible!

As soon as Kalo was forced to share with another design spirit, this benefit might undergo a significant downgrade, enough to expose the Phobos to the powerful puelmer sensors and scanners!

He began to entertain an alternative idea.

His original design for the fiends was that they were made up of negative energies such as death.

This not only granted the malice-filled spiritual entities with the power to torment their victims and inflict material damage with a little assistance, but also made them so hard to detect in general.

Negative energies alone did not suffice.

Ves had to infuse them with vitality in order to animate them and bring them to life.

It was this component of positive energy that prevented the fiends from passing through transphasic energy shields.

He was able to make this determination because he recalled one important fact about death energy.

The death energy waves unleashed by battle formations performed in past battles had always managed to pass through every obstacle without fail!

Not only that, but the death energy component of the energy beams fired by the Gray Lotus also managed to bypass the transphasic energy shield without any apparent effort!

Perhaps a part of that was because of the enhancement from Helena, but Ves strongly believed that negative energies or at least death energy operated according to different rules than positive energies.

Ves shared his latest theory with Venerable Zimro, who looked incredibly thoughtful when he took in the information.

"I am not an expert in this science stuff, but I suppose it makes sense. So all I need to sneak a fiend to the other side is to drain it of life, is that correct?"

"Yes. I will go and tinker with the Geist System a bit. I believe I can do so with the current connection between myself and the Phobos. I just need to reduce one of your fiends. This will probably weaken the creature and may even kill him, but so long as you can still control him to an extent, we can use him as an effective infiltrator even if he has grown incredibly weak."

Ves moved into action without bothering to wait any further. He extended his awareness to the Geist System and tried to pick out the weakest and least valuable fiends among the bunch.

He soon found an appropriate candidate whose attribute was also based on death.

"Hmm, I remember calling you Nosferatu. Well, you shall be my latest test subject."

Before the fiend knew it, his life was passing away at the hands of his distant progenitor!

The creature let out a wordless cry as he quickly lost all of his vitality and 'died'!

When Ves looked at the state of the fiend that he had just drained, he noticed with some satisfaction that the fiend still maintained a certain degree of cohesion.

Maybe it was because Nosferatu was mainly formed out of death energy, but he still retained a tiny semblance of life!

"It's like I accidentally created an undead spirit." Ves muttered.

Nosferatu had not only lost a lot of strength, but developed a strong hunger towards the vitality that originally sustained his life.

This was enough!

"What do we do next, sir?" Venerable Zimro frowned. "It is all well and good to sneak a crippled fiend through a transphasic energy shield, but we won't be able to bring it back to life. That means that it won't have the strength to sabotage the puelmer homeship's warp drives."

"I already thought about that." Ves smirked. "What the fiend needs the most is life energy. We may not be able to supply it from the other side of a transphasic energy shield, but don't forget what these intangible monsters are good at. As long as Nosferatu here can approach a puelmer and drain the alien of his vitality, our sneaky fiend will regain at least a part of the vitality he needs to gain material strength!"

"Will that work?"

"I don't know." Ves honestly admitted. "Let's try it out!"

Though Venerable Zimro was in favor of taking action, he took another glance at the two separated alien fleet elements that were still on high alert.

"It... will not be easy for the Phobos to get close to a puelmer warship when the aliens are doing all they can to sweep for invisible intruders." He reluctantly said. "The chance of getting detected is... considerable."

"Is that enough to deter you from proceeding forward?" Ves asked with a knowing smile.

"...No. It is not enough. I have to go forward. I have to do something. If we cannot stop these ships from approaching Corellix III, then I will have to live with the knowledge that I could have saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of colonists, but ultimately did not do so due to my own incompetence."

With so many lives riding at stake, Venerable Zimro Belson was more than willing to risk his own life and that of his battle partner in order to complete a noble goal!

Chapter 5095 Wild Cat Chase

Within the hull of an archeship that was still in hiding, a certain striped metallic gem cat phased through the bulkheads like crazy!

Whenever the cat could do so, he took a few bites out of the solid pieces of archemetal here and there. Despite having ingested tons of compacted and specially processed materials already, the small intruder showed no signs of reaching satiation!

In the face of the yummiest and most delectable metals that Lucky had ever tasted, there was no way that the cat would allow his limitations to get in the way of absorbing large amounts of archemetal.

What made the alien metal so special to the gem cat was that it was a substantially different and more ingenious arrangement of matter than anything else he had encountered in the past.

The alloys based on the biometal arrangements of the major alien race's distinct archeshells possessed too many advantages to count.

Two different machines constructed from the exact same types and quantities of materials could perform in drastically different ways depending on how they were made.

A machine made out of conventional parts was fairly easy to produce and offered good performance. Humanity had been working with these kinds of technological components for enough millenia to optimize their design and usage to a high degree!

However, it had become clear that humans had already reached the limits of what they could do with the conventional model. Even the use of materializers which enabled people to produce parts that were practically impossible to produce by other means did not alter the physical limitations that restricted the nature of matter in the universe!

Unlike many other races in the Red Ocean and the Milky Way, the arche did not set out to develop their tech base according to the conventions of either galaxy.

They instead used the complicated and ingenious organic arrangements of their own archeshell as the starting point of their tech base and proceeded to gradually master its rules over a long stretch of time.

While the technological progression of the arche was awfully slow due to the inherent complexity of archemetal and the lack of alien rivals that could contribute to this effort, the arche had gradually come into power by depending on their own distinct proprietary tech!

No other race was able to imitate or replicate archemetal as of yet, and a lot of that had to do with how well the arche guarded their unique production methods.

This had led to a situation where most residents of the Red Ocean never managed to catch sight of archemetal and gain the privilege to learn about its amazing properties.

The few native aliens that did manage to encounter an archeship constructed of this special type of metals would usually get blown to pieces after getting ambushed by the sneaky turtle-like aliens!

These incidents took place far more frequently than most aliens realized. It was just that the arche were so damn good at ambush tactics that the demise of much of their prey was attributed to other reasons.

Throughout the long and bumpy history of the arche race, there had rarely been a case where their adversaries turned the table against them and successfully launched an ambush against one of their own hidden archeships.

In the first few minutes after the alarms had started to shock the arche crew members from their routines, the aliens had slowly come around to the fact that the humans had somehow managed to deploy one of their secret weapons onto their own ship without any notice!

This completely shocked the arche officers who assumed that they had everything under control!

After the arche had managed to develop their stealth technology and turned it into one of their great strengths, they rarely if ever managed to get discovered by others anymore.

Even if the puelmers had constantly tried to beat the arche at their own game, the even smaller aliens never managed to succeed due to their scattered research focus and lack of original research ability.

Even the humans were not able to detect the arche all of the time!

The arche had long learned that as long as their difficult to detect archeships stayed away from anything that belonged to the top forces of the human race, their vessels could stalk the weaker forces of the extragalactic invaders with impunity!

To acknowledge that they had failed against one such opponent was a difficult pill to swallow for the arche.

Nonetheless, they had no choice but to admit that they had screwed up in the most horrible way.

"Reayyyaah!"

"Krooaaaaaa!"

"Yiyiyiaaaaoiaa!"

The arche could not allow the foreign intruder to keep sabotaging their precious archeship.

Many crew members began to lock down various parts of the ship while taking control of various internal defensive measures.

Every archeship was filled with a lot of flexible and multipurpose archemetal segments. Each of them could be used to produce energy shields or transformed into impromptu weapons.

This was why Lucky frequently started to encounter obstacles and traps throughout his exploration of the archeship.

In one second, the bulkhead to the side looked completely smooth and empty.

In the next second, a small energy turret quietly poked out and tried to sting Lucky with X-ray beams!

"Meow!"

The only fault with all of these morphing archemetal parts was that there was a significant time delay to switch to different functions and configurations.

Lucky was able to outpace most of them by continually taking advantage of his excellent mobility.

The fact that he could keep himself hidden by phasing through archemetal most of the time posed a great hindrance to the defenders of the archeship!

If not for the fact that the aliens had eventually found out that they could restrain the intruder to an extent by energizing the archemetal at a higher level, Lucky would have been able to phase through the solid decks and bulkheads a lot faster!

It wasn't until a hunting squad of five powerful aliens arrived that the gem cat truly started to feel the pressure.

"Yuaaha!"

The archeshells of the four arche soldiers looked a lot thicker and more developed than that of other aliens.

Despite their added bulk, they moved a lot faster even under the 1.7 g environment of the interior of the archeship.

Bang!

Bang!

Organic boosters built into the rear of their shells literally enabled them to charge forward like rockets and collide against anything in their path with great force!

If that was not enough, the small amounts of phasewater integrated into their shells sped up their forward movements to a surprising degree by forming small warp bubbles around their forms.

Lucky did not want to get smacked by any of these arche warriors! Despite their relatively lackluster heights, the aliens were incredibly dense and heavy.

"Meow meow!"

As the hunt continued, the arche warriors not only relied on their tyrannical bodies to drive the annoying cat away from the most sensitive portions of the ship, but also made use of the energy guns grown from their archeshells to put further pressure on the intruder.

The arche turned out to be quite accurate with the aiming of these miniature biometal cannons!

This was especially when they fired wide area plasma blasts or gouts of sticky flames!

These attacks inflicted surprisingly little damage against the archeship's resilient interior, but they posed a real threat against Lucky.

His Misfortune Harness had been struck by these potent attacks a few times whenever the cat thought that he was in the clear.

The main reason why Lucky failed to outpace the deadly arche warriors and couldn't resort to his phasing ability to get away from all four of these persistent pursuers was because of the might of their leader!

The arche lord was not only the master of the archeship, but also developed a much greater control over the archemetal in his surroundings!

Whenever the arche lord needed to command his archeship, there was no need for the alien with the large, imposing and strangely beautiful archeshell to make physical contact with his vessel.

The arche lord had the ability to interface and issue instructions to his own ship by relying on electronic resonance alone!

The leader figure's highly developed archeshell glowed with energy as it commanded the archemetal in front of him to separate.

The bulkhead parted away like they were building blocks that a large pair of hands had forcefully shifted aside.

This immediately exposed the beleaguered gem cat that had been in the process of taking yet another bite out of the delectable archemetal.

"Meow!"

Lucky tried to phase away yet again, but the arche lord managed to damage the cat's Misfortune Harness a bit further with a rapid spray of lightning bolts!

"Yuuuaaaawwwhaa!" The arche lord roared from his alien throat.

The deck below his dense and solid form automatically parted away, enabling the alien leader and his entourage of elite soldiers to immediately drop down to the deck below.

The chase continued for many more minutes.

Though Lucky managed to take a bite out of a lot of archemetal, the functionality of the archeship barely dropped.

The archeship featured a surprising degree of redundancy. A lot of less essential archemetal parts could easily fulfill the responsibilities of more important archemetal parts.

Although the overall performance of the archeship was steadily dropping due to the persistent sabotage, many of her core systems still functioned properly more or less.

It was only when the cat managed to eat the more specialized parts that couldn't easily be compensated for that Lucky managed to inflict more permanent damage to the vessel!

The gem cat tried his best to inflict meaningful damage to the ship, but the arche warriors under the leadership of the arche lord responded increasingly better over time.

The aliens had begun to figure out the strengths and possible weaknesses of their fiendish adversary!

Lucky had also learned much about the arche and the archeship, but he was slowly losing his advantage.

If not for the fact that he was afraid that he would get attacked and blown to pieces if he tried to phase through the outer hull and flee into open space, Lucky would have tucked his metallic tail between his legs and extract from the archeship much sooner!

As it was, the only way for Lucky to ensure his survival was to completely cripple the archeship!

There was no way out for the gem cat!

Just as Lucky was about to infiltrate a compartment where his senses detected a lot of dangerous matter, the cat briefly paused in shock as he took in the weapons that the arche held in reserve.

"Meow meow meow!"

A set of three antimatter bombs were currently held in secure storage!

Not only that, but the archeship also held numerous potent missiles that contained fusion warheads.

Each of these weapons could inflict massive damage onto starships as long as they could get close enough!

Hardly any fleet would be able to come out unscathed after getting blown up by all of this ordnance!

These were the weapons that the arche relied upon to launch their killer blows upon pulling off a successful ambush.

So long as the archeship maintained this deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, the arche could easily cripple the entire expeditionary fleet, especially if they managed to deploy these superbombs without warning!

Just as Lucky was about to phase through the nearest antimatter bomb in an attempt to neutralize it, a strong transphasic energy shield suddenly barred his path!

Not only that, but many different cages of transphasic energy shields formed throughout the entire compartment!

"Meow!"

The gem cat was trapped!

Given the extreme danger posed by the alien weapons of mass destruction, it made sense that the arche had installed much more extensive defensive arrangements in this critical space.

Though Lucky tried to overpower a transphasic energy shield by attacking it with his powerful energy claws, another layer soon appeared in front of the cornered cat.

"Yyahwhwauau!"

The arche lord and his troops had finally caught up again!

As the alien leader moved closer, he began to study the trapped feline with a curious expression.

Though the arche lord found Lucky to be rather weak and ugly due to his mechanical shortcomings, he expressed curiosity at the gem cat's ability to phase through solid matter.

The arche needed to acquire this technology.

Chapter 5096 Cat In Distress

"We've arrived in the Corellix System, sir."

"Understood." Ves responded as he sat on his command throne in the middle of the bridge of his flagship. "Be vigilant about the possible presence of more archeships than the one that the Phobos has coincidentally discovered. There is no guarantee that these tricky aliens only sent one of their special vessels to this star system."

The unexpected discovery of an archeship came as an unpleasant surprise to the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though it was difficult to believe to the others that these rare and elusive aliens had laid in wait for the arrival of the expeditionary fleet, Ves possessed enough credibility among his clan and allies that he did not need to provide proof in order for the others to accept his claims.

Perhaps plenty of leaders had already thought that the situation in this warzone had been going a little too smoothly as of late.

The aliens might be able to mobilize a lot of cannon fodder among the minor races of the Red Ocean, but that did not mean they were wasteful enough to throw them into the grinder without obtaining any significant benefits in return!

The discovery of an archeship lurking in the Corellix System jolted Ves and many others out of their complacency and caused them to pay much closer attention to their perimeter defenses.

Thousands of mechs deployed from their respective carriers and began to sweep the surroundings at every angle.

The Flagrant Vandals took up the main responsibility for scouting the surrounding areas of space.

Their combat carriers and scout mechs such as the Light Hunters were generally faster and equipped with much more extensive sensor systems than usual.

The Light Hunter was extraordinarily effective at its job. While its effective range was rather short, with the support and empowerment of the Illustrious One, its Samasei Orb Directional Scanning Module was able to penetrate damn near anything that tried to remain hidden.

Even the Phobos might not be able to pass through unnoticed if he strayed too close to an active Light Hunter!

Aside from all of the scout mechs, the Blinding Blanshee also pitched in by deploying her formidable sensor and scanning arrays to regularly sweep the center of the expeditionary fleet for any approaching stealth craft.

Although the tech level of her extensive detection systems had fallen behind the times, the sheer amount of power of the narrow espionage-oriented capital ship made them quite effective so long as they remained active!

The only downside was that channeling a lot of energy through the Blinding Banshee's scanning systems wore them out a lot faster, but the Larkinson Clan did not particularly care about this. The damaged and worn out components could easily be fixed after the immediate danger had passed.

It was much more preferable to replace the damaged and burnt out scanning modules than to suffer a loss of multiple starships and thousands of mechs due to negligence!

On top of all of these security measures, an ace mech patrolled around the main fleet at all times.

The ace pilots considered a possible ambush attack from the mysterious arche race to be serious enough to agree to patrol the perimeter in person!

They had agreed to stick to a rotation that ensured at least one of them was deployed in the field at all times.

Their exceptional intuitions and their incredibly useful Saint Kingdoms served as a final guarantee against covert intrusions!

Not even the largest and most technologically advanced archeships should be able to sneak past the ace mechs without setting off alarms.

In fact, the much greater threat posed by more powerful adversaries would trip the danger instincts of ace pilots even more.

Saints were just that amazing!

As the expeditionary fleet cautiously moved forward with great vigilance, Ves studied the revised planning for the upcoming operation.

The Golden Skull Alliance had to maintain a healthy reserve to guard the main fleet during the planned attack. It was vital to keep this reserve of mechs on hand to respond to any unexpected developments.

Ves vaguely suspected that the alien movements in the Corellix System was not a haphazard matter.

If there was an alien mastermind behind the scenes that intended to lead the human forces into a trap, then the risks of proceeding with the operation were much higher!

Ves thought many times about shutting everything down and turning away, but he did not want to run without earning any measurable rewards.

He not only wanted to earn a huge batch of MTA merits by defeating an alien raiding fleet before it could ruin another colony, he also wanted to get his hands on an intact archeship!

The research potential of such a magnificent and exotic alien ship was endless!

Even if Lucky ate a lot of holes throughout her hull, a damaged archship could still provide him with a lot of invaluable inspiration and research data.

Capturing amazing alien tech was one of the main reasons why he embarked on the Trailblazer Expedition to begin with. Ves did not intend to back down unless the warning signs had grown too severe.

As Ves swept his gaze across the projected information panels, his mind was not fully present inside the bridge.

He had split his concentration into multiple threads.

His cyborg leg and Veronica were both spending their time on designing the Supremo Project and the Transcendent Punisher Mark III respectively.

Ves had discovered that if he worked on multiple similar projects at the same time, it became a lot easier for him to come up with good ideas and apply the same solutions onto other designs.

However, his mind was not on the two heavy artillery mech design projects at this time.

He was mostly focused on maintaining his active connection to the Phobos.

After draining Nosferatu of life energy, the Phobos threw out the undead fiend into space in the hopes of infiltrating the nearest puelmer heavy cruiser.

The challenges were immense. Not only did Venerable Zimro have to push a fiend that had become incredibly weak into an enemy ship, he also had to make sure his Phobos remained undetected.

That last part was an incredibly difficult ordeal by itself as the alien warships had engaged in active scanning and more in order to expose any invisible mechs or vehicles.

Just like the Golden Skull Alliance, the yurzen raiding fleet had grown a lot more frightened about the possibility of suffering a strike without any way to prevent it from happening.

The puelmers were just as formidable with technology as everyone claimed. Their scanning modules were small, but could overpower the stealth systems of any hidden elements at close range!

Though Venerable Zimro Belson could count on the more extraordinary capabilities of the Phobos to reduce the chance of detection, he did not want to take any chances.

The Phobos constantly circled around the puelmer heavy cruiser in order to escape the most intensive zones being scanned.

It was a dangerous and risky game for the expert stealth mech.

Not only did the expert mech have to stay close enough to maintain a solid and stable connection to Nosferatu regardless of the constant repositioning, Venerable Zimro also had to predict the actions of the powerful puelmer vessel in advance!

Zimro did not always manage to get it right, but the resonance-empowered Seferath transphasic active stealth system held up long enough for the Phobos to move to a safer and less intensively scrutinized quadrant of space.

Ves did not know how long the expert mech could keep up this risky dance. The longer the Phobos lingered so close to an active alien vessel, the greater the chance of getting discovered.

Nosferatu needed to produce results quickly in order to succeed!

Just as the fiend was about to close in on a transphasic energy shield, the Golden Cat suddenly materialized in front of his face. "Nyaaaa! Nyaa nyaaa nyaa!" The spiritual cat voiced in alarm.

"Huh? Lucky got captured? How?!"

"Nyaa nyaa nyaaaaa!"

Ves immediately felt distressed. He knew it had been a little risky to dump Lucky onto an alien warship without proper preparation. They knew too little about the capabilities of the arche.

Their worst fears had come true this time. The aliens were a lot more competent than normal, and somehow managed to outplay the gem cat!

Ves immediately thought about what he could do to pull Lucky out of his sticky situation.

The expeditionary fleet had just arrived in the Corellix System and needed way too much time to reach the ambush site.

The only asset in the vicinity that could bail Lucky out was the Phobos.

As long as Ves was willing to give up on this important opportunity to sabotage at least one of the puelmer homeships, the Phobos could still make it back before the aliens committed an abominable act against their captured prey.

"I need more intelligence, Goldie. Since you're connected to Lucky, can you give me a visual on his current situation?"

"Nya!"

The Golden Cat channeled a small part of her energies to form a golden projection that displayed a highly secure chamber deep inside the archeship.

Lucky was currently being held in a cage made out of multiple layers of strong transphasic shields. His Misfortune Harness was nowhere to be seen, which meant that the aliens had almost certainly destroyed it or stripped it away.

Despite his dire state, Lucky did not stop trying to get out of the cage. His paws regularly struck the closest energy shield in an attempt to test its strength.

Though the cat could inflict substantial damage against the energy shield, he could not exhaust the energy reserves of an entire starship by himself!

Several members of the arche race were standing behind the dense array of energy shields. They all appeared to be examining Lucky as if he was an alien test subject.

What was important to Ves was that he did not sense any immediate urgency of intent to harm from these arche.

This caused Ves to relax to an extent.

"Do you think the aliens are in a hurry to disassemble Lucky and poke into his internals?"

"Nyaa...? Nyaaa..."

"Yeah, I don't think so either." Ves settled back into his imposing throne. "We will see what we can do once the Phobos has completed his main objectives."

Goldie did not like the sudden lack of concern expressed by Ves. Why wasn't he ordering Venerable Zimro to turn his expert stealth mech around right away?

"Nyaa nyaa nyaa!"

"I have known him for many years. Lucky will be fine. He's more resourceful than he looks. Don't be fooled by his sorry and distressed appearance."

"Nyaaa..."

The Golden Cat still felt a lot of concern about what the aliens might do to Lucky, but Ves already figured out the arche to an extent.

The aliens succeeded in capturing the infiltrator. They probably became impressed by the tricks that Lucky pulled off during his sabotage spree.

There was not much point in destroying Lucky right away. The best way to learn the principles behind his mechanisms was to preserve him as best as possible and find the least destructive manner to dismantle his exterior, all without triggering any possible self-destruct safeguards!

Such operations required a lot of planning and preparation. The archeship might not have the proper facilities to conduct such a difficult examination.

The aliens were in no hurry now that they had regained control. Now that the destructive cat was completely contained, the arche were probably not in a hurry to finish off Lucky, not when he was much more valuable to them intact.

It was always risky for humans to predict alien behavior, but Ves was willing to bet that the arche followed proper logic as well.

So long as these aliens did not make any irrational decisions, it was not too late to save Lucky's life.

"It will be okay, Goldie." Ves tried to console the ancestral spirit. "Lucky has remained complacent for too long. He needs a setback like this in order to regain his focus. Let's just hope the arche won't be able to repair their broken warp drives quickly. It will be a lot more difficult to get him back if the archeship manages to get away!"

Chapter 5097 Fiendishly Weak

Just as Ves dismissed the danger his cat was in, Venerable Zimro Belson grew incredibly nervous as he awaited the most critical step of the new plan.

He did not know whether to believe in the claims of his patriarch. He may have grown a lot more familiar with the Phobos and the Geist System in the months since he became a proper expert pilot, but he did not understand anything about how his fiends worked.

Zimro couldn't even control them that much. The Geist System might restrain them and force them to act according to orders, but it was not capable of giving the expert pilot direct control over the actions of his own army of nefarious ghosts.

At most, Zimro was able to exert a bit of influence over them by using his true resonance as leverage.

"Do you think that Nosferatu will be able to pass through?" The pilot asked.

"He will." The energy manifestation of Ves said in a fairly confident tone. "I am more concerned about what comes next. He will be on his own from this point onwards. Will he have the strength to drain the vitality of a puelmer, or will he get defeated in the end?" Nosferatu had slowly drifted close enough to attempt the crossing.

As his form slowly passed through the powerful transphasic energy shield in front, his shape quickly grew fuzzier while his spike-filled mouth uttered a silent cry of pain!

"Damn, it's not working as well as I hoped." Ves frowned. "It turns out that death energy can't completely pass through transphasic energy shields after all. Compared to the more powerful and concentrated death energy attacks, Nosferatu is a lot weaker and less fragile. It doesn't take as much effort to destabilize his intangible form."

The state of the poor fiend had deteriorated a lot all of a sudden.

Nosferatu's responsiveness had dropped a lot since he was drained of life, but the damage dealt by the transphasic energy shield to his intangible form seemed to kick in his drive to survive.

The spiritual fiend sped up his passage and managed to make it to the other side intact!

The only problem was that the fiend had lost a lot of strength in the process!

The undead fiend had grown so weak and feeble that it looked as if a single gust of wind could cause him to break apart and drift away!

Venerable Zimro tried to resonate harder with the Geist System, but there was a limit to how extensively this weird module could reinforce the strength of a fiend.

"You can't do much to boost Nosferatu on this end." Ves told the expert pilot. "Perhaps the story might be different if you have invested an Ascension Rune in the Path of the Ghost King or the Path of the Soul Reaper. I can understand why you chose to prioritize the Path of the Hidden Stalker first."

If the Phobos hadn't become so good at hiding himself, the puelmer heavy cruiser may have captured the expert mech's traces by this time!

Ves would have never allowed his precious stealth asset to stray so close to a technologically sophisticated warship if he did not have sufficient confidence in the cloaking effectiveness of his latest masterwork mech.

However, an expert stealth mech that was only good at hiding himself and nothing more was ultimately not that useful.

What mattered was what the Phobos could do when he was able to sneak in position.

The lack of focused strengthening on the Geist System and its collection of fiends turned into a critical shortcoming at this stage.

Compared to many of the older and more experienced third order living mechs, the Phobos was still a baby in relative terms.

Sending out the Phobos to sabotage a puelmer homeship that was on full alert was like dispatching a low-level game character on a high-level mission!

Ves would have felt a lot more comfortable if the Phobos had double the amount of Ascension Runes.

Unfortunately, there was no way to speed up their formation all that much.

The Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra that he had gifted his third order living mechs enabled them to cultivate and grow stronger at a faster rate, but it wasn't specifically tied into his Ascension Paths at the moment.

While the cultivation method did contribute to the formation of Ascension Runes, the efficiency was far too low for his liking.

Ves needed to work out the cultivation methods of his mechs further in order to ensure that his third-order living mechs would be able to develop their potential a lot faster.

All of his living mechs but especially his third order ones could vary dramatically in power and capabilities depending on how extensively they had grown!

The older and more advanced their cultivation, the more they were able to undertake tasks that would have stumped their non-living equivalents!

"Nosferatu is about to penetrate through the hull of the puelmer heavy cruiser." Venerable Zimro quietly reported.

"Understood." Ves nodded. "Make sure to nudge him to the bow section of the alien vessel. There should be relatively fewer puelmer crew members over there as there shouldn't be anything too important on the top decks."

The layout of puelmer homeships resembled that of the nunsers and many other races. They were built like towers, though they usually adopted a horizontal orientation when they traveled in space.

Compared to the battleships built by many other races, the puelmers liked to keep their homeships relatively small and compact.

It did not take long for Nosferatu to phase through the outer hull layers of the alien warship.

Although the ship was highly active and powered a lot of different systems, the undead fiend was able to avoid most of them while shrugging off the rest.

Once Nosferatu got inside, the fiend looked lost for a time.

The interior of the puelmer warship was a lot more cramped and compact than the ships of many other races.

The main reason for that was because the puelmers were small in stature!

As a race that looked like leathery balls with lots of tiny hands poking from across their surface, there was no need for them to design interiors with high ceilings.

In fact, the puelmers deliberately lowered the ceilings of the corridors and compartments of their homeships as much as possible to frustrate boarding actions!

The only way for other alien races, especially the taller and larger ones like the nunsers, to successfully capture and secure a puelmer homeship was to dispatch small bots, but they rarely

worked out well as the puelmers had a million different ways to interfere and glitch their electronic systems.

Yet for all of the puelmer preoccupation for making their small homeships as intrusion proof as possible, their measures did not hinder Nosferatu's passage in the slightest!

After the fiend managed to regain his wits in this strange and foreign environment, he began to drift towards the nearest source of life that he could detect.

As a creature dominated by the death element, Nosferatu's sensitivity towards life had become exceptionally more pronounced.

Even if his intelligence and sentience had degenerated by a large extent, he still retained a part of his most basic survival instincts.

Right now, Nosferatu had become so incomparably weak that he would probably dissipate on his own within an hour or less.

Speed was of the essence!

The ghostly apparition proceeded to phase through multiple bulkheads and drop through the deck in order to reach a compartment that looked to house a few segmented energy shield generators.

Sabotaging these shield generators would likely lessen the frontal defensive cover of the puelmer warship.

It would have been interesting for the fiends of the Geist Systems to sabotage these crucial shield generators, but right now Nosferatu only wanted to drain the vitality of one of the puelmer engineers on duty in this compartment.

Yet as the invisible and unnoticeable fiend drifted closer to the ball-like alien and attempted to phase into the center where the brain was located, Nosferatu quickly pulled back in pain!

The puelmers weren't individually strong as a race, but the undead fiend had lost so much power that he couldn't even overcome the instinctive defenses of his prey at the time!

The alien engineer meanwhile stopped in his work and rolled back a bit. "Kheayua?"

As the puelmer expressed his confusion about why he suffered a small ache all of a sudden, Nosferatu fled the compartment and built up a bit more distance.

The spiritual entity had sustained even more damage in his failed attempt to overpower the spirit of a puelmer!

His lifespan had dropped even further.

At this time, he had become so weak and fragile that it looked as if he might not last longer than 20 or so minutes.

The closer he came to death, the more Nosferatu became driven to solve his lack of energy and vitality.

The fiend drifted from compartment to compartment in search of life that was weak enough for him to tap.

It was hard. The puelmer heavy cruiser was only populated by puelmers. While they varied a bit in strength, each of them were healthy and possessed an aggressive mindset, which was fitting for soldiers.

None of them were weak enough to give Nosferatu any hope of salvation!

As the undead spirit continued to lose more strength, his senses finally managed to pick up much weaker sources of vitality.

Compared to the many other puelmer crew members aboard the alien vessels, the latest cluster of life were in much poorer condition!

Nosferatu soon emerged from what looked like a cross behind a prison and a slaughterhouse!

The stench of alien blood spread across the room as half-a-dozen or so puelmers aimlessly moaned in pain while they were hanging onto meat hooks extended from the slightly higher ceiling.

The puelmers stood out by their cruelty. They were just as heartless to themselves as they were to the members of other races!

They dealt harshly with any criminals in their ranks. The most preferred punishment entailed hanging the puelmers onto hooks and cutting bits and pieces of their skin and flesh over time.

While the puelmers were omnivores, they preferred to eat meat whenever possible.

Many puelmers happened to delight in eating the flesh of their victims!

Even if the taste of meat of their own species was not as palatable as that of others, their culture encouraged them to eat the bodies of their own kind under certain conditions!

At this time, the conditions of the six rule-breaking puelmers were mixed.

One of them had clearly been hung less than a day ago given that he only missed a modest part of his skin.

Several more were in fairly weaker conditions as they had probably been put up for about a week.

Two more were in terrible conditions. Their skins and hands had all been carved away. Many of their organs had been at least partially sliced away as well.

The fact that they were still alive was a testament of the medical technology of the puelmer race!

Yet even if they managed to stay alive after suffering all of this torture, the half-cannibalized aliens would rather have their torment come to an end!

It just so happened that a certain fiend might be able to oblige.

The hungry spiritual entity instinctively drew towards the weakest condemned puelmer and took a risk by invading the alien's mutilated body.

Different from before, Nosferatu did not encounter nearly as much resistance as before.

The puelmer's lack of vitality along with his sincere desire for death had not only made him open to invasion, but also caused the poor alien to welcome anything that would deliver him to the waiting arms of death!

As the undead fiend began to sink his intangible claws into the spirit of the dying puelmer, only relief and satisfaction radiated from the punished alien.

Meanwhile, Nosferatu immediately gained a substantial boost of strength!

The injection of just a minor amount of vitality was enough to undo a modest amount of damage and amplify his meager strength to an impressive degree!

When Nosferatu finally sucked the puelmer dry, his senses already shifted to the five other prisoners hanging from their own hooks. The buffet had just begun!

Chapter 5098 Shadow Warrior

Two powerful warriors faced each other in a high-tech sparring ring.

The male warrior wore a fairly thin protective suit that offered decent protection and reinforcement. He held a pair of extremely tough and thin practice knives in his hands.

The man jumped on his feet and kept twitching his limbs as if he was about to make a lot of strenuous movements. His flighty demeanor and the loose smile on his face gave off the suggestion that he was not taking this bout too seriously.

The larger and more athletic female warrior opposite to him was not fooled. She had tangled against him multiple times over the years and learned that the man could hide quite a sharp edge beneath his casual facade.

She was an experienced enough warrior to deal with all sorts of opponents and situations. She had honed her swordsmanship since her teens and refined it into an art of its own. She had shed the blood of many humans and aliens with her, but her Bloodsinger still yearned for more!

There was no need for her to bring out the big guns for today.

Given that she was about to spar against a fellow Larkinson, Ketis had opted to leave her Bloodsinger behind and opt to wield a pair of ordinary practice swords.

The smaller weapons also made it a lot easier for her to control her strength against a dual knife wielder.

"Heaven! Heaven!"

Sharpie emerged from her head and dove into one of the swords, causing it to exude a much greater sense of threat.

As Ketis assumed a combat mentality and tensed up her body, she carefully evaluated her current adversary.

"Are you ready?"

"Almost." Tusa spoke as he furrowed his brows for a moment. "This isn't as easy for me as it is for you. Resonating with these tiny blades is a huge pain, especially when they aren't made of resonating materials."

"Resonance is a crutch if you rely on it so much." The swordmaster admonished. "I know it is important to expert pilots such as yourself, but skill and willpower are the root of your strength. Resonance will automatically come as long you are confident enough in your skill."

Perhaps her words had an effect, because Tusa ultimately managed to click with his practice knives.

Expert pilots were never meant to wield blades in their hands like swordmasters, but there was enough parallels between the professions to produce at least a small degree of resonance.

That was enough for this practice bout.

"I'm ready. Let's start!"

The two fighters immediately ran towards each other as if they had finally been unleashed!

Clang! Clang!

Four blades collided against each other right away!

The difference in physical might between the two immediately became clear as the male expert pilot stuttered backwards as if he had just rebounded against a wall.

Though Tusa had tried to avoid a direct comparison in strength as much as possible by attacking Ketis from an oblique angle, his opponent was far too skilled and reactive to let him have his way.

Ketis had to hold back a lot. The point of this practice bout was not to attain victory at all cost or to determine who was the stronger among the two. This sparring session was mainly to enable Tusa to hone his skills and warm him up for the upcoming engagement against the yurzen raiding fleet.

This was why Ketis remained on the defensive despite possessing the skill and strength to do much more. She only occasionally thrust out her blades in order to take advantage of any loopholes revealed by her sparring partner, but other than that she mainly focused on blocking and repelling the incoming knife attacks.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sounds of metal arms colliding against each other echoed throughout the sparring chamber.

Despite the high exertion, Tusa increased his pace and began to incorporate more complicated movements in his routine.

He automatically fell into the habits that he had ingrained through his training and began to spin and dance around like a performer rather than a fighter.

He spun around Ketis and constantly tried to break her rock-solid guard.

Unlike his opponent, Tusa did not hold back at this point. Each of his attacks could be considered lethal and they could definitely poke anyone full of holes if there weren't any defenses in his way!

As Tusa began to immerse himself in the Shadow Dance Dagger Style, he began to perform all kinds of techniques that he had learned from ingesting the enlightenment fruit but never fully mastered.

No matter how well the mysterious fruit stuffed so much theory and understanding in his head, there was still a massive difference between knowing how to execute an extraordinary technique and actually pulling it off in reality!

His muscle memory was still inadequate, but that was fine because he was an expert pilot first and foremost. It was fine as long as he could pull off the moves with the Dark Zephyr.

Yet as Tusa had become more adept with practicing this extraordinary art with his expert mech, he became increasingly more aware that he was lacking in an important area that hindered any further mastery of this exceptional fighting style.

He needed to gain a greater comprehension and intimacy with shadows.

This was rather difficult for Tusa as he had never become entranced with the power of shadows in the past.

His inclinations were quite different. As a descendant of the Larkinson Family, he possessed an upright mentality towards combat.

Even if he chose to specialize in piloting light skirmishers, he did so with the intention of outmaneuvering and overcoming opposing mechs with style.

It was not until the fruit abruptly caused him to gain a talent in shadows that he had begun to grapple with this element and its traits.

Before the Great Severing had occurred, Tusa had made relatively limited progress in increasing his understanding of shadows beyond the initial boost.

Yet now that the entire Red Ocean had been displaced in an environment with an abundant amount of exotic radiation, the expert pilot found that much of the strange and whacky methods of the Shadow Dance Dagger Style was able to evoke this element in reality!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The benefits this brought to Tusa became increasingly more clear as he constant dancing and spinning maneuvers seemed to build up a certain kind of momentum in the air that caused the light around his form to darken.

Shadowy mists began to trail his body like fading afterimages.

Though these shadows only lasted for a few seconds, as Tusa continued to maneuver like no tomorrow, the shadows quickly accumulated over an area that partially hindered the vision of ordinary observers!

It became increasingly harder to keep track of Tusa. The expert pilot understood the essence of the Shadow Dance Dagger Style, which was to dance around long enough to saturate an area with shadows and turn it into his execution field!

Although it took a huge amount of energy and effort for Tusa to engulf the sparring ring with his accumulated shadows, his effectiveness constantly rose!

He felt more at home inside the shadows of his own making. His vision remained as clear as ever. His movements became faster as if he was encountering less resistance. His knife attacks became deadlier as a hint of darkness enveloped the blades of his weapons.

One of the greatest charms of the Shadow Dance Dagger Style was that it enabled a weaker practitioner to defeat a stronger opponent by maximizing the advance of shadows!

Right now, Tusa tried his best to realize this as he struck Ketis with harder and more relenting execution techniques!

Shadow Blade!

The power of shadow concentrated onto his knives and threatened to penetrate or bypass his opponent's defenses!

Leaping Shadow!

Tusa bounced back a bit, but quickly proceeded to make a powerful forward leap!

His forward momentum became so great that the shadows clinging to his body jumped ahead and struck Ketis a brief moment in advance!

This forced Ketis to lift up one of her swords at an angle and block both dagger strikes at a clever angle.

Fortunately, the force exerted by this shadowy apparition did not come close enough to the real deal.

Nonetheless, this also forced the swordmaster to lift up her other sword at a slightly more awkward angle in order to block the much more forceful strikes of the real Tusa!

CLANG!

The physical momentum empowering Tusa was so great this time that Ketis couldn't help but take a few steps backwards at this time!

This was amazing progress considering that Tusa never made Ketis move in many past sparring sessions.

This little success seemed to lift the expert pilot's courage even further, causing him to resonate increasingly more with his knives and the shadows of his making.

He moved faster and struck a little harder as he executed a host of other techniques.

It was not until his momentum had surpassed a certain threshold that he felt ready to pull his ultimate move.

"Ketis!" He shouted even as shadowy darkness clouded his form.

Ketis already knew what was coming. She bent her knees a little further and held her blades in a firmer guard position.

At the same time, she resonated with her practice weapons even further with the help of Sharpie, enabling her to form a thin but sharp defensive energy curtain around her body!

"Come!" She roared!

As Tusa danced around, his eyes abruptly grew sharper.

At the same time, he finally evoked his companion spirit for the first time since this sparring session commenced!

Chip! Chip!

Blackwing flapped his wings and dove into one of Tusa's practice knives. The weapon began to exude a greater threat while at the same time look a lot less substantial than before.

This was a strange contradiction of effects, but Tusa somehow made it work by leveraging the utmost of his willpower!

As his will and focus started to condense, he swept both of his arms back before he surged forward while swiping both of his knives at once!

The Finale!

CLAAAAANG!

"Ahhh!"

Tusa fell back while crying out in pain!

The surrounding shadows swept away as his momentum was completely lost!

As his body bounced onto the sparring ring floor, Tusa tried his best to suppress his pain. He shook his hands in order to rid himself of the aches that came about when his weapons had been forcefully wrenched away.

The sparring session had come to an end.

"You failed." Ketis plainly spoke as she wound down with ease and placed the flat of her blades onto both of her shoulders.

She hardly looked like she had gotten any exercise at all during the clashes!

Tusa's expression fell. "I was sure it would work this time. I trained so hard to perfect this ultimate execution technique. I thought that Blackwing would help me turn into shadow and phase through your resonance barrier."

"It's not the technique that is at fault." The swordmaster declared. "The strange and powerful fighting style that you have learned has a lot of potential. You're just not the right person for the job. You're not an assassin, Tusa. You're a duelist more than anything. You are not playing to your strengths by continuing to master this dagger style. I have noticed that you have been trying to modify and adapt the techniques that you have learned, but you have not gone far enough in trying to develop your own fighting style."

"I know." Tusa sighed. "I often get stuff wrong. I truly want to find a way to overcome my greatest shortcoming and make myself more useful in the battles to come. If I can't find a way to phase through transphasic energy shields, my Dark Zephyr will never be able to make a significant impact in our future battles against those alien fleets."

Ketis understood his difficulties. He was hardly the only expert pilot who was trying to resolve this common problem.

"Keep trying." She advised. "I am not telling you to give up on leveraging the power of shadows, but I think you have already spent more than enough time on perfecting the Shadow Dance and its many techniques. What you need to do at this stage is to go back to your roots and remember how you originally fought. I think you will have a much better chance of succeeding in your goal if you leverage your original strengths instead. Fight with your heart, not with your mind."

"Fight with my heart, not with my mind."

Normally, Tusa would never think twice after hearing this phrase, but now that his state of mind was different, he truly began to understand what Ketis tried to convey.

Maybe... Ketis was right.

Chapter 5099 Super-Secret Method

"Aren't you scared, great-grandpa?"

"I am." Venerable Benjamin Larkinson gently said as he placed his palm against the solid metal foot of his battle partner. "Every time I deploy onto the battlefield, I do so with the knowledge that I might never come back home again. I am scared that I will never be able to see my sons again. I am scared that I will never be able to witness my grandson lead our family to a greater height. I am scared that I will not live long enough to see children like you grow up and find your own calling in life."

Young Andraste stood next to her great-grandfather and looked up at the old man with a mixture of concern and admiration.

"If you are so scared, why don't you wait until my papa upgrades your Blood Star into a high-tier expert mech? That is what other expert pilots do when they don't have access to a powerful machine. It is not as if you can make much of a difference when you are stuck piloting a standard mech."

The old man let out a tired sigh. "That is true for other pilots, but I am different. I am already old. Due to special reasons, my lifespan is tied to my fighting ability. If your father did not tie my life to the Blood Star, you would have already witnessed my funeral by now. Do you understand now, dear? I fight not just because I enjoy the thrill of combat, but because it is the only way for me to live and see you grow into a lovely woman."

"You'll also be able to grow stronger in the process!" Andraste chirped! "People are saying that you and Uncle Ark have the highest chance of becoming the first ace pilot of our clan. Between the two of you, who will break through first?"

Benjamin shook his head. He lowered himself to his knees so that he could look at his great-granddaughter straight into her eyes.

"Mech piloting is not a race. It is a life-threatening job. Breakthroughs are serious business, Andraste. In the history of the Larkinson Family of old, many expert pilots have emerged from our ranks. Many of them have shown great talent and bravery, yet they have never managed to overcome the bottleneck that prevents them from becoming a Saint. I do not dare to say whether Ark or I can be the first trueblood Larkinson to fulfill our old family's greatest dream."

"Papa can help." Andraste claimed with absolute confidence. "He helped Reginald Cross advance to ace pilot by designing the Mars, so he can definitely help the two of you in the same way!"

"We are all hoping for that. I do have a lot of faith in your father's design abilities, but that is not an excuse for Ark and I to slack off. A strong mech will never enable a weak pilot to exceed his limit. This is another reason why I voluntarily participate in battles despite knowing that my mech can be destroyed by a single direct hit from a warship cannon. I have too many shortcomings as a recently recovered expert pilot who has been sitting in retirement for over half a century. If I can't be as

skilled and experienced as my peers, then I will just have to be braver than everyone else. It may be an exceedingly reckless way to test my limits, but it has been proven to work."

What Benjamin didn't tell his great-granddaughter was that the death rates of pilots who chose to embrace this method of pursuing greater strength was distressingly high!

People always tended to fixate on the few brilliant success stories, but this caused them to overlook the countless bodies of deceased mech pilots.

All of these poor souls ultimately sacrificed everything in exchange for becoming a forgotten footnote in humanity's history!

Fortunately, Andraste was still a young girl for the most part. All she thought right now was that the grandfather of her father was an awesome expert pilot!

Andraste developed a liking for every Larkinson expert pilot. She especially looked up to Venerable Dise due to how the Swordmaiden expert pilot exquisitely leveraged her excellent swordsmanship to overcome greater challenges!

Yet despite Benjamin's lack of a powerful expert mech, flashy moves or a clearly defined advantage, Andraste had come to admire him as well.

The greatest virtue of the Larkinson Clan was bravery. This did not come from nowhere, but originated from the Larkinson Family!

Andraste briefly daydreamed about embodying the virtue of bravery herself. Once she grew older and completed her training as a mech pilot, she wanted to blaze her own trail and follow the examples of her relatives by chasing after breakthroughs by confronting deadly opponents!

An old man like Benjamin knew exactly what little Andraste was thinking. He had seen far too many Larkinson children indulge in the same fantasies.

It was a pity that the majority of them never had a chance to fulfill their wishes.

From the moment a child celebrated their tenth birthday, their aptitude of piloting became clear.

Benjamin did not want Andraste to develop too many unrealistic expectations.

He reached out and embraced the girl in his arms. "Piloting mechs is a noble profession, but it is not the only way for girls like you to excel. There are many other ways for people to attain greatness. Your father has built up our entire clan from nothing by excelling in mech design. General Verle commands an entire mech army."

"I know, great-grandpa. I know they are all awesome in their own way. I heard it a million times before." The little girl whined. "I don't want to sit behind a desk all day and let others fight on my behalf. I want to grab a weapon and beat our enemies myself! Aurelia and Marvaine can go off and do all of the boring stuff. What I want is to become the greatest mech pilot ever, and if that is not possible, the greatest swordmaster, oh, aside from Ketis of course."

Benjamin's mouth twitched when he heard the boundless desire and enthusiasm from the girl.

"That is nice to hear, Andraste. It is fine for you to have aspirations as a child, but I hope that you will not fixate on them too much if there are better professions for you out there. You are not an

ordinary Larkinson, you know. You are a princess of a powerful clan. Leadership is your birthright. It is not that hard for our clan to train hundreds of mech pilots a year, but it is much harder for us to raise qualified and responsible leaders."

"Mama and papa are already raising Aurelia to become the next matriarch of the clan. I don't want to steal my older sister's job." Andraste flatly said. "As for me, I'm supposed to grow into her protector! How can I do that if I can't become good at fighting? If I can't become a mech pilot, I will never be as good as others!"

Try as he might, Benjamin couldn't temper Andraste's determination to become an expert pilot.

This was bad as children like her tended to suffer the greatest psychological blows if their genetic aptitudes ultimately weren't good enough to support their dreams.

Though Benjamin knew from his grandson that the Carmine System might be powerful enough to give those without the right genetic aptitudes a chance to pilot a mech anyway, this experimental tech was still in early development.

It may have been fine for the Carmine System to augment the control of existing expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi or restore the piloting ability of veteran expert pilots such as himself, but even Ves did not dare to test his new invention on a young and weak ten-year old child!

Ves might have to invest decades worth of research into the Carmine System in order to refine the tech and make it safe enough to be used by the general public.

Until he reached that point, there was no way he would risk the life of his precious daughter by treating her as a test subject!

Andraste suddenly smirked.

"I'm definitely becoming a mech pilot, great-grandpa?"

"Oh? What makes you sound so confident, young lady?"

"Hihihi! I have a little secret- " She teased before she lifted her arm and activated her comm. "Look at this! I found this super-secret method a few weeks ago when I browsed the galactic net on how to increase the chances of developing the right genetic aptitude. The poster claimed that it would definitely turn a kid like me into a potentate as long as I follow all of the steps!"

Venerable Benjamin grew perplexed when a projection of a sketchy virtual document appeared in front of Andraste.

"What? That can't be true. Hasn't your mother or father told you to always remain skeptical and never believe in the nonsense spouted by people on the galactic net?"

"This isn't nonsense, great-grandpa! It really works! I know it since I tried it out myself!"

The old man frowned deeper and deeper as he quickly skimmed over the text. The contents reminded him of the meditation manuals that he used to read and practice after he had lost the ability to pilot a mech.

The meditation helped him get over his trauma and look forward to living out the rest of his life as a simple family man.

Yet as Benjamin continued to read through this parody of a meditation method, he did not find it credible in the slightest!

According to the exaggerated claims of its anonymous writer, practicing this specific meditation recipe would definitely encourage the formation of better genetic aptitude in the brains of developing children!

"The galactic net is becoming more and more messy ever since we have been cut off from the Milky Way." Benjamin grumbled. "The Red Two and the local Comm Consortium have become too short-handed to clean up all of this harmful nonsense."

"Hey!" Andraste wanted to kick the old man's foot! "It's not harmful and it's not nonsense! Let me show you how it works!"

The impulsive girl immediately dropped into a lotus position on the deck. She proceeded to close her eyes and began to whisper a mantra under her breath.

She did all of this while still remaining under the influence of the Blood Star's glow!

Fortunately, the offensive knight mech was directly tied to the Golden Cat, so the glow hardly bothered Andraste.

Though Andraste looked incredibly endearing at the moment, Benjamin did not want the foolish girl to get her hopes up by indulging in this superstition.

How could mediation possibly increase one's genetic aptitude?

People had tried out a lot of different methods to increase their probability of becoming a potentate during the Age of Mechs.

From participating in brutal survival camps to practicing musical instruments to a professional level, they had done so many different things, yet hardly managed to affect their chances in the end.

Venerable Benjamin firmly believed like every other human that developing genetic aptitude was completely out of their hands.

It was for that reason that he wanted to pull her great-granddaughter from her delusions.

Yet just before he tried to lift her up to her feet, he paused in his motion.

This was because Andraste's actions produced a reaction.

The effect was faint, but a high-tier expert pilot like Benjamin was still perceptive enough to feel the shift of E energy radiation in the environment.

Instead of swirling around in place like normal or getting pulled into the Blood Star due to practicing the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra, a faint amount of spirituality began to get sucked into Andraste's body!

"...What...?"

Benjamin's attitude towards the little girl's behavior had completely changed. He took another look at the virtual document, but this time he tried to analyze it with a more earnest outlook.

He still thought that it shouldn't be doing anything at all, yet Andraste proved his assumption wrong!

What was the matter? Was this secret method truly legit? Who came up with it, and why post it on the galactic net?

Benjamin felt there was a lot more going on with this than he initially thought.

Chapter 5100 Fueled By Animosity

Nosferatu indulged in the sweetness of life.

Relief shone on his distorted face as the intangible fiend stole the vitality of another dying puelmer!

The mutilated alien that had been hanging on a meathook did not offer much resistance against Nosferatu's attack.

Though the condemned puelmer had no idea what was happening to him, his resistance quickly ceased when he felt that he was moving closer towards death.

After losing an internal power struggle and seeing his own compatriots feed on his own flesh, the puelmer crew member did not want to prolong his torture any further.

All he wished for at this point was to end his suffering and to pray for revenge against the puelmers who ultimately betrayed him and let him down!

"Uu..kiwaaa..."

The puelmer was too weak to speak more alien words, but he hoped that his words or the emotions behind them was enough to send the right across.

Hardly any puelmer was stupid. The alien that had already been dying for a long time knew that his former alien colleagues would never allow him to die so soon.

He still had plenty of organs and pieces of flesh left on his body to grant him mercy at this time!

The puelmers delighted in the suffering of others. Cannibalizing the flesh of their own just wasn't enjoyable enough if they couldn't taunt the victim in the process!

The dying alien should know, because he participated in this barbaric custom several times himself!

He just never imagined that he would be the one to hang on the dreaded hook this time!

As he felt his life fading away, the puelmer hoped with all of his meager consciousness that whoever was responsible for sapping his strength would do the same to the rest of the puelmers on this homeship!

The mutilated ball of alien flesh twitched a final time as the dying puelmer seemed to regain a touch of clarity before death.

As the alien quickly thought about all of the events leading to this regrettable outcome, the puelmer became incredibly enraged!

With the last fiber of his being, he pushed out all of his hatred and all of his animosity towards his own kind and hoped that he would still be able to enjoy his revenge after his passing!

The crippled collection of alien meat finally died.

As Nosferatu digested the life energies he had taken from his latest victim, he also absorbed a lot of additional stuff that came along with his food.

The hatred and all of the other desires and emotions the puelmer felt before his death turned into different kinds of negative energy that seemed to acquire a power of their own. These resentments inadvertently merged with the spiritual fiend and contaminated his soul!

As Nosferatu moved on to drain the life of his next victim, the puelmer reacted not much differently from the last one.

Each puelmer that had been hung on these punishment hooks had already given up on life to an extent. Whoever or whatever was causing them to meet their deaths in advance was doing them all a favor!

As the fourth condemned puelmer lost his life, alarms began to ring inside the slightly cramped compartment.

While it might not be unusual for the badly mutilated aliens to perish in advance due to unforeseen variables, the more intact and healthy prisoners were not supposed to expire this soon!

Nosferatu did not care about whether he had possibly alerted the crew of the ship of his presence. All he wanted to do right now was to finish off the remaining two meatbags that possessed a lot more life than his previous prey!

"Hshaaa...!"

The fiend pounced onto the next puelmer, and while this alien put up a little more resistance on account of how many less days he had been hanging on his hook, he too ultimately could not defeat the might of the recovering ghost!

The round hatch to the chamber slid open by this time.

A trio of armored balls rolled inside. The thinner but still armored spikes poking out of their surface extended in such a way to arrest their forward momentum.

The armored puelmers beheld the sight of five prisoners first, but soon focused their augmented vision to the final alien hanging from the ceiling.

The poor alien twitched a number of times before his many tiny hands finally drooped and lost all movement.

Behind this alien was a faint shadow of a humanoid ghost.

Nosferatu had finally restored a respectable measure of his original strength!

Though he was still far from regaining his prime, he was no longer under threat of dissipating any longer!

What was even better was that he regained a lot more cognition and awareness than before. He was no longer operating largely on instinct anymore.

Yet all was not entirely well for the spiritual fiend.

By feeding on the life of other organisms when he was at his weakest, Nosferatu became far more susceptible to the spiritual contamination of his prey.

This produced unforeseen consequences. His toothy mouth cried out in silent pain as his entire shadowy shape started to grow less and less stable!

Before the uncomprehending gaze of the three puelmer security troopers, Nosferatu's shadowy energy form suddenly began to sprout over two-dozen tiny arms!

These tiny limbs shared a great resemblance to the hands surrounding the ball-like forms of the puelmer race.

The only difference was that it looked extremely disturbing and discordant when they emerged from the body of a humanoid!

The puelmer security troopers no longer remained frozen at this bizarre sight. They were all smart enough to know that this strange intruder was not only supposed to be here, but also posed an unknown but most certainly considerable threat towards the rest of the ship!

"Huuhwa!"

"Kakakauual!"

"Usehaa!"

The aliens quickly reported what had happened while at the same time opened fire at the ghost!

Their advanced suits of armor incorporated a range of highly compact weapon systems. An intense volley of laser beams, positron beams, plasma bolts and other dangerous ordinance quickly blasted the dead bodies hanging from the hooks as they saturated the entire space above!

A few of the weapons happened to be transphasic, so they penetrated the ceiling and bulkheads and left more severe marks of damage behind!

Yet for all of this intensive firepower, Nosferatu remained almost completely unaffected!

He was a completely different enemy than the puelmer troopers had ever encountered before. Weapons that were proven to be highly effective against other races produced no discernable results when employed against the humanoid fiend with puelmer arms sticking out of his body!

"Hishaaa!"

Of course, Nosferatu wasn't going to allow these aliens to fire at his form forever. He quickly dove down in an attempt to sap the relatively weaker and younger of the three alien guards of life.

"Kohaya!"

All three spherical suits of armor began to project multiple transphasic energy shields that happened to layer on top of each other.

This was a common tactic of the puelmers and several other advanced alien races. By combining the defenses of multiple individual soldiers together, they could resist the attacks of hostiles, especially when they enjoyed a numbers advantage!

As Nosferatu clashed against the first transphasic energy shield in his path, the fiend screamed in pain and frustration, but only for a short amount of time.

As the fiend faced the armored puelmer soldiers, his chaotic mind began to recall all of the hatreds and the resentments that his previous prey held towards the former comrades who had condemned them to death.

The surge of animosity welling from the depths of Nosferatu's spirit seemed to give him an additional boost of strength.

The fiend uttered a silent roar before his intangible form overcame the resistance of not just the first layer of transphasic energy shields, but also the other two layers!

Compared to the main shields of the puelmer homeship, the weaker ones projected by the armor of the alien soldiers were much less capable of stopping the fiend from reaching his next victims.

The fiend immediately phased through the armor of the first puelmer trooper and began to prey on the alien's healthy spirit!

Despite the much greater strength of this relatively strong soldier, Nosferatu attacked with much greater fervor than before.

Not only that, but his unusual puelmer arms grabbed and clawed at the alien's spirit and body as if that would help inflict additional damage!

"HUKKAAA!"

The tormented puelmer soldier lost his concentration and even began to roll around in panic, causing him to collide against the bulkhead and the armor of one of his colleagues!

Though he put up a lot of resistance, Nosferatu's greater strength and familiarity with the puelmer psyche finally enabled him to gain the upper hand!

As the soldier slowly lost his life, the spiritual fiend gained his largest boost of strength since he infiltrated the puelmer heavy cruiser!

It took a lot less time and effort for Nosferatu to finish off the remaining two puelmer soldiers.

However, the puelmer crew had become much more aware of the threat that had somehow sneaked aboard the homeship.

Many puelmers became more alert and a lot of security systems came online!

It was a pity that few if any of these measures were effective at killing or repelling the spiritual intruder.

While Nosferatu deeply wanted to move towards the nearest cluster of puelmer lives, his orders were clear.

His main priority was to destroy the warp drives of the puelmer heavy cruiser!

If he did not complete this order, then he would probably die regardless of how many puelmers he was able to drain!

"Hisshaaa..."

Finding the warp drives of a fairly large alien ship was extremely difficult. Even if the puelmer vessel was not as large as a human capital ship, her volume was still large enough to make the search difficult!

Normally, the Phobos was supposed to send out dozens of fiends, but now that Nosferatu was on his own, he wasn't able to cover as much ground!

It just so happened that the fiend just happened to absorb a lot of scattered thoughts from a bunch of puelmers.

As soon as the spiritual entity thought about this topic, he gained a faint and almost subconscious idea where they might be located.

Nosferatu's eyes gained more purpose. The fiend immediately sunk down the decks and moved towards the center of the massive ship.

Soon enough, he reached the primary engineering bay where at least one of the warp drives were located.

The puelmers were prepared for his arrival this time.

Two-dozen armored puelmer troops immediately opened fire as soon as they spotted the faintest hint of a shadow that didn't belong!

None of the attacks dealt any substantial damage to Nosferatu.

When the puelmers saw that their massed attacks didn't produce the results they desired, they quickly tried to block Nosferatu's passage instead.

A large grid of transphasic energy shields came online in order to protect the warp drive and isolate any possible enemies.

While they may have been strong enough to block the phasing ability of Lucky, Nosferatu was a different kind of life.

He did not possess a physical body to begin with, and his odd experiences had somehow made him a lot more effective at forcing his way through the weaker interior transphasic energy shields generated by the puelmer homeship.

The alien soldiers all uttered angry noises as Nosferatu successfully managed to reach the alien warp drive!

The device was considerably tougher and more resistant against tampering than ordinary drives.

Yet for all of its advanced design, it could do little to stop a reinvigorated fiend tearing apart the more delicate and fragile internal components.

The warp drive quickly lost the ability to function properly as the fiend inflicted damage without encountering any effective opposition!

Though Nosferatu found to his annoyance that he couldn't finish off the puelmer warp drive entirely due to its more advanced design and better construction, it would still take a fair amount of time for the puelmers to undo the damage!

Now, the fiend just needed to take out the backup warp drive that was located in a different section of the puelmer heavy cruiser.

As long as he fulfilled his primary objective, Nosferatu would be free to prey on the lives of all of the delicious puelmer souls contained within this homeship!