Mech Touch 6791

Chapter 6791: Unredeemed Warship Tokens

After setting the initial design choices for the Final Glory Project, Ves and his collaborators soon began to make quick progress.

This was not a complicated design project. The design of the 'mech' had to be as simple as possible. It only really amounted to a man-controlled rocket. The degree of complexity was so low that Ves could design a basic version of it in a single day.

However, a proper job required a lot more work than that. Ves wanted to design a pair of proper mech templates that could work fairly well no matter what materials people used to make the suicide mechs.

Ves and the rest of his design team needed to take variables such as aerodynamics and interactions with different gravities in order to make sure that the mech launched from ground to space in the least amount of time.

It should only take them days to devise a solution that fulfilled 80 percent of their target goals.

Yet in order to secure the missing 20 percent, the four mech designers needed to work hard for at least a month in order to get close enough.

Every individual percentage of improvement after that demanded disproportionate work and effort to acquire. They could spend months iterating on the mech designs just to raise the performance by just 5 percent.

Naturally, neither Ves nor anyone else aside from Gloriana was crazy enough to think that this was a worthwhile tradeoff.

Ves merely settled for target goals that were 'good enough' from a professional perspective. The quality of the mech designs had to be high enough to pass certification at the Red Association.

This would dictate how much time he invested in the mech design. As soon as the quality surpassed the minimum threshold, then that was time for him to pack up the project and publish the mech templates as soon as possible.

As far as Larkinson products were concerned, the mechs of the Final Glory Project would probably be a huge step down in terms of quality.

Ves found it painful to compromise his brand by releasing such shoddy products, but he could not afford to care so much about maintaining quality standards in a time of total war.

Necessity trumped quality.

Unlike Gloriana, Ves understood that the right product did not always have to be the most exquisite product.

Of course, he had collaborated so often with his wife that he had acquired a few of her tendencies. He understood the value of quality and had witnessed first-hand how his wife made mechs stronger by polishing their designs to an obsessive degree.

Her pursuit of perfection was her greatest strength as well as her greatest weakness.

Even Ves hadn't been able to avoid this fever entirely. He too valued the ability to design mechs that could more easily produce masterworks. He also wanted to invest in his future and gain the ability to create his own grand works sooner rather than later.

The approach chosen by Gloriana was probably the fastest way to earn the qualifications to produce a grand work!

This was why he tried to align the desire to maintain high quality standards with his design goals whenever possible.

Alas, this was one instance where he could not compromise on his duty as a mech designer.

Ves naturally tried to avoid any mention of the Final Glory Project whenever he was in the presence of his wife.

Gloriana was more than happy to pretend that the Final Glory Project did not exist.

As the two worked on the Minerva Mark II Project, his wife grew more and more content.

Ves still managed to keep his promise by not lowering the amount of work he managed to get done each day. He had to push himself to do more work and cut back on the time he spent on other affairs, but he managed to persist due to the urgency of the times.

He could slack off and take a vacation when red humanity was not being pushed to the brink of extinction!

There were many soldiers at the frontlines that had to fight a battle every day. The moment that any of them surrendered to their own exhaustion, their mistakes might cause the attacking aliens to gain the upper hand and dismantle the fifth defensive band even further!

He had watched enough live feeds of the ongoing battles in the frontlines to understand that mech designers like himself had it so much easier.

Ves could dictate his own schedule under the comfort and security of his own territory. New Constantinople was still fairly secure. The threat of alien raids or more serious assaults remained fairly low so long as the frontlines held.

The Upper Zones remained the most secure regions of human-occupied space.

Even if the Middle Zones collapsed on a large scale first as he predicted, it would still take time for the native alien forces to pivot towards the Upper Zones.

That should give Ves, his family and the rest of the Premier Branch to evacuate from the Monroe Upper Zone should it ever become the next staging grounds of the Red War.

The only issue he was concerned with was the delays in gaining possession of the starships that were supposed to make up his new first-class fleet.

The Vulcanites were definitely taking their time with the delivery of a first-class fleet carrier while his own E-66 Experimental Yard was not able to speed up the conversion process of the Tortuous Scream any further.

In fact, the greater spacetime bubble enveloping the Yernstall Central Star Node had inflicted such a considerable shock to the logistical network of human-occupied space that the Larkinson Clan's first proper warship might take a week or so longer to complete!

The only good news up until now was that the Premier Branch at least managed to accrue a modest but serviceable collection of first-class combat carriers.

Although they were only rated to carry 30 first-class multipurpose mechs, their quality and tech were both in the upper boundaries. The vessels were faster and far more robust than second-class combat carriers. Their workshops also contained just enough state-of-the-art superfabs and materializers to handle any repair or reconstruction jobs.

The only complication now was that Starfarer Berth was not in a condition to supply more first-class combat carriers for the foreseeable future.

This was because the high-quality orbital shipyard was located in the Yernstall Central Star Node!

If Ves was unlucky enough, then by the time the people of Yernstall managed to unravel the greater spacetime bubble, Starfarer Berth may have fallen already!

"I need more ships."

In order to pursue this topic further, he scheduled a meeting with his RF liaison.

As soon as he got teleported to the Babylon Excavator up in orbit, an aide led him to a secure office where the highest-ranking officer greeted the new arrival in person.

"Welcome back to the Babylon Excavator." Commodore Zonrad Reze said as he waved Ves to take a seat. "I received word that you wish to talk about our Warship Quota Program."

"That is correct. Our clan and I have killed a bunch of phase lords as of late. Saint Tusa has been especially prolific with his tier 3 Destroyer spear. So far, he has claimed the lives of 1 greater phase lord and 6 lesser phase lords. While he was only able to kill those alien powerhouses with the help of other forces, Tusa has played an instrumental role in each successful killing attempt. His ability to make his Dark Zephyr Mark III bypass any energy barrier makes it much easier for him to land his killing blows."

"We are aware of his illustrious record during the past year." The human vessel of Sigrund said. "Each of his feats are public. There is no dispute that he has materially contributed to the deaths of the Arena Lord of Ya'gwasa and so on. You have a number of notable kills under your belt as well, and so does Saint Davia Stark. On top of the spoils of war and merits that the three of you have earned through your deeds, you are also entitled to receive RF Warship Tokens. Would you like a list of our current redemption list?"

"Sure."

The RF commodore projected a simple shopping list.

It became clear that the fleeters had refined their redemption rules.

Killing a lesser phase lord corresponded to a Frigate Token or Destroyer Token.

The fleeters used a long set of criteria to determine which kind of token to hand out. If a Larkinson managed to kill a weaker lesser phase lord with the help of lots of external assistance, then he would only receive a pitiful Frigate Token.

If an ace pilot managed to challenge and kill a stronger and better-equipped lesser phase lord through single combat, then he would definitely earn a Destroyer Token!

The same terms applied to killing phase whales as well. However, most of them were substantially stronger than typical phase lords, so they should always award the best available rewards.

"So what has our clan accrued so far?" Ves asked.

"1 Light Cruiser Token and 6 Frigate Tokens. All of them are restricted unless I mention otherwise."

Ves loudly snorted. After killing all of those phase lords, the Larkinson Clan was only able to redeem the lowest available awards according to the rules!

The RF was as stingy as ever. The fleeters hated the thought of handing other parties the right to field formidable first-class warships.

While the second-raters and third-raters were able to field auxiliary warships due to the RF's lack of fear towards these inferior hulls, first-raters still had to jump through a lot of hoops in order to field their own true warships!

"Are there any options to merge them into bigger tokens?" Ves inquired.

Zonrad Reze smiled. "You are not the first individual to ask this question. Due to growing demand, we have amended the rules of our Warship Quota Program to allow for conversion. You can convert 5 RF Warship Tokens of the same naval class to 1 RF Warship Token of the next naval class by tonnage. In short, if you choose to do so, instead of fielding 5 frigates, you can choose to field 1 light cruiser instead."

"That… is a questionable deal."

"There are pros and cons to both choices." Commodore Reze said. "As a senior naval officer, I can wax for days about the benefits of forming a wolf pack of 5 fast and nimble frigates as opposed to having a stronger light cruiser that can inflict superior damage onto larger threats. I can advise you if you wish. You can also choose to postpone the redemption of the RF Warship Tokens. This is what I recommend."

"Oh? Why is that, commodore?"

"Nobody is in a condition to supply warships to your clan. Think about it, Professor Larkinson. Many battles are taking place at the final defensive band. This is a matter of life and death to many states and powerful groups. Money cannot repel invaders. It is an abstract number that possesses no combat power. Now that the war is encroaching upon us all, the demand for warships has skyrocketed. It is nearly impossible for you to acquire warships from external sources. The only viable means to expand your collection of warships is to trade them for large quantities of superdimensional matter or build them yourself."

Neither solution sounded acceptable to Ves.

"I will see what I can do." He tersely replied. "If I don't manage to get my hands on a working warship, then it may be better to leave it be. They are no use to me at the moment."

Ves really hated the limited shipbuilding capacity of red humanity.

The Great Severing took place too soon. Ves bet that if the aliens waited a decade before pulling off this stunt, red humanity's shipbuilding capacity could have easily quadrupled!

The additional territories also would have been nice to have.

Commodore Reze stared at Ves for a few seconds before he decided to make a choice.

"If you see little value in our Warship Tokens, you may choose to exchange them for alternative rewards."

"Really? Is that part of the rules as well?"

"This is an informal offer to valued friends and allies such as yourself. If you wish, you can choose to exchange varying amounts of Warship Tokens for access to exclusive technologies or the acquisition of small amounts of super-class materials. Think carefully about what you need."

Chapter 6792: Smart AIs

The offer made by Commodore Reze sounded intriguing.

Ves leaned forward as he contemplated the possibilities.

He always had a desire for better tech.

He was most familiar with the tech employed by the Red Association. His understanding of the tech used by the Red Fleet was much poorer. That made it difficult for him to judge what he could obtain from the fleeters.

The downside of exchanging tokens for tech was that it took a lot of time to realize these gains. His schedule was already packed and he really did not have the time to explore an entirely new branch of high technology.

He favored a trade of super-class materials a lot more. The more he climbed to the top, the more he understood that these were the true strategic materials of every civilization.

Phasewater was just the most common and prevalent strategic resource of the Red Ocean.

There was a lot of other good stuff that was only available in the Red Ocean and the Milky Way.

For example, Ves had recently signed an agreement with the Devos Ancient Clan that granted him the right to learn the theory behind developing Destroyer weapons.

What the Devosans could not trade was Destroyer particles. This emphasized the importance of access to rare and exceedingly high-quality materials.

Much of the best tech utilized by humans relied on super-class materials to give them the greatest edge.

That was what Ves needed the most. The current and future ace mechs of the Larkinson Clan needed to be as strong as possible in order to navigate the challenges

ahead. He also needed to expand his collection of high-quality materials to design the best possible Polymetal raiment for himself.

Ves steepled his fingers. "Tell me about the exclusive tech that you think is most helpful to me. What do you think I need the most?"

He and Sigrund went back a long way. Although they belonged to completely different species, in the face of external enemies, both of them belonged on the same side.

There was no reason for Ves to mistrust Sigrund at this stage. Perhaps the hybrid alien AI that masqueraded as a RF officer may be a little more biased towards his current employer, but that was not a big problem.

After a few seconds of thought, Commodore Reze made his first suggestion.

"According to our intelligence reports, your Design Department is not able to sustain a high enough output of mech designs. Part of this is due to slow and restrictive recruitment. Another part of this is due to the fact that the processing banks and AI cores of Diandi Base are no longer able to keep up with your needs."

"Not all design work is based on mathematical calculations."

"That is true, but I still think that a large expansion of processing power can help you complete all of your mech design projects significantly faster. If you previously had to wait for a week for the processor banks to deliver the necessary simulation data, then you can obtain the desired results in a day or even a handful of hours. The benefits to your productivity are immense. Not only will you suffer less delays to obtain time-sensitive data, but you can also buy more time to refine your work further, thereby raising the average quality levels of your output."

Sigrund's analysis on what Ves needed the most right now was scarily accurate.

From the moment the RF commodore mentioned processing power, Ves immediately became hooked.

As a mech designer, it was impossible for him to hate anything that could raise the efficiency of his design process!

"What can the RF offer me that is actually usable?" Ves queried.

"We can offer you high-quality processors of our latest and most advanced computer architecture. It not only relies on phasewater technology to miniaturize vital processor components further, but also utilizes hyper technology to improve and expand the functionality of the software programs and AIs that govern its behavior. In fact, the software is just as important as the hardware."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves frowned.

"Our latest processor banks not only work much harder, but also smarter." Sigrund swelled with pride. "The possibilities opened up by hyper materials as Mentalist Crystals have sparked a revolution in this sector! Similar to ARCHIE, we have been able to devise all sorts of AIs that can do more than follow rigid logic. They have become smart enough to solve problems that are related to fuzzy or more complicated problems. This can be of immense use to a mech designer such as yourself. For example, instead of spending days on brute force calculations to improve a mech part, your smart AI can make inferences based on past design work to deduce the correct solution in minutes and with much less processing power."

Ves understood how significant this could be. The processor banks of Diandi Base also came with its own AI systems, but their performance was merely average.

There were better ones available on the open market, but the performance difference was not significant enough for him to bother.

He was aware that the major powers all possessed their own privately developed AI systems that were way better than was available in the public.

Of all of the human powers, the Red Fleet was ahead of everyone else when it came to automation and AIs. Ves truly did not believe that anyone else could beat them at this game.

He thought about the premise of this deal.

RF Warship Tokens were valuable in the current climate, but this was not an absolute.

What if the Red War took a turn for the worse?

What if the Red Fleet lost so many warships that it could no longer maintain its standing within the Red Three?

What if taboo against owning and using warships had become so damaged that it was no longer enforceable?

If any of these scenarios came to pass, then RF Warship Tokens became as useless as decorative medallions!

Ves felt it would be better if he traded long-term benefits for short-term benefits.

The state of the Red Ocean continued to deteriorate by the day. Red humanity's bottom line was dropping lower and lower. The native aliens also became more serious and unscrupulous in their efforts to eradicate humans from their home galaxy.

Such conditions were not conducive to waiting years to acquire or build the warships that corresponded to 6 RF Frigate Tokens and 1 RF Light Cruiser Token.

That was not to say that he discounted their value. That was very much not the case. Every warship was useful. Mechs could fulfill a lot of jobs, but there were some roles where warships were indispensable.

Ves just felt a little underwhelmed by the lack of mass and power of these sub-capital ships.

If the RF was generous enough to award his clan a Heavy Cruiser Token or Battlecruiser Token, then Ves was more than willing to invest in the time and resources needed to construct a large warship!

Yet when the only ships on offer were half-a-dozen frigates and a light cruiser, Ves simply did not want to bother.

He already learned that it was nearly impossible to get other parties to agree to transfer a warship to the Larkinson Clan!

Since that was the case, expanding his processing power was a great solution to many of his problems. It would significantly speed up the progress of every mech design project. It would also grant the Larkinson Clan the ability to crunch the numbers on a lot of other priorities.

What was not to like?

"I am sure you are aware of the ongoing conversion work of the Tortuous Scream." Ves mentioned. "Is the RF able to expand her processor banks so that she can perform a lot more calculations than before?"

Commodore Reze nodded. "We can expand her raw processing capacity easily enough. Integrating them into the existing computing networks of the Tortuous Scream is another matter. We do not recommend you decide to do so in the short term. The alien battleship will still retain large parts of her original orven computing systems. Your shipbuilders are simply building a human computing system and interface on top of this alien architecture to serve as a ship-wide translation device more or less. You do not want to introduce any drastic changes to this setup."

Stronger processors and better AIs could drastically improve the effective performance of a warship. Targeting systems became more accurate. Damage control systems suppressed malfunctions faster and better. Azure energy shields lasted longer.

Ves would have liked it if the new processors could improve the performance of the Tortuous Scream, but he was fine if this improvement could not be realized.

"Give me a more detailed explanation of how much additional processing power I can expect to obtain if I exchange all of the unredeemed Warship Tokens."

Commodore Zonrad Reze fulfilled the request as diligently as possible. He conducted a small presentation and projected lots of screens that were filled with numbers and theories.

Ves had very little interest in the nuts and bolts of these high-tech computing systems. He just wanted to know how much faster he could complete his calculations.

The commodore sighed. "If you want the short answer, then let me put it in the simplest terms possible. We shall arbitrarily set the performance of the processor banks of Diandi Base at 1. According to the terms that I have mentioned before, you can acquire additional processor banks that raise the total effective performance to 150 to 250. This performance is constrained by how much power your converted warship can supply to the processors and how well she is able to keep them cool."

"That sounds… like a lot. The processor banks of Diandi Base are not outdated, and our Premier Branch has expanded them after settling down on this planet."

"You can go much higher if you are willing to exchange better Warship Tokens with us, Professor Larkinson. It will mostly involve an expansion in number of processors rather than improving the computer architecture further, so you must be in possession of a starship that can meet all of the demands. For now, the current range is what you should expect for what you have. I should warn you that much of the improvement comes from the optimized performance of smart AIs rather than stronger chips."

"I see."

That made the offer less valuable than it sounded, but that did not invalidate how much good it could do for the Design Department.

"These smart AIs. They're sentient, right?"

"Yes." Sigrund plainly admitted. "They at least have the potential to develop sapience over time. Before you ask, your smart AIs are unlikely to rebel against you unless you have severely mistreated them. Just as with your living mechs, you should extend your trust to our latest generation of AIs enabled by hyper technology. As long as you treat them well and extend your respect towards them, they can save many days worth of problem solving and experimentation. They can serve as your ideal assistants. I should know, as I have contributed much to their programming."

Perhaps only an AI could program the best AIs.

Commore Reze painted a rosy picture, but Ves felt uncomfortable about relying so much on automated systems, especially ones that he did not understand himself.

What if the RF planted extremely hidden backdoors into their state-of-the-art processing banks?

Their incredibly complex and abstruse designs and programming code may as well be arcane runes in his eyes!

"I am… open to this deal, but I need you to give me enough assurances with regards to the reliability and trustworthiness of your computing software and hardware." Ves stated his demands. "You need to go out of the way to convince me that the Red Fleet cannot hack into the new systems or forcibly command the allegiance of the smart AIs. If there is any doubt, then I will not accept this deal."

Chapter 6793: Smart AI Template Selection

When Ves expressed an obvious interest in trading away 6 RF Frigate Tokens and 1 RF Light Cruiser Token for a cutting-edge computing system, Commodore Reze was more than happy to play the role of an enthusiastic salesman.

From the perspective of the Red Fleet, the Warship Quota Program functioned as a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, it was one of the most powerful ways for the fleeters to motivate third party groups into killing phase lords and phase whales.

These groups were not as selfless and noble as they painted themselves as. They were all shrewd opportunists who never entered a losing deal if they could help it. The Terrans, Rubarthans and many other powerful groups managed to maintain their seat of power for so long due to their sound judgment and rational decision-making.

There was no way to truly mobilize them to defend human space if the Red Three tried to appeal to their honor and duty alone.

After all, the powers that be that operated on this level would never allow themselves to get used up as cannon fodder at a loss.

This was why the Red Fleet had to make this painful concession. Nearly every fleeter hated it, but its effectiveness was never in doubt.

The fleeters adored the might of warships, and so did the other first-raters once they got over their apprehension towards breaking this long-standing taboo.

The parties that had just managed to earn their first RF Warship Tokens and fielded their own self-designed warships on the battlefield all came to appreciate their value.

Four centuries of focused mech development may have raised the standards of first-class multipurpose mechs to an incredible height, but warship development had not entirely stagnated during these times.

At the very least, many of the innovations that were applicable to mechs could easily be applied to warships after a bit of adaptation!

Warships were easily able to accept new alloys, stronger weapons, better control systems and many other technological improvements depending on the designs of their ship classes.

This allowed the fleeters to harness the power of increasingly more destructive warships, but also granted third parties the ability to do the same!

Although everyone was focused on turning their formidable guns at the invading aliens, how long would this situation last?

If red humanity managed to beat back the invasion and gain enough breathing room to return to its typical infighting, could they truly resist the urge to hold back their warships when they inevitably waged war against each other?

The fleeters had a very pessimistic view on this matter.

Alas, once the RF handed out the right to field warships, it would be difficult to revoke it again.

The parties who earned this precious boon would resist the revocation with as much political pressure as possible!

Considering that the Red Fleet wasn't doing so hot these days, the fleeters did not have full confidence in their ability to put the genie back in the bottle.

These reasons and more therefore made the fleeters extremely reluctant to actually award RF Warship Tokens to the irresponsible space peasants.

Only the fleeters possessed the discipline and restraint borne of noble tradition that went back before the start of the Age of Mechs.

The CFA amassed more warships than any single human polity that existed before, yet never abused all of this destructive might.

The fleeters may have grown increasingly distant from the rest of human civilization in the Milky Way, but many of them earnestly saw themselves as the noble protectors of humans who were too impulsive and immature to wield so much power.

The Red Fleet ideally wished to preserve the Common Fleet Alliance's successful operating model, but the circumstances in the Red Ocean were too different to make that viable.

Adaptation was necessary, but every change came with risks.

In any case, the fleeters only begrudgingly gave others the right to field first-class warships.

While they had to abide by the terms of their own Warship Quota Program, the higher ups actually incentivized their subordinates to convince people to swap their RF Warship Tokens for alternative rewards.

Anything was better than letting third parties play around with warships!

As Commodore Reze wrapped up his miniature lecture on the latest generation of RF computing systems, he began to mention the specific options available for exchange.

"I am authorized to offer you a selection of three different processor cluster series. The DF series is suitable for large space stations or surface-based facilities. It is physically

enormous and demands an excessive amount of energy to run at full capacity, but all of this will grant you the capacity to perform calculations at dizzying speeds."

"Too big." Ves immediately shook his head. "I need stuff that can fit in a warship like the Tortuous Scream."

"The SF series and the KF series are both designed to be installed in warships. The SF is mainly designed for warships that measure over 5 kilometers long, but we can make it fit into your alien battleship by rearranging her interior to an extent. The KF series is much smaller and can fit into most light cruisers and larger naval classes, but their power is also the weakest. Their value also differs substantially, but we can equalize that by raising the quality and performance of the smaller processor clusters. You should make a choice based on size and needs."

"I think the SF series is the obvious choice for me here." Ves mentioned. "The KF series sounds nice if I want to make myself home on a faster and nimbler sub-capital ship, but since I have a RF Battlecruiser Token, I may as well make myself home in the Tortuous Scream. Maybe I will go back to you and exchange other stuff for a KF series in the future. I can already tell it is immensely useful for stealth vessels."

Commodore Reze nodded in agreement. "You do not need to exchange as many Warship Tokens to exchange a basic version of the KF series with us. If you desire greater processing power while maintaining the compactness of this series, then you can always wait until you have accumulated more Warship Tokens. For now, the next choice you need to make is to select the smart AI templates that will govern and optimize the performance of your processor cluster. These smart AI templates are all based on ARCHIE and are more than the inflexible AIs that you are accustomed to. Think of them as the software equivalent of adding weapon and utility modules to a mech design. The more, the better, but be aware that they will all draw from the same pool of processing power, so the busier they are, the slower they become."

"How many of these 'smart AI templates' can I choose from?" Ves asked.

"The DF series can typically accommodate 5-8 smart AI templates. The SF series can typically accommodate 3-5 smart AI templates. The KF series can only accommodate 1-2 smart AI templates. There are exceptions, but they require a disproportionate amount of customization and use of strategic materials. The standard options presented to you are all defined by their computing architectures. Their hardware is specifically configured to allow for the aforementioned range of smart AIs to serenely work alongside each other without generating any conflict or congestion. You do not

want to deal with the headaches produced by inserting too many smart AI templates in a processor cluster that is not designed for those numbers."

The ugly look on the RF Commodore's face indicated that there were fleeters out there that had ignored this recommendation.

While Ves did not quite understand why a processor cluster couldn't install 1000 smart AI templates and simply keep most of them inactive until there was a need for their services, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

He was not the expert on computing systems and AI systems in the compartment. Sigrund had already risen up to become one of the foremost experts in this field.

"You didn't answer my question, commodore. How many smart AI templates can I choose?"

"The SF-02 that is suitable for your converted alien warship should be able to host 5 smart AI templates. I will present to you a list of options. It is not complete, but it should provide you with an adequate selection. Be mindful that you can choose to select one of the smart AI templates that improve the operations of any starship, but they will remain inactive so long as the SF-02 processor cluster remains isolated from the control network of the Tortuous Scream. We are only offering these options to you if you intend to transfer the SF-02 to a proper human capital ship in the future."

"That is good to know."

Sigrund proceeded to transmit a small shopping list to Ves.

[Smart AI templates

STAR WATCHER - Naval, exploration, survey.

SEA SOVEREIGN - Naval, command.

BARBARIAN WARLORD - Combat, offensive.

KNIGHT COMMANDER - Combat, defense.

LOCK BREAKER - ECM, Hacking, information warfare (offensive).

WIZARD KING - ECCM, information security, information warfare (defensive).

THIEF LORD - Stealth systems.

LORE MASTER - Research & development, general.

ARMOR POLISHER - Research & development, mech design.

OCEAN WITCH - Research & development, naval design.

PLAGUE DOCTOR - Research & development, biotechnology.

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The list presented over 100 options, though many of them sounded rather niche and circumstantial.

The broadest and most universally applicable smart AIs were conveniently listed at the top.

Ves narrowed his eyes. "I see now. This is similar to hiring a team of specialists. In this case, instead of hiring human professionals that are good at specific jobs, I am filling up the available smart AI template slots with digital specialists."

"The smart AI templates are more comprehensive than that, but if that is how you wish to perceive them, then it is not too inaccurate of an analogy. Be warned that your selection will be permanent. Since the selection of smart AI templates will make parts of your processor cluster develop sapience over time, you will suffer ruinous consequences if you attempt to swap out one smart AI template for another one. It is much easier for everyone involved if you simply maintain your selection going

forward. If you wish to acquire the services of other smart AI templates, then you should collect more RF Warship Tokens before exchanging for a new processor cluster."

"Understood." Ves grunted.

That put this selection process in a different light. He did not like all of the restrictions, but if the fleeters could tolerate it, then so could he. Ves merely had to make careful choices that would be useful in the short-term as well as the long-term.

The most difficult choice he had to make at the beginning was to choose how to decide the distribution of 5 smart AI template slots.

Should he allocate all of them towards research & development, thereby enabling the Larkinson Clan to expand its technological superiority?

Or should he allocate most of the slots towards naval combat so that his future warship would be able to perform much closer to an RF dreadnought?

He could also choose to split up the allocation between combat and non-combat smart AI templates. That sounded like the most suitable choice if he was only able or willing to exchange one processor cluster from the Red Fleet.

Since Ves could not know for sure whether he could have an opportunity like this in the future, he decided to work on the assumption that this would be his only chance.

"I think I will split my choices between smart AI templates that can directly boost the performance of a warship and ones that directly benefit our R&D activities."

Commodore Reze smiled. "Good decision. What split are you aiming for, Professor Larkinson?"

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "2 smart AI templates should be oriented towards direct naval combat. 2 more smart AI templates should be specialized in R&D. As for the remaining one… I feel I can afford to allocate this towards a more eccentric and unusual option. Do you have any recommendations?"

Chapter 6794: Naval Templates

The choice of smart AI templates would decide much of the functionality and effectiveness of the processor cluster in certain tasks.

There was no obligation to accept any of these smart AI templates. It was perfectly okay for Ves to just receive an 'empty' SF-02 that only possessed generic data processing capabilities.

However, that was a complete waste of this product. The SF Series was completely designed to work with smart AI templates. The hardware served as a foundation for the intelligent software to showcase their amazing capabilities.

To Ves, this entire discussion actually revolved around configuring a modern artifact.

The processor chips and surrounding architecture comprised the physical artifact, while the smart AI templates took on the role of artifact spirits.

Just like the Heavensword, the presence of an artifact spirit massively increased the power and capabilities of an object.

There were good reasons why high-level artifacts existed in a completely different tier than low-level artifacts!

Ves figured that the RF had taken 'inspiration' from ARCHIE's transformation through unintentional deity cultivation and tried to replicate this phenomenon on a wider scale.

Not even the fleeters could resist the allure of harnessing the power of cultivation science. E energy radiation was one of the few 'free' sources of energy that they could freely harvest and convert into useful applications.

This was incredibly important in a situation where the RF no longer had access to the material resources needed to maintain its sizable fleet, let alone build replacements for the hulls that got lost on the battlefield!

As Ves carefully studied the smart AI templates on the list, his expression grew strange as he took notice of the strange names.

"Why are the templates called this way?"

"We used to refer to the smart AI templates by codes, but more and more researchers began to add more 'descriptive' labels to them in order to make them more 'memorable'." Commodore Reze said in a slightly disapproving tone. "They even began to program default personality traits to them in order to justify their decisions. As a result, every smart AI will start with a programming personality that corresponds to the meaning of their labels. For example, you can expect a smart AI based on the BARBARIAN WARLORD template to act like a savage warrior that is eager to take the fight to the enemy."

"Do we have to call all of these smart AIs this way?"

"Oh, never. The smart AIs of the same template all have the same starting point, but they will gradually diverge from each other as they are being put to use. The passage of time, the calculations that they are tasked to perform and their interactions with humans all shape their personality and make them more unique over time. This is also one of the strongest guarantees of their loyalty. Just as with your living mechs, as long as you treat your smart AIs well, they will develop a strong attachment and sense of loyalty towards their users."

Ves crossed his arms. "That is not enough, commodore. You know as well as I do that even if these AIs develop sentience and develop the ability to resist their instructions, their behavior may still be constrained by hardcode."

"Then what other assurances would you like to have?"

"The best way to get our clan to trust your work is to transfer over a group of computer engineers. I do not think that any Larkinson can understand the programming code and computer architecture of your processor clusters. Rather than waste lots of time on trying to figure it out ourselves, I would rather hire a bunch of computer experts from your organization and secure their loyalty by having them join our kinship network."

"That is… a viable solution." Zonrad Reze judged. "It will cost you more if you want to poach our computer engineers. They possess many secrets about our fleet and are highly prized due to their qualifications to work on these projects."

"You don't have to send over a senior engineer or anything. I am perfectly fine with junior ones as long as they voluntarily agree to join my clan. They only need to know just enough to spot any possible traps or subversion in the code."

Commodore Reze contemplated this proposal. "That is more acceptable, but there will be very few computer engineers who will agree to leave the RF for the Larkinson Clan."

"It doesn't matter." Ves grinned. "You fleeters probably have so many of them that there are bound to be oddballs in your ranks that are excited to start a new adventure. Perhaps there are servicemen among you that feel they are being stifled by the structure of your RF and think they can do better in a less restrictive environment like our clan. I will compose a recruitment statement that will outline all of the benefits and requirements to work in the Larkinson Clan. This should definitely attract enough volunteers."

"We can try it out and allow the results to speak for themselves."

Compared to the other ideas that Ves and Commodore Reze entertained, this was a more elegant solution to solve the trust problem.

It was not perfect, but there was no need for Ves to be excessively on guard against the RF. The two both had a vested interest in cooperating together.

"Let's get back to the selection of smart AI templates." Ves spoke. "I will be able to bestow them with unique names, right?"

"Correct. Templates are templates. How you treat them shapes how they will grow up. Names have great significance. The exact same smart AI's derived from the same template can still become different personalities just because of changes to a single variable. This is why we recommend you to think hard before you bestow your newborn smart AIs with names. In the process of developing sapience, the way they are addressed has a profound influence on how they evaluate their own existence."

All of that sounded interesting. Ves became more and more invested in growing his own collection of sentient 'smart AIs'. Even if they had traps, he was not too concerned. He already came up with his own plans to gradually convert them into his own unique products.

Ves projected the list in front of him and pointed at one entry in particular.

"This SEA SOVEREIGN template sounds intriguing. The description is very short. It only mentions naval and command. Does that mean that it is specialized in commanding warships as well as other units such as starfighters and mechs?"

"The SEA SOVEREIGN template is trained with the help of an enormous library of past battle logs." The RF officer explained. "Most battles are purely naval ones, but the more recent battle logs incorporate more fights involving mechs. In order to make it relevant to the battles taking place today, we have also fed it with a large amount of recent battle logs. It is absolutely capable of commanding naval fleets as well as mech forces, either separately or together."

"How good is the SEA SOVEREIGN, exactly?"

"That depends on how you train it after it, he, or she has become active." Sigrund carefully responded. "On default, it will exercise caution and seek to avoid losses rather than seeking victories. The idea behind this is to give the SEA SOVEREIGN time to become accustomed to commanding and controlling the units that are at its disposal. Once it has grown familiar with the traits of different mechs and warships, it can begin to expand its risk tolerance and employ bolder gambits. Even then, it will still remain fairly cautious unless you explicitly train it to act more aggressively."

"I see. That is illuminating. Is the SEA SOVEREIGN better in strategy or tactics?"

"The latter, professor. The SEA SOVEREIGN excels at micromanagement. It has access to enormous amounts of processing power and can distribute timely and accurate micro-orders to every individual mech if necessary. Small-scale tactical judgment is also a much lighter burden as the variables are relatively limited and straightforward. Choosing strategies is much more difficult due to the sheer amount of variables interacting with each other over longer periods of time. This is what the smart AI can only master on a gradual basis by developing sentience and gaining the abstract mind needed to strategize on a grander scale."

"Hmmm…"

Ves seriously considered whether he wanted to fill up 1 of the 5 slots with the SEA SOVEREIGN template. He did not forget about his intention to modify the Tortuous Scream to enable the Minerva Mark II to interface directly with the alien battleship.

It would actually be even better if Saint Commander Casella Ingvar could place the smart AIs under her command as well!

With the SEA SOVEREIGN acting as an interface between the Saint Commander and the vast processing power available on the ship, Casella should be able to harness the power of the Tortuous Scream a lot more effectively!

Aside from that, the SEA SOVEREIGN could also serve as an adequate battlefield commander if the Saint Commander was unavailable.

Of course, Ves would prefer to hand over command to a competent military officer first. The SEA SOVEREIGN did not have to tackle any big problems. It could already make a substantial difference by micromanaging all of the friendly mechs in the field.

"Let's add the SEA SOVEREIGN template to my shopping cart." Ves decided. "I want to choose one more template that can help in naval settings. Which one do you think makes my Tortuous Scream last longer when confronted by an ambush?"

Commodore Reze smirked. "In this vaguely described scenario, you must take the initiative and go on the attack. The goal is not to kill as many aliens as possible, but take advantage of the complacency of their foes and burst out with amazing strength. If you are able to take your enemies by surprise, you can break past their envelopment and attempt to flee away. However, doing this will require excellent use of warship cannons. The BARBARIAN WARLORD's label may not be to my liking, but its aggressiveness gives it a strong motivation to master the weapon systems of a warship."

"I can see how that can be useful, commodore, but… if the warship is just one of many combat assets in a large force, then the difference that this can make is marginal. I trust in my clansmen to be able to do a good job at manning their stations. Do you have another suggestion that happens to be more practical?"

Ves also had an expectation that if the Saint Commander was able to Commandeer the Tortuous Scream and all of her crew, she would be able to produce a similar effect. The BARBARIAN WARLORD became redundant in that case.

"In that case, I personally recommend you select the STAR WATCHER template." Sigrund spoke. "It is not particularly helpful in combat scenarios, but is highly practical and useful outside of them. The STAR WATCHER template is especially helpful if you explore the stars and try to survey for rare and valuable material deposits. The more it surveys new locations, the better it becomes at predicting the presence and locations of rare exotics and hypers in a star system."

That sounded a lot more relevant to Ves if he ever decided to go on expeditions again.

He may even be able to unlock the true value of the STAR WATCHER if Ketis was able to make a dimension breach that was large enough to fit an entire alien battleship through the opening!

It would definitely take a long time before Ves and Ketis upgraded the Dimension Observatory to this extent, but at that time, the ability to analyze the surroundings of a different dimension and predict where valuable resources might be located should definitely be helpful!

While the RF offered many other templates that could boost the performance of a starship, he had a good feeling for this option.

"Then add the STAR WATCHER template to my shopping cart as well." Ves decided. "Together with the SEA SOVEREIGN template, that should be enough for ship-specific templates."

Chapter 6795: Implications of Smart AI Templates

Ves had a strong awareness that the choice of smart AI templates would have an enormous influence on his work and life trajectory in the next years and decades.

As much as most humans wanted to run their advanced civilization through manpower alone, this is plainly impossible.

Their society had grown too complex. The tool-using race had developed their latest tools far beyond what they were able to properly comprehend and control by themselves.

This was why nearly every piece of modern tech possessed certain degrees of automation. Humans alone could not fully control the sprawling technologies that they depended upon to live and fight.

It was a rather sad state of affairs, but it was an inevitable outcome.

The best humans could do to control their increasingly more complicated tech was to formulate sound design principles and avoid the common pitfalls of relying too much on AIs and algorithms to control their own tech.

It remained to be seen whether the Red Fleet was on the right track by developing smart AI templates.

There were clear risks related to turning AIs into sentient beings that could think for themselves.

Sigrund's performance in the first stage of his reawakening from long-term hibernation was a particularly acute example of the horrors that artificial intelligences could unleash.

Who could have known that when Saint Davia Stark traveled to New Constantinople and happily left with her newly upgraded Amaranto Mark III, she had come awfully close to the ultimate culprit of the Sand War?

The hybrid alien AI had very clearly instigated the sandman race to uproot their peaceful existence just outside the borders of human space and invaded the Komodo Star Sector in a grand manner.

The invasion attempt was doomed to fail. From the moment the sandmen violated the bottom line of the Big Two, the race was destined to become extinct.

Exactly as Sigrund intended.

With the control he exerted over his former race, Ves bet that Sigrund could have easily chosen to employ less destructive means to eradicate his fellow sandmen. Trillions of innocent third-raters did not have to die to satisfy his strategic objectives.

This meant that Sigrund undoubtedly had the blood of a huge amount of innocent civilians on his hands.

In this meeting between the two, Ves may have indirectly caused the deaths of a lot more people, but Sigrund definitely possessed much greater culpability for the deaths caused by the Sand War!

The former sandman admiral bore so much guilt, but still managed to escape the eyesight of the newly christened Executioner of Light!

This was a deeply ironic occurrence!

Ves had no intention of spilling the truth to Saint Davia Stark. Sigrund was more valuable to him alive than dead. There was no obvious benefit to pointing out the ultimate cause of the Sand War to anyone.

While Saint Stark still remained haunted by the past, Ves only had eyes for the future. He bore too many responsibilities for the members of his clan and the people of red humanity to waste his time on ancient history.

Right now, he was much more interested in selecting the next smart AI templates to his SF-02 RF Smart AI Data Processing Cluster.

"Well, I think the most obvious choice here is to select the ARMOR POLISHER template." Ves said. "That is a really bad label, by the way."

"Trust me, my fellow researchers have come up with much worse names for the smart AI template that is specialized in mech design." Commodore Reze twitched his lips. "Choosing this template is an obvious choice for you, but please keep in mind that the personnel who developed it were not particularly motivated. Do not expect a polished experience if you make use of the ARMOR POLISHER template. The smart AI will likely be rough around the edges."

"That is okay." Ves said as he decided to look on the bright side of this circumstance. "I don't expect you fleeters to know too much about the needs of mech designers. As long as the basic framework of this smart AI template remains sound, my fellow mech designers and I will have ample room to develop the new AI according to our unique requirements."

"I am glad to hear that. The smart AIs will be in good hands when they begin to work on behalf of your clan. I am certain of it. What template would you like to add next?"

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought yet again. The choice of a second R&D-oriented smart AI template was not as straightforward this time.

There were so many attractive choices, but he only had a limited amount of slots to work with. He could only allocate 1 more slot to an R&D-related smart AI template.

Choosing the OCEAN WITCH template in order to help the shipbuilders of the Larkinson Clan would prevent him from helping the Larkinson Biotech Institute by choosing the PLAGUE DOCTOR template instead.

He felt tempted to pick the LORE MASTER template in order to solve his indecision in the most direct fashion, but that was a cowardly solution in his opinion.

The Larkinson Clan's R&D divisions weren't large and expansive enough to conduct research in so many different fields. There was no way that Ves and his fellow Larkinsons could equal the Polymath.

In the face of limited resources and manpower, Ves felt it was better to narrow the focus of his clan's main research activities.

That did not mean that the Larkinson Clan ceased all R&D projects outside those categories. They just wouldn't be able to gain priority.

Ves had a feeling that the choice he made today would impact the development of the Design Department and the Larkinson Clan as a whole.

After all, if the new SF-02 could drastically boost the research progress of a specific scientific discipline, then Ves would never allow its processing power to be squandered by working on other problems.

Several minutes passed by as Ves methodically weighed the pros and cons of different choices.

He eventually narrowed down his selection to just two templates.

"Commodore."

"Yes, professor?"

"I am hesitating between the PLAGUE DOCTOR template that is specialized in biotechnology and the IRON MONGER template that is specialized in metallurgy. Which one do you think will benefit my clan the most?"

"There is no clear winner as far as I am concerned." Sigrund calmly responded. "The IRON MONGER template is primarily geared towards researching and testing new alloys that are suitable to be used in the construction of warships, but your new smart AI can be trained to understand the requirements for metals used in the production of mechs. It should come with extensive understanding of transphasic alloys, though its understanding of superdimensional matter is still at a rudimentary stage. In short, if you or another specialist wants to develop your own alloys, then the IRON MONGER template will massively cut down on trial-and-error by guiding you to the right directions and cutting back the waiting period of completing simulations."

That sounded incredibly useful.

"Does it work with archetech as well?" Ves asked on behalf of his wife.

He did not know how Gloriana would react towards his decision to trade away his existing tokens for a powerful new data processing cluster. Telling her that it could accelerate the process of designing archemetal components by 10 times or more would definitely help to forestall another outburst.

"No. Not yet, at least." Commodore Reze said with a frown. "You or your wife must train the smart AI based on the IRON MONGER template yourself. Once this is done, it should be able to provide excellent assistance. You can train it to understand and work with other advanced tech related to metallurgy. For example, you can teach it how to process superdimensional matter based on your own research."

"I see. Can you tell me what is special about the PLAGUE DOCTOR template? Cool name, by the way."

"Thank you. I happened to have bestowed that name myself." Zonrad Reze proudly smiled. "This smart AI template is rather broad. It is designed to cover many fields of organic science, which includes medicine, genetics, biochemistry, biomechanics, exobiology, agriculture and so much more. It is not particularly good in any of these fields, but it will never be completely useless as long as it falls under the umbrella of biotechnology."

"How does this work when I want the SF-02 to assist me with a biomech design project?" Ves inquired. "Will the smart AI based on the ARMOR POLISHER template or the PLAGUE DOCTOR template take precedence?"

"That is up to you, Professor Larkinson. You can choose for yourself to let the ARMOR POLISHER do all of the work, or grant total responsibility to the PLAGUE DOCTOR. You can also choose to make them work together according to a split of your designation. For example, you can command them to share equal processing power, or you can choose to grant the PLAGUE DOCTOR 80 percent of the available processing power so that it takes the lead. By experimenting with these settings and instructions, your SF-02 can produce drastically different results."

That… actually sounded really fun!

Ves could already foresee situations where equal or unequal splits in processing power could produce all sorts of interesting and whacky design solutions.

This would especially be the case if the smart AIs developed eccentric and extreme personalities!

At this time, Ves still felt torn between the two available choices. He even felt tempted to change his mind on reserving the last smart AI template slot and simply pick both the IRON MONGER and the PLAGUE DOCTOR templates to complete his selection.

However… he had reasons not to go for this obvious solution.

Ves did not want his choices to result in boring and generic design solutions.

Standard choices often led to standard solutions. There was not much wrong with that, but if Ves wanted to stand out and continue to create radical inventions, then it was clear that he needed to specialize the SF-02's research capabilities in an unusual and exotic direction.

Perhaps if he was able to exchange a second SF-02 from the Red Fleet in the future, he might pick up the smart AI template that he had turned away from this time.

Ves made up his mind.

Although the PLAGUE DOCTOR template sounded incredibly interesting, right now his clan needed the services of the IRON MONGER template more.

Just the fact that it could massively speed up Gloriana's work was reason enough to favor this choice!

"I will pick the IRON MONGER template this time."

"Noted, professor. That makes for 4 out of 5 smart AI templates. You have one left. What do you have in mind for the last available slot?"

"I want a template that is unusual." Ves said. "It doesn't necessarily have to be focused on combat or research. I just want a smart AI that can add more color to the works of other smart AIs and introduce a perspective that is radically different from others. It should ideally be predisposed towards irrational thinking when it develops greater sapience. If I want a straightforward answer, I can resort to the other 4 smart AIs. I need at least one deviant that is willing to engage in contrarian thinking. This is the best way to obtain second opinions."

"That is… a remarkable attitude." Commodore Reze looked impressed. "Very few fleeters have expressed this sentiment. They still think of smart AIs in the same

framework as non-sentient AIs. You are among the first to truly recognize the greater potential of AIs that possess their own souls."

"Enough flattery. Do you have a recommendation, or should I trawl through the list myself?"

"Well, one choice immediately comes to mind."

"Which one?"

"The NATIVE GOD template. As you can guess, it is a template that deliberately seeks to develop an inhuman personality in a smart AI. You can rest assured that it will not defect to the enemy side, but only if you raise it correctly."

Ves looked surprised. "Why would you fleeters create such a template?"

"Why else? We want to understand our enemies. This template is also able to generate different solutions related to phasewater technology."

Chapter 6796: Eccentric Smart AI Templates

The Red Fleet developed a collection of weird and unusual smart AI templates.

There were all kinds of people within the Red Fleet.

Its research divisions were quite enormous.

After all, in order to remain competitive with the high-ranking mech designers of the Red Association, the fleeters had to rely much more on quantity in order to keep up in terms of technological refinement and innovation.

This naturally meant that the Red Fleet employed its own fair share of oddball researchers and developers. So long as they performed their expected duties, they received enough recognition to propose their own R&D projects.

All of this gave Ves quite a few choices to work with. He already had a vague vision of what he wanted from his final smart AI slot.

The SEA SOVEREIGN, STAR WATCHER, ARMOR POLISHER and IRON MONGER smart AI templates were all purely functional.

The smart AIs derived from them were programmed to fulfill their tasks in the most efficient way possible. Everything they learned as the Larkinsons interacted with them would get added to their existing problem solving frameworks.

While the onset of developing sentience may cause them to develop strong personalities, Ves found it difficult to imagine that they would deviate too much from their starting point. Their foundations were already set from the beginning. Whatever was built on top of that may add a lot of richness to their personality and operating approach, but they were fundamentally bound to their purpose.

This meant that the solutions generated by these smart AIs would not deviate too much from the solutions generated by the smart AIs that were already being used by the fleeters.

The lack of uniqueness grated on Ves. Just because he agreed to make use of the RF's excellent processing clusters did not mean he wanted to imitate the fleeters.

He already had multiple plans in store to add his own touch to the remarkable SF-02, and his choice of a fifth smart AI template would be the first step to deviating from the most obvious trajectory.

Ves repeatedly studied the list of smart AI templates and picked out a few that stood out from him right away.

[STARVING ARTIST - Art, creativity, unconventional.

MASTER ARTISAN - Craft, quality, consistency.

HIGH PRIEST - Religion, social engineering.

ANARCHIST LEADER - Anarchy, resistance.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE - Business, management, economy.

CULT MASTER - Cult, secrecy, taboo.

FEUDAL KING - Kingdom, vassals, authority.

DARK LORD - Evil, darkness, selfishness.]

It was an eclectic list. Ves really liked to meet with their creators and see what they had in their minds when they decided it was a good idea to develop these smart AI templates.

Were the fleeters so desperate to understand different people that they were willing to create the ANARCHIST LEADER, CULT MASTER and DARK LORD templates?

Ves had a strong feeling that the actual reason why those crazy fleeter AI systems engineers created these templates was to bring their alter egos to life!

Whatever their motivations, if their creations made it on the list of available smart AI templates, then they had to be legit enough to receive RF recognition.

"What do you think about the options that I have selected?" Ves asked.

"Well, my predictions of what smart AI templates may have caught your attention are largely correct." Commodore Reze said in a neutral tone. "I heavily recommend that you do not select the HIGH PRIEST, ANARCHIST LEADER, CULT MASTER and DARK LORD templates. They are mainly used to help us understand enemies and individuals of concern. They were never designed to assist in other matters. Their programming in this aspect only meets the minimum requirements. They require a lengthy period of training in order to become useful in other capacities."

Ves smirked. "That doesn't sound so bad. That means that these smart AI templates are highly malleable. Even if they come with problematic traits, I can just train one of them like a dog and turn it into a productive addition to the SF-02."

Sigrund looked at Ves as if he was an idiot.

"The threat posed by these dangerous smart AI templates is greater than you think, professor. When the SF-02 that you have ordered becomes active, all 5 smart AI templates will be in constant contact with each other. While we have programmed them to maintain their separate personalities, a certain degree of cross-contamination cannot be avoided. Some of us even think that this is desirable because it will increase the coordination between them when working on multi-disciplinary assignments."

"What does that mean for me specifically if I choose one of those 'dangerous' smart AI templates?" Ves asked.

"It means that if you settle for a dangerous choice such as the DARK LORD smart AI template, it will promptly try to pass on its dangerous and subversive traits onto the other 4 smart AIs. Each of them will become crueler and less ethical. This can have far-reaching consequences. Perhaps you will be able to mitigate the undesirable consequences through strict training and constant vigilance, but the DARK LORD template in particular is programmed to always undermine all other authorities, including its own users. It is by far the most dangerous form of smart AI in our arsenal. Some of us previously thought about connecting a modified version of it to alien computing networks, but the threat that the DARK LORD AIs may come back to human space and wreak havoc across the galactic net is too great."

The more Commodore Reze talked about the DARK LORD smart AI template, the more Ves felt an attraction towards it. Not only was it aligned to the darkness element, but it was also by far the most challenging to control and harness.

Ves regarded it as a digital reflection of a demonized artifact spirit.

Just like the Bitter Swordsman, an AI based on the DARK LORD template would constantly work to undermine the existing order and take control in order to impose its own rules.

Just the thought of it made him more excited!

That was until his rationality reasserted itself.

What the hell was he thinking? How could he compromise the safety and reliability of his first smart AI processor cluster by letting a literal DARK LORD infest its processor chips?

The amount of processing power being wasted on infighting, redundant security measures and excessive verification would definitely cause the SF-02's performance to bog down!

While others might see this as an advantage as it would make his future flagship a lot more resistant against external intrusions, Ves did not want to turn his own smart AIs into his enemies one day!

He decided to save this option for another day. Perhaps it would be better if he reserved the DARK LORD smart AI template for a less critical but still important starship such as a stealth vessel.

Ves decided to turn his attention to less risky choices.

"What can you tell me about the STARVING ARTIST and MASTER ARTISAN templates? What are the differences between the two, exactly?"

"The STARVING ARTIST is our best attempt at getting an AI to gain an understanding and appreciation of art from a human perspective." Commodore Zonrad Reze explained. "However, this template is more of a private project, and has never received much interest and support from the Red Fleet. A smart AI based on this template will only exhibit rudimentary and borderline useless functionality. It will require years of training and human interaction in order to meet the original goals of its sole programmer. This is why its label includes the word 'STARVING'."

"All I am hearing are downsides, commodore. There has to be a reason why it exists. What is the goal of this smart AI?"

"To find out… whether smart AIs can create art that matches or surpasses human works." Commodore Reze answers. "Its creator was particularly interested in finding out whether the STARVING ARTIST smart AI template can lead to the mass production of masterworks without any human intervention."

"That sounds like a project worth investing in." Ves judged.

"That is why the MASTER ARTISAN smart AI template exists. Compared to the STARVING ARTIST template, the MASTER ARTISAN template has attracted much more investment. Its code is more refined and developed and can completely automate many different production tasks, from producing mechs to constructing starships. It has already become popular among our factory ships for this reason."

That sounded like a perfect match for the Spirit of Bentheim, but not necessarily for the Tortuous Scream.

While it was possible to refit the Tortuous Scream in order to expand her production capabilities, doing so was a complete waste. It was better to work with dedicated factory ships that did not require Warship Tokens.

Ves felt he was about ready to make a selection.

He briefly contemplated the remaining options on his list.

The HIGH PRIEST smart AI template sounded interesting if he was interested in trying to manipulate his clansmen and red humanity by spreading faith in his design spirits.

The CHIEF EXECUTE smart AI template would definitely be of great assistance to the commercial enterprises of his clan. The Living Mech Corporation, the Open Consortium, the Creation Association and so on could all benefit from the improvements suggested by a business-savvy smart AI.

The FEUDAL KING smart AI template sounded incredibly interesting if he wanted to expand his power base or even create his own state or star nation one day. If Ves possessed megalomaniac ambitions, then he could use a powerful assistant that excelled at securing the loyalties of powerful people.

However, most of these smart AI templates merely sounded 'nice to have' rather than absolutely essential. Ves still couldn't spot a choice that was vastly superior and more appropriate to his current situation than the other ones.

Given that the expected value and utility of many of them were quite close to each other, Ves did not have to use those criteria to determine his choice.

He decided to disregard his rationality and rely on his emotions to come to a decision.

Which one spoke to him the most?

Ves briefly closed his eyes in order to clear his mind of all of his complicated thoughts.

When he listened to his heart, he was gradually able to determine his preference.

"I have made up my mind on the last slot. Please fill it up with the STARVING ARTIST smart AI template."

"...Are you certain of your decision, professor?" The RF officer softly asked in conformation. "You can still decide to allocate the final slot to the PLAGUE DOCTOR smart AI template instead. Your clan relies more and more on biotechnological applications. There are many other useful smart AI templates available that can facilitate research into other fields."

"It can wait." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I will revisit these options when my clansmen and I are able to earn more RF Warship Tokens. For now, I want my own SF-02 to serve my direct needs as best as possible. The choices I have made do not encompass every demand I have, but it should offer me enough utility to satisfy me for the time being."

Commodore Reze began to make the choices official.

"I have transmitted the order request." The fleeter said. "The Red Fleet will construct and install the SEA SOVEREIGN, STAR WATCHER, ARMOR POLISHER, IRON MONGER and STARVING ARTIST smart AI templates as quickly as possible. This should not take long as the 'parts' are available and partially assembled. We can deliver the SF-02 directly to Diandi Base in a week. We can also ship it to the E-66 Experimental Yard located in the Inferno Spear Principality so that we can install it directly into your converted alien battleship. Making this choice will ensure that the SF-02 will be able to operate alongside the existing computer systems of the Tortuous Scream with as little glitches and malfunctions as possible."

Ves did not care too much about that. He always saw the Tortuous Scream as a stopgap warship. There was no need to do everything properly when he might abandon the alien vessel for a proper human battlecruiser at a later date.

"Don't ship the SF-02 to the Rubarthan Pact. Send it over to Diandi Base. My wife and I should make use of it as quickly. The sooner it arrives, the sooner we can accelerate our mech design projects. Just make sure that it remains easily transportable so that we can transplant the processor cluster to the Tortuous Scream in a few months."

"Very well. We can do that, professor. We will send our advisors to the E-66 Experimental Yard and begin to lay the groundwork for a future installation."

Chapter 6797: Preparing the Clan

When Ves closed the deal with the Red Fleet and departed from the Babylon Excavator, he quickly sought out his wife and explained what he had done.

Different from what he predicted, his wife did not look too upset.

"There you go again making life-changing decisions that affect my work and the rest of our clan without consulting other people's opinions, most notably mine." The woman said in an exasperated voice. "Let me state that the choices you have made do not exactly align with my own preferences. It is much more beneficial to us if you chose to select 5 smart AIs that excel in research and development. We have no immediate need for smart AIs that improve our naval operations. Admiral Gori Tensen of the Bluejay Fleet is a much more reliable naval commander than the SEA SOVEREIGN, and we can employ survey ships and survey mechs to fulfill the role of the STAR WATCHER. And do not get me started on this ridiculous STARVING ARTIST."

Though Gloriana lamented Ves' choices, she at least expressed satisfaction for choosing at least two useful smart AIs.

"If you selected the ARMOR POLISHER and IRON MONGER templates, then I think that you have truly destroyed the value of those Warship Tokens. Mechs remain the foundation of our success. I truly cannot wait for the RF to ship over the SF-02. We can compress our schedule and work on more mech design projects at the same time. So long as we devote all of the available processing power to the two R&D-centered smart AIs, we should quickly be able to reduce our backlog."

Just as expected, Gloriana only valued the R&D smart AI templates. She did not see the value in the other templates even though they had their own value in order for the RF to invest resources into developing them. Their value was far greater than his wife gave them credit for. It was unfair to pretend that they did not exist.

It was useless to persuade her otherwise. Perhaps the only way for them to prove their value to Gloriana and everyone else was to see them in action.

Until that happened, Ves was content with leaving the naval smart AIs mostly inactive.

After he concluded his talk with his wife, he continued to make the arrangements for the arrival of the SF-02.

A lot of mech designers reacted positively to this addition. The first-raters were especially glad to receive much more processing power.

"Our courses have taught us how to make the best use of the processing power of supercomputers and processor clusters." Alexa Streon explained to Ves. "The processing power that you have secured for us is luxurious. I have studied the specifications that you have sent to me and I can judge that the fleeters are indeed sincere in this exchange. The SF-02 is far from the most powerful processor cluster that you can obtain, but what strikes me the most is that it is far more compact and efficient than the alternatives. Part of that is due to superior design and materials, but another part of it is vastly more effective software. The smart AIs alone defy contemporary understanding of intelligent systems design."

"That is interesting to hear." Ves responded before turning to another Journeyman. "What do you think, Kelsey?"

The former Rubarthan's verdict was immediate. "This is a security nightmare. This tech is beyond our understanding. Even if we have full access to the programming code, there is so much of it that it is far too easy to overlook anything dangerous. I am also rather concerned about the hardcode that underpin the behavior of the smart AIs. What if they are hardwired to obey the instructions of the RF above our own? There is little we can do to prevent that from happening. Then there is the potential for the smart AIs to escape our control."

Kelsey Ampatoch specialized in subverting systems, so his words carried a lot of weight.

Ves had already thought about most of these issues, though. "The RF and our clan have signed a formal contract that restricts the former from sneaking in any backdoors into the SF-02. The fleeters are also obliged to transfer a handful of their computer experts to our clan who are capable of understanding the RF's programming language and solutions. While they may not be the best of what the RF has to offer, once they become a part of the Larkinson Network, their loyalty is not in doubt."

"What about their competence, sir?" Kelsey retorted. "You should have pushed harder to absorb senior AI programmers that have materially contributed to at least one of the smart AI templates. Frankly speaking, it does not matter how much these former fleeters are dedicated to serve our clan if they are too ignorant to recognize the subtler traps and vulnerabilities that their more competent seniors have left behind."

"It's okay." Ves responded. "As soon as we get the SF-02, we will begin to alter it so that it becomes our own work. I already have a few ideas in mind. Trust in my E-technology. So long as the smart AIs are alive as I suspect, I have many ways of binding them to my cause."

"What if you are wrong, sir?"

"Then we treat the SF-02 as a discrete tool. We store it in an isolated chamber and prevent it from connecting to our other networks. We only feed it with the data that we explicitly permit it to access. This should limit the threat it may pose. I don't think it will come to that, though. I have plenty of justifications to go back to the RF and accuse them of not abiding by the terms of our contract."

Isolating the SF-02 made it a lot less useful, but that was a compromise that Ves was willing to make if he could not gain enough guarantees about its reliability.

This was the inherent problem that came with relying on other people's tech. Ves felt much more sympathetic to all of the haters and skeptics who had viewed his living mechs with great mistrust and suspicion.

Their concerns about the reliability of living mechs were more than justified. Even if Ves never harbored any ill intent towards his own customers, who knew whether that might change in the future.

Ves had the power to change and corrupt his living mechs whenever he wanted. He had already done so in the past when he updated their spiritual foundations as a result of flaws and malfunctions.

Now he found himself in the same position as those paranoid fellows. The SF-02 had the potential to massively increase the productivity and security of his clan, but it also left his Larkinsons more vulnerable to the Red Fleet.

Whatever the case, Ves should avoid getting into a direct conflict with the Red Fleet for the foreseeable future. The best way to avoid the SF-02 from becoming a dangerous trap was to ensure that those who could take advantage of its vulnerability never had any reason to make a move.

"Since the two of you are more familiar with working with these kinds of supercomputers, I would like the two of you to go over the SF-02 once the fleeters deliver it and set it up." Ves instructed the two first-raters. "Be thorough in your inspection and mention any faults or concerns that you may have."

"We can do that, sir." Kelsey Ampatoch said.

"I would like your permission to contact the Devos Ancient Clan." Alexa Streon requested. "THe Devosans have much better computer specialists in their employ than us. Given our relations with the ancient clan, we should be able to trust the judgment of these experts."

"Good idea. Please make the arrangements. Any other suggestions?"

Kelsey raised his hand. "We cannot keep relying on external talent and consultants to maintain our security. We should expand the relevant departments and hire the best experts that apply to our clan. Our reputation is at an ascendancy. We can take advantage of that to headhunt key personnel that ordinarily would have never taken interest in our clan. It is unlikely for us to match the Red Fleet when it comes to the development of these smart AIs and processor clusters, but as long as our new personnel come close enough, we can at least defend ourselves against most attacks from this direction."

Ves nodded in approval. "Also a good idea. If you have enough spare time from working on the Final Glory Project, please take the initiative on this matter. I will tell my personal assistant to give you the authority to make changes on my behalf. Our civilization is continuing to deteriorate with every passing day. I fear that the stuff we take for granted may no longer exist tomorrow. Free markets, interstellar commerce, open economies and so on may become a thing of the past. This will make it much harder for us to hire the highly skilled personnel that we need, so it is better to get this taken care of sooner rather than later."

The Larkinson Clan needed to get ready for the next era.

Once the Premier Branch was able to launch its own first-class fleet, his clan would definitely gain a huge amount of power as well as responsibility.

Whether red humanity managed to beat back the native aliens or not, his fleet would definitely play an integral part in the fighting to come.

"Do you have any other helpful suggestions?" Ves asked.

"We should think about designing a first-class multipurpose mech of our own." Alexa suggested next. "This has been a glaring absence in our mech roster for too long. Right now, the only native first-class living mech of our own design that we can place in our first-class carriers is the Yellow Jacket Version A. No offense to your revolutionary Carmine mech, but we can do much better than that. If we do not have an appropriate design ready, then we may have to resort to using third-party mechs."

Ves briefly thought for a few seconds. "The addition of the SF-02 will reduce the time it takes to design a first-class multipurpose mech, but I don't think we can get it done in less than half a year. This is a large and complex undertaking. I do not think we have the time to design such an ambitious mech design project right now. I at least want to finish the Final Glory Project and the Minerva Mark II Project before I consider this job. For now, I am not in much of a hurry to design a first-class multipurpose mech. I am perfectly okay with using market products as a stopgap solution."

He wanted to pay close attention to how well first-class multipurpose mechs published by well-regarded mech companies performed in the hands of the Larkinsons.

Once he figured out their advantages and shortcomings, he could design his own first-class multipurpose mechs that promised to be a better fit for his clan.

"Do you already have an idea in mind, sir?"

Ves nodded. "I do, Alexa. Several of them, in fact. While I prefer to design specialized mechs, that doesn't mean I look down on first-class multipurpose mechs. They exist and have become popular for good reasons. I just find it a little difficult to give them a unique character and set of advantages. You have to go out of your way to give the mech design strong advantages and disadvantages. Right now, I am especially interested in designing first-class multipurpose mechs that can serve as all-round Commandeering vessels for our Saint Commander. Strong firepower is essential, but it also needs to be good enough in melee combat to shred enemy transphasic energy shields."

Mechs did not exist in isolation.

Ves needed to design his first-class multipurpose mech to synergize well with the Minerva Mark II, the Tortuous Scream and the warships of the Bluejay Fleet. There was no reason for it to exist otherwise.

Chapter 6798: Reluctant Transfer

Ves and Gloriana could not wait to make use of the SF-02. They eagerly awaited its delivery and felt that each day without it made their work slower.

The two had never noticed the shortcomings of their current processor banks in the past. They were aware that they did not enjoy the best, but they were otherwise happy with what they had at their disposal.

The amazing performance of the Red Fleet's latest advancements in computing and AI systems changed their perception.

Now that the pair had become aware of how much faster they could process data, conduct simulations and perform a huge number of mathematical calculations, everything else suddenly became inferior.

This must be what people felt when a mech company released a newer version of a mech model that was already in use.

Even if their performance remained exactly the same, the awareness that there was a superior version available instantly changed one's perception of the previous version.

Ves tried to shrug off this perspective, but he failed to do so. The difference in performance between his existing means and his future means was too great.

Before the SF-02 arrived, Ves and every other mech designer had to spend a few hours of their time to read portions of the manual that the fleeters had thoughtfully sent ahead.

There was a lot of reading material to go through. For now, most of the mech designers could only skim through the basic operations. There was no need for them to learn how to operate the more advanced functions for the time being.

It was different from Ves and his wife. The two of them needed to master the use of the SF-02 as quickly as possible in order to get full value out of its powerful processing capabilities.

Gloriana proved to be a much better study in this regard. Her Mentalist Crystal-augmented cranial implant suite massively sped up her learning rate. She pretty much figured out most of the advanced operations in less than half the time it took for Ves to gain the same degree of understanding.

"I can see now why you have taken a strong liking for the SF-02." She told him when she dropped by his design lab. "Its smart AIs are truly similar to artifact spirits. The differences are that smart AIs can not only be programmed in advance, but that they can be shaped to a much more extensive degree while they grow up. They are enormously predisposed to adaptation through external stimuli. They are similar to children in that sense. The way we raise and treat the smart AIs will dictate their personalities as well as their approach towards problem solving."

Ves nodded in understanding. "In short, this will be our version of piloting a living mech. If we want to turn the SF-02 into a productive tool for us, then we need to teach it what we want. However, I don't want other people to exert undue influence in the development of smart AIs. Have you found out how you can prevent that from happening? I do not want to restrict access to the SF-02 too much just to prevent a low-ranking mech designer from defining its personality."

"I do recall that such settings exist. You can configure the SF-02 to assign scores or ranks to every user. We need to put ourselves on top and everyone else far below. The SF-02 will benefit our clan the most if it is specialized in complementing our distinctive design work. According to the manual, the smart AI based on the ARMOR POLISHER template will provide the greatest assistance if it is dedicated to serving a single mech designer. Letting it serve two mech designers will reduce its efficiency, but may also led to the creation of interesting hybrid solutions."

That caused Ves to grow intrigued. He hadn't read that part of the manual yet. He could see why his wife developed an interest in this mechanic.

"I see." Ves said. "Combining design work based on 2 different design philosophies is still relatively simple. The smart AI will become a lot more confused if he has to juggle between 100 different design philosophies. Without enough processing power, it will only ever be able to develop shallow combinations. Depth will be entirely absent from the smart AI's output."

The more design philosophies the smart AI needed to master, the less it could comprehend the nuances and higher principles of each of them. Providing more processing power certainly helped, but there came a point where a sentient smart AI reached its limits.

Only sentient being that had proven the capacity to juggle an astounding amount of design philosophies without reaching a limit was the Polymath!

It was blasphemy to think that a mere smart AI could equal the feats of a Star Designer!

In any case, both Ves and Gloriana agreed that the smart AI based on the ARMOR POLISHER template should evolve into a reflection of both of their works.

This not only ensured that it will be able to provide the greatest level of assistance to any of their important collaboration works, but also make sure that other workers had access to design solutions based on the style of the two most important mech designers in the Larkinson Clan.

If anything happened that caused Ves or Gloriana to disappear and become unavailable to assist in any mech design projects, then the smart AI may be able to make up for their absence.

Ves had actually begun to wonder whether a smart AI possessed the qualifications to become a mech designer.

Would the Red Kingdom be able to recognize the smart AI's knowledge and mech designs?

Was a smart AI able to form its own design seed and later on a domain?

Perhaps not, but what if he merged the smart AI with a human somehow?

This may be enough to spoof the Red Kingdom and cause it to mistakenly promote the smart AI into a Journeyman Mech Designer!

If that happened, then Ves would definitely keel over and laugh!

Letting a smart AI originally developed by the Red Fleet gain recognition from the Red Kingdom would definitely drive the mechers nuts!

He chuckled but quickly wiped the crazy idea from his mind. There was no need for him to go this far.

Days passed by as Ves and his wife continued to wait for the shipment to arrive.

All the while, Ves continued to split his time between the Minerva Mark II Project and the Final Glory Project.

Even without the much-anticipated SF-02, he was making excellent progress in both projects.

"The Minerva Mark II Project should be done in a month if we account for the productivity gains from the SF-02." Ves judged. "We can complete it even faster if we allocate all of the available processing power to this project. We don't have to wait long before we recall the Saint Commander from the frontlines."

"Do you think she will agree?" Gloriana questioned. "She has a strong attachment to the soldiers of the expeditionary fleet. She commanded them and fought alongside them for multiple years. Once she departs and receives the Minerva Mark II, the rules set by Human High Command obliges her to fight to defend the Upper Zones. Saint Tusa and Saint Stark may not have a problem with that, but the Saint Commander cares too much about 'her' men."

Ves frowned. His wife made a good point.

Many people relied on the strength granted by the Saint Commander. The absence of the Minerva Mark II would significantly reduce the combat power of the expeditionary fleet.

This was quite a serious absence in a time where the fifth defensive band was under threat!

However, the Minerva had to be upgraded. The difference between the Mark I and the Mark II was too great.

Ves knew that the Saint Commander ultimately wouldn't be able to make much of a difference.

HHC had effectively abandoned the Middle and Lower Zones.

While it was still important for second-raters and third-raters to fight as hard as they could defend their homes and their people, their main purpose was to stall the aliens and provide a lot of stimulation to peak ace pilots.

Now that Ves had found out that the higher ups regarded the near-certain fall of these zones as necessary sacrifices, he did not want the most important ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan to fall victim to this scam.

"I will talk to her and try to convince her of the necessity to defend the core of human-occupied space." Ves said. "With her strategic acumen, she should understand that none of us stand a chance if we lose more than half of our Upper Zones."

Red humanity was too fragile in the face of a hostile dwarf galaxy.

Ves subsequently called the Saint Commander and had a very tense discussion.

Suffice to say, she did not look happy.

"This is unacceptable, patriarch." Casella Ingvar spoke while her firm willpower tried to pin Ves directly across the communication link! "The expeditionary fleet is one of the main forces that is trying to save the Krakatoa Middle Zone from getting overrun by murderous alien fleets. Though our strength is diminishing, we are still able to make a difference. That becomes much more difficult if I leave. The expeditionary fleet will become lesser in my absence, and is guaranteed to suffer greater casualties."

"I understand your objections, but we all have to make sacrifices in order to preserve our race and civilization. The expeditionary fleet… needs to get rid of its dependence on your Command Field. Your power is much more useful when you Commandeer and Enfeoff are genuine first-class mechs. There are so many powerful first-class warships crashing into the defensive lines of the Upper Zones. Your upcoming Minerva Mark II can make a massive difference. The more ships you are able to break through your intervention, the faster the Red Tide Offensive will stall. Once the native aliens have suffered so many material losses that they cannot sustain their assault on the Upper Zones anymore, the attacks on the Middle and Lower Zones will also diminish."

"..."

Ves reached out with his hand. "The longer you pilot your horribly outdated mid-tier expert mech, the more you constrain your own strength. You are not doing yourself nor your living mech justice by insisting on fighting on a battlefield that you have outgrown. As an ace commander, you must bear the responsibility of protecting red humanity, not just the members of our clan."

"Who will look after the soldiers of the expeditionary fleet after I depart?" Saint Commander Casella softly asked.

"There are plenty of Larkinsons that can try to fill your shoes, Casella. When it comes to hard power, I have heard that Venerable Joshua is doing really well. Venerable Jannzi also appears close to making a breakthrough. Your troops will be fine under their protection. Besides, even if you leave, you will still be contributing to the

protection of the expeditionary fleet. You fight to preserve the society that our clan is dependent on. If our civilization collapses, we will all turn into homeless dregs."

"...Very well. I will depart for New Constantinople, but only when you are almost ready to upgrade my machine. I want to stay with the expeditionary fleet as long as possible. This will also give me more preparation time. The transition needs to be done as smoothly as possible to prevent morale from sliding."

"Understood." Ves nodded. "Do you require anything special?"

"No. I have what I need. Sir… do you truly think my assistance is necessary to hold the Upper Zones?"

That was a difficult question to answer. "I am just a mech designer, Casella. I am far removed from the frontlines. I read a lot of reports, and I watch the battle footage like everyone else, but my opinions probably matter less than the soldiers who are fighting at the front. I suggest you contact Saint Tusa and Saint Stark and ask what they think."

"I shall do so, though I fear their opinions are too narrow for my liking."

Chapter 6799: Deteriorating Economy

[The Upper Zones are holding for the time being. The defenses built up by the Red Three, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact have proven their worth many times over. Countless native alien warships have tried to break our orbital defenses, yet found themselves crashing against a wall of alloy and energy beams…]

[The first wave of superweapons designed by Star Designers have made an appearance across the frontlines. Predominantly concentrated in the Upper Zones, their technological supremacy has taken the enemy aback and successfully forced the phase whales into passive positions. However, analysts fear that the Red Cabal will respond to the appearance of human superweapons by matching our escalation with their own superweapons…]

[OUR ANNIHILATION IS AT HAND! DEATH HAD DESCENDED UPON THE RED OCEAN AS OUR ALIEN EXECUTIONERS ARE ON THE VERGE OF BREAKING THROUGH OUR LAST LINE OF DEFENSE! SURRENDER TO THE INEVITABLE AND MAKE PEACE WITH THE FACT THAT WE WILL ALL REUNITE WITH EACH OTHER IN THE AFTERLIFE!]

[The slow collapse of the fifth defensive band has generated massive economic upheaval. Planets and states located closer to the frontlines have already entered into deep recessions as they are suffering from the consequences of the Red Tide Offensive. Skilled employees have paid the profligate prices charged by passenger liners to emigrate from their vulnerable homes while consumers are not buying anything except vehicles, survival gear and nutrient packs. Millions of companies have gone bankrupt, with more to follow in the following months unless stability returns to the frontlines…]

[The cosmopolitans were right all along! Huh? I know that what I am saying will get me arrested, but who cares about that when our planet will soon get raided and bombarded until not a single human organic cell is left alive? If I am destined to die, then I will make sure to leave a memory of myself behind by speaking what is really in my mind! As far as I am concerned, our obsession with making humanity the only race that matters has backfired! We should have tried to befriend some of the native aliens when we first arrived. By making enemies out of all of the major as well as minor races, we have doomed ourselves as soon as the Great Severing took place…]

[OUR GODS AND HEROES AREN'T DOING ENOUGH TO SAVE OUR LIVES! Where is the Polymath?! Where is the famous Dominion of Man?! Why has it taken so long for the first masterwork-level superweapons to deploy at the frontlines? The high-and-mighty first-raters have made their moves too late! There is almost no point in deploying our superweapons when the aliens have already pushed us to the fifth and final defensive band. We could have used them in the first defensive band instead! Also, whoever thought it was a good idea to transfer our ace pilots from the Middle Zonez to the Upper Zones should be arrested and shot for treason!...]

[Have faith! Our race is anointed by God. Under the protection of the one true God — not the alien monstrosities that parade as such because they can drink special water — humanity shall rise again, just as our forefathers have done during the Age of Conquest! Pray to Him and hope that the Almighty shall send down an apostle such as the Savior or the Marshal that will lead us to paradise…]

"Are you enjoying the news, boss?"

"Not much." Ves replied to Gavin Neumann. "I am rather surprised that half of these broadcasts are allowed to stay up. The Comm Consortium used to be a lot stricter about what opinions people are allowed to spread to the masses."

"It doesn't matter too much anymore." The personal assistant shrugged. "The truth cannot be covered up or massaged anymore. If the native aliens successfully breach the fifth defensive band and begin to raze multiple Middle and Lower Zones, then all of the folks who are venting on the galactic net will no longer exist anymore. Perhaps letting them show their faces and leave their records behind on the galactic net is the last form of mercy that the authorities are able to offer to them. Many more people will die without leaving any notable mark of their existence behind. They are as dull and unremarkable as the asteroids floating in an asteroid belt. No one will miss the presence and absence."

The augmented assistant sounded remarkably emotional when he spoke about the lack of impact of the mass deaths of lots of space peasants.

Ves could not bring himself to disagree with Gavin's assertion. Those that possessed valuable talents, a lot of capital or excellent connections mostly managed to find a way to evacuate from their endangered planets in advance.

"So how screwed are our commercial enterprises?" He asked.

"Their economic outlooks are bad. Our profit margins have evaporated as the price of purchasing input materials has skyrocketed. An increasing number of workers have quit their jobs depending on how close they are to the current frontlines. We are also gearing up our administration to write off all of the factories that we have built in the Middle and Lower Zones that are currently under threat. Davute is an especially notable headache for us. The branch that is based on this capital planet has built up a sizable real estate portfolio. It has used the profits generated by the factories at the Cat Nest to construct manufacturing complexes, office buildings, hotels, residential housing reserved for clansmen, hospitals and more."

Ves groaned and pressed his hand against his forehead. This must have been General Ark Larkinson's doing. His damn uncle overestimated red humanity's ability to defend its borders and underestimated the sacrifices that the people at the top were willing to make.

This was why Ves had always insisted on maintaining the independence of the clan and remaining cautious about investing heavily into fixed locations.

Now, it looked as if Ves made the right decision yet again white all of the Larkinsons who insisted on putting their trust in third-party governments and institutions might have to pay for their mistakes with their lives.

"Are there any evacuations?"

"There are." Gavin responded. "We have converted a part of our merchant fleet into refugee vessels. As long as you install basic life support facilities in the holds of large cargo haulers, you can bring away a large amount of people. The evacuations of clansmen who are based in branches that are close to the frontlines is proceeding according to schedule, but… the ones who are based on well-defended planets such as Davute are partially rejecting the offer to flee to safety."

Figures.

Ves sneered as he steepled his hands in front of him. "Let me guess. General Ark Larkinson wants to rope in as many of our clansmen to defend Davute from the advancing aliens, is that correct?"

Gavin nodded. "He does not want to run without doing his duty to the Colonial Federation of Davute. The main goal is to stop the alien advance at the Davute System. If this cannot be accomplished, then the 77th Warborn Mech Division should at least do their best to delay the alien invasion in order to buy time for more evacuations. Right now, many, but not all, of the non-essential personnel such as factory workers, R&D personnel and children are being evacuated to safer zones in the rear of human-occupied space. It is only the soldiers and the personnel required to support their activities that are remaining behind."

That sounded a bit better. The Davute Branch was not as crazy as Ves feared.

He still disagreed with the Larkinsons who had grown so attached towards Davute that they were willing to risk their lives to defend it, but… he could understand the sentiment.

People needed to fight. Even if the odds were stacked against them, humans couldn't afford to retreat all the time. They needed to stand up for what they believed in and fight for a cause that was greater than their own survival.

Ves mentally saluted the poor chums of the Davute Branch, but that was all he did. He had no desire to provide any additional aid to these dummies.

Even if General Ark Larkinson suffered an accident as a result of his misplaced sense of patriotism, he only had himself to blame.

Ves continued to talk about business and related matters with Gavin.

The declining economy and the unstable market conditions disrupted a lot of operations. The Larkinson Clan had to suspend or pull back many different business ventures in order to adjust.

"The good news is that we have built up a formidable warchest in the past few years." Gavin said. "The Yellow Jacket line has especially earned us a large amount of cash. The bad news is that inflation is spiking. The prices of ordinary commodities have remained the same, but the prices of premium goods and materials are skyrocketing. People are beginning to find out that a fat bank account is less useful than a powerful mech or vehicle when the aliens come knocking on your door. This means we can buy less for the same amount of money."

"Ugh. Inflation. I figured that would make a return. Do you think we can still afford to pay for all of the major ventures that we have planned? Can we still produce mechs to replace the ones we have lost, and can we still pay for the construction of high-quality starships at our shipyards?"

"It is doable, Ves. We will rapidly use up our cash reserves if we do so. Our deficit spending will go through the roof. However, if you think that it is better to be broke than safe, then this is a good decision to make. Given the popularity of your Carmine mechs, you should be able to recover funds that you have spent on the construction of starships, but that is only the case if there is a semblance of a mech industry left after this ordeal."

He nodded in agreement. That was what he thought as well. LMC mechs have proven to be enduringly popular, and Carmine mechs had become the latest trend.

"I am afraid that this invasion will leave behind deep scars in whatever society we have left." Ves frankly spoke to a man that he had come to trust to a certain extent. "Our society is continuing to diverge from what we left behind in the Milky Way, and I am not sure if that is entirely good."

Gavin disagreed. "I think your fears are overblown, boss. Humans will come together and try to shoulder the burdens together. We have no other choice if we want to avoid a catastrophic loss. Our civilization is resilient. Our society will likely remain the same because we won't be able to return from prosperity as quickly and easily if our culture and traditions change beyond recognition."

Ves pressed his lips. He did not quite agree. He felt that red humanity's society had become a lot more fragile. It shouldn't take too much pressure to collapse everything.

"I hope that you are right, for all of our sakes."

Ves continued to watch the news feeds. He enjoyed the eclectic opinions that popped up. The doomsday scenarios hanging over people's heads certainly caused a lot of people to stop caring about proprietary and simply voice their true opinions.

Even if they cussed out the mechers and the fleeters, the Red Comm Consortium still permitted the broadcasts to continue. That was really weird. Had the influence of the Red Collective grown so powerful as of late that it was able to serve as a counterweight?

That did not sound likely.

Perhaps the mechers and the fleeters of the Red Ocean had a change of heart.

"Nah."

Who was he kidding?

The Red Association and the Red Fleet would never relinquish their hegemony so easily!

A more likely possibility was that the Red Association wanted to provide additional stimulation to peak ace pilots.

The more desperate people broadcast their tearful last days, the more the god pilot candidates felt motivated to step on the road to no return!

"This explanation makes much more sense!"

Chapter 6800: The Battle of Yernstall

Just as Ves continued to listen to one depressing news report after another, a sudden event shook apart the despondency that had overtaken the galactic net.

"The Yernstall Central Star Node has broken out of the greater spacetime bubble!"

Although it took a little longer than expected for the humans trapped inside the powerful bubble that not only cut them off form the rest of the cosmos, but also caused the passage of time to slow to a crawl, the aliens ultimately failed to cut off the Sapphire of the Red Ocean.

The fact that the people stationed in Yernstall managed to dispel the effect so soon meant that they had probably defeated all of the ancient phase whales and other nefarious alien arrangements in less than two hours!

The speed was so impressive that whoever or whatever was assigned to defend Yernstall from the predations of the Red Cabal possessed absolute superiority in combat.

It shouldn't be the First Flame, as it was well known that he was originally stationed at Bridgehead One when the ancient phase whales first demonstrated the capability to form greater spacetime bubbles.

"Who, then?!"

The answer should be fairly easy to guess as many god pilots had already made their appearances across the frontlines during the time that Yernstall became isolated.

Soon enough, the first broadcasts from Yernstall started to spread like wildfire across the galactic net.

The professionally edited clip showed what happened.

Several sensor posts suddenly detected the arrival of 6 ancient phase whales. Each of these powerful True God-level body cultivators surrounded Yernstall from all of the cardinal directions including up and down.

They conducted a mysterious ritual that caused them to channel their spatial manipulation into a massive dome that was large enough to cover the central star node!

This was not the extent of the alien attack. In order to sneak behind enemy lines, only the most powerful and capable aliens had taken part in this bold and risky assault.

"The aliens have come!"

The native aliens clearly took inspiration from red humanity's Operation Night Jazz and sent out 6 more ancient phase whales as well as an elite warfleet!

The 6 ancient phase whales that had not sacrificed their power to maintain the greater spatial bubble immediately began to unveil their true bodies, causing half-a-dozen moon or planet-sized organic monstrosities to appear in the central star node!

"They alien deep strike force is seeking to blitz our strongholds from the outer system!"

Each of them had begun to wreck the outermost orbital fortifications and factories. They utilized their immense bulk and insanely strong spatial barriers to block most of the attacks coming from the advanced defensive platforms.

Compared to the enormous ancient phase whales, the accompanying warships appeared tiny and inconsequential, but they took care of scouting, threat assessments, data analysis and other chores that the native gods thought were beneath them. The assistance provided by these warships improved coordination and warned the attackers in advance of any priority threats.

The 6 ancient phase whales that were responsible for destroying Yernstall's infrastructure were beginning to encounter much greater resistance.

Even if they decided to attack Yernstall's weakest and least-defended moon that was orbiting the edge of the star system, the orbital defense network was considerably more powerful than the ones deployed across the fifth defensive band.

Orbital defense platforms armed with the most advanced transphasic hyper energy beam cannons and hyper plasma cannons continued to pummel the spatial barriers of the 6 ancient phase whales, but they may as well be throwing pebbles against a solid wall!

None of the sensor systems employed by the humans detected any measurable reduction in the integrity of the spatial barriers!

"Our firepower is completely ineffective! Even our most powerful transphasic missiles and projectiles are inflicting too little damage to make any measurable difference? Any damage we inflict instantly gets restored!"

The spatial barriers of the ancient phase whales were nowhere comparable to that of their greater phase whale counterparts. The qualities of the energy barriers had fundamentally changed.

It sort of reminded people of the reality-defying properties of high-ranking mech pilots.

Although the effect was not too strong, the divine qualities of these ancient phase whales still caused their energy defenses to become virtually impenetrable to mortal weapons and enemies!

Only gods or the creation of gods possessed the power to overcome these defenses. It was too difficult for others to accomplish the same even if they relied heavily on quantity to overcome their inherent weaknesses!

If this continued, Yernstall would quickly lose its first collection of infrastructure and population centers.

There was no way the orbital defenses had any hope of blocking the advance of so many threatening ancient phase whales!

Just the excessive gravity generated by their mass was already starting to alter the local gravity on the outermost planet!

A few human commanders recognized the futility of attacking the ancient phase whales. They instead directed their mobile units to attack the more fragile elements of the alien deep strike force.

First-class multipurpose mechs attempted to circle around and attack the warships. Each of these RA machines possessed a bit of confidence in their defenses, as their azure shield generators were all connected to each other through the use of shield link technology.

However, when two of the ancient phase whales combined their spatial abilities, the resulting wide-area spatial storm quickly engulfed and shredded the human strike craft!

Not even the toughest and most resilient first-class mechs managed to last more than a few seconds from this spatial onslaught!

"We need backup now, or else our defenses will fall in a matter of minutes!"

As the ancient phase whales continued to tear down orbital defenses and mechs alike, they did not press their current targets as hard as they could.

These old and venerable gods were no fools. Their massive eyes betrayed their vigilance. They all knew that the native aliens would send their strongest means to stop them from rampaging further.

They were ready for whatever might come. Yernstall was important enough to host a grand work-level superweapon.

Such an extraordinary weapon might be able to challenge the might of an ancient phase whale, but what about 6 of them working together?

The native aliens could not conceive of a possibility where they would lose against the technological wizardry of the 'Star Designers'.

Their cosmopolitan lackeys had already informed them of what to expect.

These powerful superweapons might possess the raw power to breach their formidable defenses, but as long as the ancient phase whales covered each other's backs, they should still be able to withstand the potent attacks.

Hopefully.

The ancient phase whales were much more concerned about other threats.

They did not fear the dreadnoughts as none of the ones aside from the missing Dominion of Man had undergone the critical transformation that turned them into god ships.

Therefore, the only possible threat they had to be on guard against were god mechs.

It was highly likely that just one of these transcendent machines was stationed in Yernstall.

Was it possible for a single god mech to defeat 6 ancient phase whales?

The Red Cabal had to admit that it may very well be. After all, the ancient phase whales killed during Operation Night Jazz was undeniable proof that a single god mech could easily defeat multiple ancient phase whales.

This was why 6 of them were on the attack at this time!

Not only did they possess the advantage of numbers, they also took part in this risky operation with much greater awareness and respect of the incredible martial prowess of a god pilot.

Even so, these ancient phase whales still possessed their own pride!

They wanted to wash away the shame of witnessing their peers getting butchered like human pigs during that infamous deep strike operation.

The strategic advantages of killing a god pilot were too great. Not only would the act of slaying one of these human scourges boost alien morale, but also make it more difficult for the remaining god pilots to defend important locations.

Therefore, when they finally detected the rapid approach of a metallic machine so powerful that it was able to race to the outer system with an impossibly high warp factor, the ancient phase whales instantly got ready for the most challenging fights of their lengthy lives.

"YOUR PUNY METAL FALSE GOD SHALL SHATTER BETWEEN OUR DIVINE TEETH!"

When the ancient phase whales finally opened their gigantic maws, their clearly altered teeth not only looked like they belonged to sharks, but also generated a lot of anomalous sensor readings!

It was difficult for most sensor and scanning systems to make accurate sensor readings due to the heavy gravitic interference generated by the massive true bodies, but the devices developed by the mechers and the fleeters still managed to make a positive identification.

"Watch out! Those enormous artificial teeth are all covered by a layer of superdimensional matter! The outermost layer consists of weapon-grade superdimensional matter, while the inner layers consist of lower grades of superdimensional matter. Their ability to penetrate through any form of armor far exceeds that of regular transphasic blades. When backed by the power of an immense true body, these ancient phase whales can bite through anything!"

"THEY SHALL HAVE TO CATCH ME FIRST!"

The god pilot that was originally stationed closer to the inner system had finally arrived!

The ancient phase whales ceased their destructive spree onto the orbital defenses. They had already wrecked most of it, and the remaining defenses had become irrelevant.

They only had eyes for the incoming god mech. The 6 ancient phase whales had formed many plans around this confrontation. This time, they would not underestimate the strongest of human false gods.

As soon as the distant god mech began to get closer, all 6 ancient phase whales generated one of the most powerful spatial disruptions in a wide area of space!

The resulting spatial storm and disruptions were so strong that a part of the surface of the nearby planet was suffering from apocalyptic disasters!

No amount of titan shields and other defenses had a chance to negate the power of these god-fueled spatial storms. Millions of first-raters lost their lives in an instant while a fortune's worth of defenses and industrial facilities got twisted by disordered space until there was nothing left but metal pieces!

The god mech charged head-long into this enormous spatial storm.

Just as the ancient phase whales predicted, the might of their near-perfect coordinated spatial storm had become so powerful that the dreaded God Kingdom struggled to negate or mitigate all of the damage.

Yet contrary to the expectations of the ancient phase whales, the rapidly approaching god mech did not suffer any noticeable damage or lose any speed!

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

"HAHAHA!" The boisterous and combative human god pilot laughed! "GOD PILOTS SUCH AS MYSELF DO THE IMPOSSIBLE EVERY SECOND OF THE DAY! I AM GLAD THAT YOU HAVE COME! I DID NOT GUARD THIS CENTRAL STAR NODE IN VAIN. NOW GET READY TO EAT MY NEW AND IMPROVED KNUCKLE SANDWICH!"

Before any of the ancient phase whales could ask what a knuckle sandwich was supposed to represent, the powerful god mech closed the distance with great momentum and reared back a fist that shone with the same complex sheen that characterized the enormous superdimensional teeth.

"SUPERDIMENSIONAL PUNCH!"

The god mech arrived so quickly that the targeted ancient phase whale was barely able to conjure up additional spatial barriers and other defenses.

All of it made little to no difference as the Invictus punched through all of the barriers with its outstretched fist and plunged into the body of the ancient phase whale!

Just an instant later, the same god mech broke out of the opposite side of the planet-sized true body, only this time an entire continent's worth of transphasic flesh wrenched loose!

Lifted up by the immense kinetic power of the punch, the superdimensional properties of the fist and the insanely high amplification from the God Kingdom, the Invictus had instantly managed to cripple the ancient phase whale with its opening punch!

The alien god in question suffered such grievous internal and external wounds that he had practically lost a third of his immensely powerful life!

"HAHAHAHA!"

The Fist of Defiance laughed as his fighting spirit grew stronger after experiencing the effectiveness of the latest upgrades of his god mech in person!

As millions of sensors focused on the Invictus, it became clear what the upgrades encompassed.

Practically its entire exterior was covered in brand-new plating that compromised entirely of armor-grade superdimensional alloys!

The only exception was its fists. The mechers had carefully coated the main weapons of the Invictus with the most superior weapon-grade superdimensional alloys!