

Tech System 721

Chapter 721 Enjoying the Process

Aron paused for a moment, taking a deep breath to gather his thoughts and process the information he had just absorbed. The weight of what he had learned required a moment of reflection before he could continue reading.

Although much of the information appeared legitimate, Aron remained cautious. He didn't consider it the absolute truth, knowing that the data from humanity's side also contained skewed details—while not outright lies, certain aspects were deliberately vague or not fully explained. This understanding made him approach the other side's information with a critical mindset.

But the absolute truth of the information wasn't what mattered most. What truly mattered was that the other side expected them to believe it. Aron knew they would act based on this information. From the information he had already reviewed, it became clear that the other side likely consisted of the so-called opportunists that were included in the information hoping to strike it rich.

This led Aron to suspect that they were previously gathering coordinates to sell to potential buyers who could come to this star system to stake their claim to it. It was highly probable that they were either in the process of selling this information or were prepared to do so at a moment's notice.

But it didn't matter whether they had already sold the information or were still preparing to do so—either way, the data would eventually be sold. However, if the sale hadn't occurred yet, there was still a sliver of hope for Aron and his team to recover from the situation. That hope hinged on the other side's level of greed. Selling something without knowing its true value would fetch a lower price, while waiting to fully understand what they had could increase its worth. This gap in knowledge might give Aron the time he needed to act.

Given that they had undertaken a journey spanning years to reach this star system, they would need to earn enough to justify the effort and time invested. This made it highly likely that they would only sell the information after thoroughly investigating the mana pulsar anomaly that had originally drawn them here. Depending on what they discovered, the value of this information could skyrocket, potentially allowing them to retire in luxury. Alternatively, if the star system's worth surpassed a certain threshold, they might even risk declaring ownership of it, deeming it something worth fighting for.

Based on that reasoning, Aron hoped that greed had overtaken the other side—not just because of the phenomenon they were investigating, but also because of the reported population of over eight billion people. To them, this massive population represented potential slaves that could make them incredibly wealthy. From their perspective, they likely believed they could win any confrontation easily, considering the other side unworthy of even challenging their single ship. This overconfidence and greed might provide Aron with the opportunity he needed to outmaneuver them.

Having reached that conclusion while hoping for the best and preparing for the worst, Aron refocused on the hologram to continue analyzing the information.

As Aron sifted through more of the information, he found that although it was important, it wasn't immediately relevant to the current situation. He skimmed through these details as quickly as possible, planning to revisit them later once he had dealt with the pressing issues at hand.

Once Aron had finished reviewing all the information, only five real-world minutes had passed, though to him, it felt like hours of reading and processing.

“How long until the others are up to date on everything?” he asked.

{It will take another twenty-five minutes before everyone on a need-to-know basis is caught up,} Nova responded promptly, as she was the first to have a comprehensive understanding of the current situation.

“Good, tell the fleet to be ready to engage at any moment. Depending on how quickly they process the information we provided, an attack is likely. We need to ensure we're not caught off guard,” Aron instructed, pulling up the hologram showing the ship's image.

They were using radio communication to initiate contact not just because it was simple, but also because it allowed them to use the signals as a form of radar to scan the ship discreetly, without alerting the other side.

While the signals weren't strong enough to penetrate every part of the ship, they provided sufficient detail about the basic thickness of the side that was facing them. This information revealed the thinner, more vulnerable areas as well as the hardest parts, which they could avoid in the event of a confrontation.

{Are we going to annihilate them?} Nova asked Aron, as his directives would guide the stealth fleet's actions in the potential faceoff.

“If we can handle them, we should gather as much information as possible. Given that they might have means of instantly communicating with their home base, we must get our hands on that. But what I want most is their knowledge—so instruct the fleet to do their best to capture them alive if possible. However, If they find the enemy to be too powerful, they should drop all of the directives and focus on destroying them,” Aron said, returning his attention to the hologram of the ship. He didn't need to provide further directives; the fleet members were experienced and would implement the orders based on their training and skills honed over thousands of simulation training.

{Sent,} Nova responded shortly.

Now, it was a matter of waiting to see if events would unfold as anticipated or if something unexpected would occur.

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Ten hours later.

The other side initiated a video call, which Niwildan immediately accepted. He noted the delay, considering how quickly he had processed their information, but he found it understandable given the advanced technology of their empire.

“From the look on your face, it seems you’ve already reviewed our material. So, how long until your so-called emperor receives the news and surrenders, or do we need to do it forcefully?” Xalthar asked with an air of arrogance. He was now fully confident in his power and the capabilities of his ship to take over the star system, and he had shifted his focus to enjoying the process.

Chapter 722 Opening Punches

“Since there is a limit on how quickly we can transfer information through our current means of communication, we are two hours away from completing the transmission. It should take about another twelve hours for it to arrive, but since they can review it as they start receiving it, we expect answers within twenty-four hours,” Niwildan replied calmly, deliberately infusing his tone with a sense of defeat and hopelessness.

“Good. Tell them that we expect an answer by then, or we will choose one for you, and you won’t like what we decide,” Xalthar said, cutting the call abruptly. He ensured his smug expression was the last thing the other side saw.

He appeared untroubled, confident that the other side wouldn’t have enough time to mount any significant response. With no immediate threats to worry about, Xalthar was at ease, certain of the outcome.

“Arrogance. The cause of many peoples, armies, and empires’ downfall,” Niwildan remarked, continuing to rest in his chair. They had effectively bought themselves and the empire twenty-four hours.

They were currently operating under the command to appear as weak as possible, adhering to the principle: “Appear weak when you are strong and strong when you are weak.” Since they hadn’t yet determined the strengths and weaknesses of their opponents, their strategy focused on “Don’t interrupt your enemy while they’re making a mistake” and “Always strive to maintain the upper hand.”

To reflect this principle, the fleet that was still in stealth mode, breaking into six parts and maneuvering slowly around the ship while keeping a constant distance.

They moved slowly to maintain their stealth and avoid triggering the enemy’s monitoring equipment by detecting any minute anomalies in light. Their strategy was to have all six divided groups surround the ship from six different directions: top, bottom, front, back, right, and left. This way, when they move to attack, the enemy would have to contend with simultaneous threats from all sides.

Although their movement was slow, that was only relative to light speed, so it only took a few minutes for them to reach their assigned positions, with the group heading to the rear of the ship taking the longest.

With the certainty of an impending face-off, the fleet was prepared to go all out in their engagement.

Within the stealth, bubbles that were being maintained and powered by a central ship within each divided group. These bubbles kept all the ships invisible to the outside despite every other ship not being stealth ships.

Within the ships soldiers conducted their final checks, preparing to head for their assigned locations.

Most of them headed to the breach pods, taking their places and readying themselves for the imminent action.

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{Locked}

“Copy that,” Ismail Maylander responded as he took his position within the breach pod, bracing himself for what was about to unfold.

On the left side of his view, Ismail saw a timer steadily counting down, indicating that there were only forty-seven seconds remaining before their breach pod would be launched to carry out its mission: breaching and deploying soldiers.

It was a moment he had rehearsed countless times, yet now that the real action was upon him, he felt an extraordinary calm. His breathing was steady, like that of someone at rest. Inside, however, his heart raced at full throttle, ensuring oxygen was delivered precisely where needed, with nanomachines aiding his respiration. Meanwhile, adrenaline surged through his body, and time acceleration implants sped up his perception to five times normal, synchronizing his highly responsive body with what he observed.

{Thirty seconds remaining, brace yourself} his government-issued AI, which he had named Cortana, instructed. Though the reminder was unnecessary—everyone in the breach pods was already as prepared as possible.

“Show me what’s going on outside,” Maylander requested. Instantly, the feed from his side of the fleet—stationed at the top of the ship relative to the solar system’s plane—appeared on his display.

He watched in silence as the attack ships completed their final positioning, preparing to deliver the initial strikes.

Even as his AI announced fifteen seconds remaining and then ten seconds, the attack did not commence. Maylander wasn’t surprised; he had grown accustomed to these moments of calculated patience.

As the timer hit three seconds, the ships unleashed a barrage of laser attacks. To Maylander’s accelerated perception, each ship flashed more than a hundred times over the span of what felt like fifteen seconds, their laser beams slicing through the void with relentless precision.

As the timer ticked down to one second, the breach pod jolted into motion, accelerating with terrifying speed due to magnetic propulsion. In just five seconds, they would cover the distance between the two ships. Thanks to the inertial compensators, the crew felt almost no impact from the intense acceleration.

The feed vanished, and the breach pod itself became invisible from his view as his implants activated augmented reality and he could see the thousands of other breach pods moving in tune with his. Sensors around the pod provided a seamless connection, allowing him to perceive the outside environment as if he were moving through space independently.

Now, as he exited the stealth bubble, he could see the ship being pummeled by the lasers. The focused strikes had already inflicted significant damage on the engines, rendering any attempt to escape nearly impossible. For a brief moment, he allowed himself a satisfied smile before refocusing entirely on his mission.

As the breach pod closed in on the Visitor's ship, it engaged its tractor beam, anchoring itself to a carefully chosen spot determined to be the ship's weakest point based on their data. The pod maintained its high speed, and with a powerful burst of kinetic force, it punched through the ship's surface effortlessly, much like a hot knife slicing through cheese. This breach was made possible not only by the pod's immense kinetic energy but also by the shield powered by a micro fusion reactor, which absorbed and redirected any retaliatory fire. The result was a seamless entry, with the crew inside the pod untouched by the intense energy exchange.

{Breaching successful} Cortana informed him as the front of the pod opened to reveal a dimly lit corridor.

The team was inside, and it was time to put their extensive training to the test.

Chapter 723 Responsibility Without Authority

Before the front doors of the breach pods opened, all of the pods that had successfully penetrated the ship simultaneously launched small, specialized disks toward the openings they had created. The disks powered up in perfect unison the moment they were thrown, activating immediately upon contact with the surface.

Each disk emitted a localized electromagnetic field, disrupting nearby sensors and alarms, while also generating a stable environment for the soldiers to enter. Along with this, the disks continuously mapped the surrounding areas, providing the team with valuable intel. The corridor ahead now lay momentarily exposed, granting them a brief window of opportunity to advance before the ship's systems could react.

As the disks operated, they transmitted real-time data between each other and the designated receivers, constructing a comprehensive map of the ship's interior within a range of several kilometers.

Ismail Maylander watched as the map updated in his implants, seamlessly overlaying his field of vision. It granted him the ability to see through walls, revealing hidden corridors and lifeforms. His team in the breach pod sprang into action without a word, moving with precision and silence. Communication flowed effortlessly through their AIs, allowing for coordination without wasting any precious time or giving away their presence. They moved like shadows, ready to execute their mission with the utmost efficiency.

They swiftly got to work, their weapons emitting only faint hums with each trigger pull. Despite being unable to see their targets directly on the other side of the walls, it didn't matter. Each shot hit its mark, sending someone to the ground. These targets weren't killed; they convulsed briefly as the

rounds shocked them into inactivity—following strict orders from the Emperor, to preserve lives for interrogation.

The involuntary shaking lasted only a few moments before stopping entirely. The rounds weren't just designed to disable; they contained nanomachines that, once inside the body, moved undetected toward the brain.

Even if the targets had heightened senses, they wouldn't feel the nanomachines at work thanks to the electric shock. Upon reaching the brain, the nanomachines would put the person into a deep, uninterrupted sleep, ensuring they remained unconscious until later retrieval.

This allowed the soldiers to "shoot and forget," not needing to manually subdue each individual.

The breach had been sudden, catching nearly everyone in the outer section of the ship off guard. This allowed the soldiers to move swiftly and efficiently, neutralizing the initial wave of resistance. The outer sphere of the ship, spanning two kilometers, was cleared within just three minutes. It felt almost too easy—a fact that didn't go unnoticed by the experienced breachers.

Despite their speed, they knew that the deeper they ventured, the harder the resistance would become. The ship's vast size meant that even moving quickly, it would take hours to reach the inner sections, where the crew would likely have had time to organize their defenses and prepare for a fight. The silence in the corridors wasn't comforting—it was ominous.

Every breacher understood that the easy part of the mission was over. The real challenge lay ahead. No one had come to meet them, which could only mean one thing: the enemy was waiting deeper inside, ready for them. It was now a game of patience, strategy, and survival as they advanced toward the heart of the ship.

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“AH! PHUCK! AH! PHUCK! AH!” The room echoed with the sounds of someone furiously smashing an object and another one screaming in pain. Each strike and scream was accompanied by a sickening squelch as fluids squirted out, evidence of the violent impact.

After a few agonizing moments, the relentless pounding ceased a few moments after the screaming did.

Xalthar, still gasping for air and visibly distressed, threw the blood-soaked, biological material-stained club-like object to the ground. His eyes locked onto the nearest subordinate. “Give me the report,” he demanded, his voice sharp and strained.

“We've lost control of the five-kilometer outer zone, and there are no movements at the moment,” the newly promoted Vice-Captain reported, his face smeared with remnants of biological material from the previous Vice-Captain.

“And what are you doing about it?” Xalthar demanded, his tone icy as he approached his chair. As he settled into it, maids of various races entered the room, their expressions neutral as they began methodically cleaning up the remains of the murdered Vice-Captain, as if it were just another routine task.

Instead of responding verbally, Xalthar activated the hologram system that had been deactivated earlier to make way for his outburst.

“Your excellence Sage, since the breach occurred before we could deploy any countermeasures, most of our external forces and weapons are rendered useless, as the ship is primarily a carrier. However, we have reorganized and are preparing to confront and flush them out from within the ship before addressing the rest of the attackers,” reported the new Vice-Captain.

“What is your name?” Xalthar asked, his gaze steady.

“My name is Quorani, Your Excellence Sage,” the Vice-Captain introduced himself calmly and respectfully, not really bothered that the former captain was killed.

In Xalthar’s eyes, death was a standard consequence for failure, especially for someone in a position of authority like the previous Vice-captain while being a slave. The role came with privileges but also high stakes. Failure due to fear or nervousness was a grave offense, often resulting in death. As a result, Quorani’s body was effectively conditioned to maintain calmness under pressure, driven by the instinctual need to avoid a fatal outcome.

“And how do you plan to deal with the forces that attacked us from the outside?” Xalthar asked. Despite the attack, the ships responsible remained concealed, hidden by their stealth technology.

“For now, our stone layer will absorb the attacks while we concentrate on clearing the interior. Only once we’ve secured the ship will we send out our forces to deal with the attackers,” Quorani explained.

“Quorani, I want this situation resolved as quickly as possible and with minimal damage,” Xalthar said, his tone carrying the weight of a direct command.

“I will do my utmost to resolve it swiftly, Your Excellence Sage,” Quorani assured.

Xalthar responded with a piercing glare, his killing intent palpable and his mana veins glowing ominously.

Seeing the menacing expression, Quorani fell to his knees and pleaded, “Your Excellence Sage, I will ensure that they are eliminated as quickly as possible.”

Xalthar remained silent, his glare intensifying before he finally retracted his killing intent.

Quorani quickly stood up, rushed out of the room, and headed directly to the control room, located just outside Xalthar’s quarters, to begin his preparations.

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“Any update on how much ground they’ve covered?” Quorani asked as he entered the control room.

“All of our sensors on the outer layer are currently inactive due to the EMP they hit us with at the start,” reported the communication specialist, who was of the same race as Quorani.

“Inform all units en route to engage them that they should consider the attackers to be at least as technologically advanced as a member of the top one hundred in the Astral Conclave,” Quorani instructed, ensuring his command was heard by everyone in the room.

Quorani’s words drew surprised looks from everyone in the room. The notion that a relatively small and less advanced civilization could match the technological prowess of the top one hundred in the Astral Conclave seemed like an exaggeration to many.

However, no one dared to challenge Quorani’s assessment.

The attack had caught them off guard, leaving them with only basic retaliatory options. The ship's slave-based bureaucratic structure, which granted responsibility without corresponding Authority, had hindered their ability to react effectively to something new and disruptive.

Furthermore, the attack's nature was unprecedented for them; they were accustomed to discovering enemies light weeks or days away which allowed them time to prepare, whereas this situation involved a direct and immediate assault within the ship, bypassing their usual and slow defensive measures.

Chapter 724 Xalthar's Dilemma

If looks could kill, thousands might have perished under Xalthar's gaze alone. But for him, he didn’t need his eyes to end lives—his hands were more than capable. The proof of this lay before him: three bodies sprawled on the ground, broken and lifeless, resembling smashed dolls. Their mangled forms were a testament to Xalthar's brutal strength and his readiness to expel and express his feelings through sheer violence.

More than twenty minutes had passed since the surprise attack, and the new vice-captain's plan to flush out the infiltrators was proving ineffective. Over eighty kilometers of the ship's surrounding outer area had been completely overtaken, and the alarming part was that they hadn’t even seen how it happened. Every soldier, slave, or armed crew member sent to confront the enemy went completely dark, as if the opposing forces were walking EMPs.

This left the taken-over zones in a literal blackout, with no surveillance or intel from those areas.

What was even more alarming was that the ship had built-in redundancies to counter such scenarios, utilizing both technological and magical surveillance systems. Yet, the invaders had somehow managed to disrupt both in a single, sweeping move, leaving the crew blind to what was happening within their own vessel. It was a tactical nightmare.

Xalthar who was monitoring the situation could only guess what was happening beyond their reach, and it was clear the situation was slipping out of control.

His face remained eerily calm, a mask of composure that betrayed nothing of the turmoil within. However, the circuit-like veins etched across his skin told a different story. Normally glowing a serene golden hue, they now pulsed with a disturbing blend of red and other colors, signaling

emotions far more dangerous: anger, shame, worry and disgrace. These shifting shades were a warning—nothing good was coming for anyone on the ship.

But these feelings of anger and disgrace weren't born out of fear for his life. As a sage, Xalthar possessed enough power to ensure his own survival and escape if needed.

However, his abilities fell short of being able to annihilate the attackers without risking his life in the process. What truly weighed on him was the looming report he would have to make to the upper echelons of his organization—a report detailing the loss of an entire carrier ship, along with all its valuable contents.

While his rank afforded him protection from outright execution, especially given his sage-level power, the consequences would still be severe. His painstaking efforts to rise from an ordinary member of the organization to a commanding officer of one of its prized fleet carrier groups would be wiped out in a single stroke.

His position had not been awarded for his strategic acumen or leadership over fleets but as a result of his power alone, which had reached sage level. This left the organization with little choice but to give him a high-ranking position, hoping to keep him loyal and prevent rival factions from poaching him.

Consequently, his authority over the ship was more ceremonial than functional. The true management of tactics and day-to-day operations fell to the vice captains, while Xalthar only needed to approve final decisions. Knowing his volatile temperament, his superiors had filled his command chain with slaves, their loyalty ensured through the conditioning they had undergone before being sold. These slaves had been chosen precisely because they were incapable of betraying their master—a buffer between Xalthar's wrath and the practical needs of running a carrier fleet.

Despite having the option of defecting to another organization, the cost of doing so would be astronomical. Xalthar would have to pay an enormous penalty for leaving, a fine so immense that no other group would find it worth the risk. Once they discovered that the penalty stemmed from his catastrophic failure—losing an entire carrier group and abandoning ship while saving only himself—he would become a liability. His only real option was to remain shackled to his current organization, enduring their disdain until he could repay his losses.

The thought of it made his veins pulse with frustration. He recalled his smug, arrogant demeanor during his last conversation with the opposition, believing he had time to savor their defeat. That mistake—granting them extra time—had backfired spectacularly. They had played him, and the humiliation he would face once the news spread throughout the ranks only stoked his fury further.

Should he report the situation truthfully, including the vital information they'd gathered about this planet, or should he bury everything—vanish into obscurity, seeking refuge in some distant star system where he could live out his days in seclusion? Both paths seemed to lead to ruin, but one might offer the illusion of escape. The only question now was whether he could truly disappear or if the organization's reach would hunt him down no matter where he fled.

The thought of fleeing to an unpopulated star system flickered in Xalthar's mind but was quickly dismissed. Living in fear, waiting for death in isolation, would be worse than facing the aftermath of his failure within the Astral Conclave. Even as a disgraced commander, life in the Conclave was preferable. There, only those stronger than him could openly express their disdain. Anyone weaker wouldn't dare; as a sage, he held the right to kill anyone beneath his level who dared insult him,

provided he could justify his actions. At worst, he'd face a minor reprimand, a slap on the wrist so long as the person killed was just a normal civilian. He would always have a place within the Conclave, no matter how badly things unfolded here.

His brooding thoughts were abruptly cut short as new information flashed before his eyes. A grim update appeared on the display: the outer 100-kilometer perimeter had now been lost. His expression hardened. What had started as a surprise breach had rapidly turned into a full-scale invasion, and it was only getting worse.

"How far are they from reaching us?" Xalthar asked through the intercom, his voice cold and demanding.

"Approximately a hundred kilometers before they reach the control room," Quorani replied, his voice steady despite the dread creeping up on him. He had been handed a sinking ship, and while he had once believed he could turn things around with a miraculous strategy, the reality was grim. Xalthar would not care about his aspirations or the impossibility of the situation—he wanted results.

Quorani knew that if he didn't act quickly, Xalthar would not hesitate to deal with him personally, just as he had done with the previous vice-captain moments after the attack began. Desperate to buy more time, Quorani added, "But, your excellence sage, I've taken precautions. Seeing how quickly they were advancing, I initiated a containment strategy. I've deployed a kilometer-thick fast-setting solution to seal off all paths leading to the control room and the central sectors of the ship. It'll take them days to breach it, unless they resort to fully destroying parts of the ship—something it seems they're avoiding."

He held his breath, hoping this would be enough to delay both the invaders—and Xalthar's wrath.

There was no response from the other end of the intercom. Quorani's heart raced, almost leaping into his throat as he instinctively turned toward the balcony. Dread filled him—he half-expected to see Xalthar descending from the observation room to end his life, just as he had done to the previous vice-captain. But when he looked up, his eyes met Xalthar's, who stared down at him with a deadly, unnerving glare.

The silence was suffocating. Then, without a word, Xalthar closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, still seated, but his brief dismissal was more ominous than if he had moved to act. Quorani's stomach twisted with fear. The waiting, the uncertainty, was almost worse than death itself. As a wise man once said "The wait for death is scarier than death itself."

Quorani squeezed his eyes shut, his palms pressing into his face as he tried to collect himself. For a brief moment, he opened his eyes, peering through the gaps between his fingers. His gaze flickered with something different—an emotion that quickly disappeared behind the mask of fear. When he finally removed his hands from his face, the bravado had vanished, leaving only the same frightened expression he wore before. No one around him could tell what he was truly feeling.

Chapter 725 An Offer of Unparalleled Worth

"I'm going to use every means of torture known in existence before I allow you to die," Xalthar's voice echoed ominously from his chair, a chilling promise that was muffled by the soundproof insulation of the room and thus unheard by those in the control room below.

While Quorani's measures to seal off the passages had bought him a temporary reprieve, they had inadvertently sealed Xalthar's fate as well. The closures not only trapped the invaders but also cut off Xalthar's only viable escape route—the gates through which he had planned to flee. As a result, Xalthar was now bound to share the same grim fate as the rest of the ship's occupants, his power and position rendered irrelevant against the encroaching threat since he could kill only a few thousand of them before they manage to kill him.

Amidst his fury at his sealed fate, Xalthar recognized that with no escape route remaining, his only viable option was to do everything in his power to save himself. His previous dilemma was now resolved: survival was paramount. To achieve this, he hoped for the effectiveness of his soon-to-be torturee's plan to succeed in buying him the time he needed to formulate a strategy and perhaps turn the situation to his advantage.

After a detailed conversation with his AI, Xalthar and the AI developed a strategy that would appear both credible and enticing to anyone who received the news. Their plan was crafted to be convincing enough to prompt a desperate and rapid response from those who could offer assistance. Xalthar trusted the AI implicitly, knowing that it was deeply embedded with its users and would prefer self-destruction over betraying them. This level of loyalty made the AI a reliable ally and a useful companion, even for the most paranoid individual in the Conclave.

Once the plan was finalized, Xalthar pressed a button on his chair, connecting him to the ship's control AI. "Stop providing mana to the systems in the blackout zone and redirect it to enhance our communications," he instructed, intending to make his communication system as fast as possible.

{Our current energy supply is sufficient to send information to our organization without the need for extra power,} the AI responded, its tone reflecting a hint of curiosity about Xalthar's request.

"I want to broadcast this to anyone who can view it within the Astral Conclave and to as many influential individuals as possible," Xalthar replied calmly.

{The organization may view this act as a betrayal and could impose severe punishment on you,} the AI cautioned. Despite Xalthar's awareness of the potential repercussions, the AI felt it important to remind him, as people sometimes overlook such consequences when deeply engrossed in their plans.

"I know, but I have a plan to mitigate their anger and even turn this into an opportunity to bolster their strength," Xalthar responded, demonstrating that he had considered the implications carefully.

"I know, but I have a plan to mitigate their anger and even turn this into an opportunity to bolster their strength," Xalthar responded, demonstrating that he had considered the implications carefully.

Seeing the determination in Xalthar's eyes and recognizing his authoritative grasp on the situation, the AI complied with his instructions. It redirected the magical power from all non-essential systems and initiated a Conclave-wide communication broadcast. The broadcast, powered by the his Id of a Sage, quickly eclipsed other ongoing activities within the Conclave. The title of Sage carried immense weight, and the broadcast was assumed to be of significant importance, as individuals of that rank and higher were rarely seen engaging in public matters, typically remaining behind closed

doors. The people and organisations in the Conclave anticipated a critical announcement or guidance from one of the people with actual personal power.

{The audience has reached the required level. You may begin.} The AI informed Xalthar as the number of viewers surpassed the critical threshold, ensuring that nearly everyone of importance within the Conclave would witness the broadcast.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting his rage simmer and intensify. His circuit-like veins glowed a deep red, visibly conveying his fury to anyone watching the broadcast.

“Greetings, everyone. I am Xalthar Zynara, Sage of the Astral Conclave. I find myself in this predicament due to our recent endeavor over the past five years, investigating an anomaly we stumbled upon during equipment tuning and testing. This anomaly led us to this star system in search of its origins.”

As he spoke, his AI displayed data and visual aids that perfectly synchronized with his narrative, reinforcing the authenticity of his account.

“After a lengthy journey, we reached the source of the anomaly and discovered it originated from this star system. Our initial investigations and surveys were promptly interrupted when the system's natives detected our presence and made contact. Through this contact, we established an information exchange agreement, and what we uncovered is something that will astonish anyone who hears about it.”

He paused dramatically, letting the suspense build before continuing. “In this star system, due to a peculiar phenomenon, mana has not dispersed throughout the system but instead has concentrated on the planets themselves. After billions of years, these planets have transformed into having minerals that we can only described as mana stones.” He let the gravity of his statement sink in, knowing the implications would be staggering.

Even the most advanced civilizations within the Conclave have only ever hypothesized the existence of mana stones. These are considered the most mana-dense materials imaginable, something that no one has yet been able to create or discover in nature. Instead, they have relied on canisters to store compressed mana in its air form. Despite this, the mana canisters had represented a groundbreaking advancement, as they could now provide a versatile and potent fuel source, allowing spells to be used independently of individuals and which paved the way for new technological applications.

The AI wasted no time, displaying fabricated information to further captivate the audience. Images of various colored mana stones were shown, each with unique aspects, enhancing their allure. The sight of these diverse and potent mana stones caused the viewers' anticipation to reach a fever pitch, their excitement and greed nearly palpable as they imagined the possibilities.

Hearing that the entire star system was filled with mana stones made many question the validity of Xalthar's claim. Anticipating such doubts, Xalthar was prepared to address them. He continued, ready to answer any questions that might arise from those discerning enough to wonder why he was revealing this information rather than keeping it for himself and capitalizing on it alone.

“I know many of you are wondering why I’m sharing such critical information. It’s because of this,” Xalthar said, and the AI displayed a video showing the surprise attack, with figures emerging from nowhere and various areas of the ship plunging into blackout. The viewers quickly grasped that they were under siege.

“We are currently being attacked and are running out of time. I promise to provide the exact coordinates of this star system to any individual or organization that can swear under a mana oath to establish a wormhole between us and their location within two weeks and come to our rescue,” he declared, revealing the true intention behind his actions. In exchange for his life he was willing to give out the location of the most valuable resource, a material of unparalleled worth to anyone in the Conclave that can come to rescue him.

With the offer now on the table, it became one of the most outrageous proposals ever made. The lengths to which one would go to ensure their survival were indeed extreme.

With that, Xalthar concluded the broadcast and left the rest to his AI. She would now handle the influx of requests for coordinates, ensuring that only those who pledged to establish a wormhole within the specified two-week period and take a mana oath to rescue him would receive the location. This oath would also guarantee his safety from any future harm.

Chapter 726 A Call from the Organisation

As the AI began sorting through the flood of requests for the star system's coordinates, ensuring only those who promised aid within the set timeframe were considered, Xalthar’s communicator buzzed. The heads of his organization were contacting him with remarkable speed, a clear sign they were far from pleased with his recent actions.

Despite this, Xalthar remained unfazed. His circuit-like veins, once pulsing with anger, shifted color to a calmer hue as he accepted the call without hesitation. He showed no signs of concern, confident that he wasn’t going to be on hot waters by the end of the conversation with him.

"WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE?!" The voice on the other end wasted no time, launching straight into the core of the matter. There was no greeting, no room for Xalthar to show the customary respect as the caller was not just his superior in rank as the leader of the organization but also in strength, two levels beyond Sage. If it came down to it, he could easily crush Xalthar without breaking a sweat.

"WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU MAKE SUCH AN ANNOUNCEMENT ACROSS THE CONCLAVE WITHOUT INFORMING US FIRST?!" the voice thundered, dripping with fury. "WE COULD HAVE USED THAT KNOWLEDGE TO HELP YOU, AND THE ORGANIZATION WOULD HAVE BENEFITED IMMENSELY! HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND, PANICKING OVER YOUR LIFE THAT YOU DON’T THINK BEFORE ACTING?!"

The tirade continued, relentless and scathing, as the leader berated Xalthar’s reckless choices. He emphasized everything Xalthar had cost them—an opportunity to elevate the organization into one of the most powerful in the Conclave. Instead, Xalthar had just handed that potential power to random factions, all for the sake of saving his own skin.

Throughout the outburst, Xalthar remained silent and respectful, his expression unwavering, as though he were carved from stone. Even his mana circuits, usually responsive to strong emotions, stayed steady. He listened attentively to the tirade from the organization head, a man known for his calm demeanor—someone who rarely raised his voice.

The irony wasn't lost on Xalthar, but in his eyes, this reaction was expected. If the head had remained calm during such a moment, that would have been unsettling. This outburst, though uncharacteristic, was completely natural under the circumstances.

“Have you already exchanged the information?” the organization head demanded, his tone still sharp, though he had stopped firing questions like bullets, finally waiting for a response. The fury was still clear in his expression.

“Not yet, but the process should be completed soon,” Xalthar replied promptly.

“Good,” the organization head responded, his tone softening just a bit, though it remained authoritative. “Halt all communications with others immediately and send us the information. We will handle the negotiations on your behalf.”

The subtle shift in tone carried a clear message: Xalthar might have made a mistake, but the organization would now take control of the situation.

“Unfortunately, I can't do that,” Xalthar replied, his tone remaining calm and respectful.

The organization leader, upon hearing Xalthar's response, became eerily calm, a stark contrast to the earlier outburst. “You'd better have a good reason for that,” he said, his voice steady, but with a dangerous edge. “I'm sure you understand the consequences of refusing, don't you?”

Xalthar recognized the shift, knowing this was the moment before the storm. It was like a star in its final stage of contraction before going supernova—an explosive fury waiting to erupt if he made the wrong move.

Knowing he had no time to waste, Xalthar immediately responded, “Yes, I have a good reason not to give you the information, and I can explain it fully.”

Without pausing, he dove into his explanation, speaking as quickly as he could. “The information I've sent out is completely false. I'm doing all of this to attract enough forces to come and help me.

But announcing it under the organization's name would have looked foolish or blatantly obvious as a trap. You could have let me die and then used the information to secretly conquer the star system without anyone knowing and reap the benefits. Given these circumstances, it makes perfect sense that I had to do this on my own to ensure my survival, despite the risk of retaliation from the organization.

And through the mana oath, I'll ensure my safety when they discover the news is false. I'll also include the organization in the oath, so it appears I've devised a way to earn forgiveness by providing a period during which no organization will attack or hinder it. This compromise will seem minor compared to what the winners will gain, but it's something valuable enough to warrant the organization's forgiveness for the loss. It will also grant you power to avoid retaliations and similar threats.

Furthermore, only the top fifty have the technology to create wormholes, and many of them can't bear the costs alone. They'll likely seek alliances with other nations or organizations in exchange for a share of the star system. This will spark significant cooperation among them, as they'll need a united front to avoid being annihilated by the top ten superpowers in the Conclave when they arrive on the other side of the wormhole.

While they're occupied fighting over the star system, and under the protection of the mana oath, you'll have the perfect opportunity to seize control of the organizations left vulnerable. With many of their powerful forces dispatched to this conflict, their remaining factions will be significantly weakened, allowing you to move in and take over their operations with minimal resistance.

"It will take a considerable amount of time before any agreement or victor emerges and before they realize there were no mana stones. By then, they will have endured significant losses. As they have sworn the mana oath only in exchange for the coordinates and nothing else, they will be bound by it, even as they return empty-handed. Many of them will lack the resources to open another wormhole for their return, which will make their journey back prolonged and arduous.

This delay will provide you and the organization ample time to consolidate your gains. With the resources and time at your disposal, you can use the new assets to compensate and appease the top ten superpowers for their losses. This strategic move should fortify your position, ensuring that others are deterred from challenging you."

Xalthar went on, meticulously explaining how his announcement wasn't a reckless decision, but a calculated move. He showed how this plan wasn't just about saving his own skin but about creating a massive opportunity for the organization to rise in power at the expense of weakened competitors.

"....."

Silence filled the void on the other side after Xalthar finished his explanation. Xalthar maintaining his silence waited patiently for a response.

"We'll see if things unfold as you've planned. If they do, and the results are favorable, we'll lend further legitimacy to your actions by staging attacks on your family's territory. This would create the appearance of retaliation for you sharing information without consulting us first," the organization leader responded. Without waiting for Xalthar's reply, the call was abruptly ended. Xalthar was certain he caught a hint of a smile just before the connection was severed.

"Now we wait," Xalthar said with a sigh of relief. He wasn't overly concerned about the potential loss of life on his family's planet, as he trusted that the organization would target only those who were insignificant to him or the random inhabitants of the planet.

Chapter 727 Cold and Calculative

Xalthar sat in silence while waiting for the AI to receive and filter the requests to ensure they met his criteria. During this time, he was informed that the insulation had effectively halted the enemy forces on the outside. This was confirmed by the surveillance system, which displayed the enemy forces as a blob on the other side of the insulation, visible through the spectrum.

Anyone in their situation would have likely tried to find alternative means to bypass the insulation. However, upon arrival and after one of them placed a hand on it, they quickly realized that breaching it within a short time frame was nearly impossible. This realization led them to cease their efforts, or at least that was Xalthar's impression from his point of view.

Quorani, watching the feed near a screen that displayed all the areas under their control, felt a chill run down his spine. Even though the enemy forces were stalled and unable to advance, they were equally trapped in this confined space, unable to escape or retreat.

Despite the success of his efforts to halt the enemy, Quorani felt no satisfaction. He understood that his actions had only bought them a month at most before the enemy would find a way through. This looming deadline meant that he, too, would soon face the consequences of Xalthar's actions. He raised his head to the observation room, hoping to see any sign of Xalthar making his move. As anticipated, Xalthar was already in motion, slowly lowering himself, a clear indication that he was preparing to act on his plans.

Quorani and everyone in the control room, who had resigned themselves to their impending doom and hoped for a swift end, were taken aback by the sight of Xalthar's smile. It wasn't just a fleeting expression; his circuit-like mana veins confirmed that he was genuinely pleased. This unexpected display of happiness puzzled them greatly. Despite their curiosity, no one dared to question the source of his joy, fearing the repercussions of drawing attention to themselves in such a dire situation.

Seeing the stunned expressions on their faces, Xalthar simply smiled and said, "Don't worry, I've already called for help, and they should be here within at least two weeks." He then directed the ship's AI to update them on the current situation, while carefully omitting details about the ongoing negotiations. The AI only communicated that assistance was on the way because Xalthar had made the call. It kept the specifics of the negotiations, including the various organizations and nations negotiating for extended terms, eased restrictions, or exclusive access to the coordinates, confidential as they weren't worthy to know about it.

The fact that Xalthar was even providing them with such words was unusual and indicated just how content he was with the current situation.

Everyone in the control room and the protected sections of the ship wore expressions of disbelief and doubt. They were acutely aware that for help to arrive within two weeks, the other side would need to use a wormhole—a feat requiring an enormous amount of mana canisters. Even the most advanced civilizations within the Conclave reserved such an expenditure for only the direst of circumstances, as the cost of using wormholes multiple times could severely destabilize their economies.

The technology to create wormholes was also one of the most closely guarded secrets, known for its capacity to alter the course of wars by enabling devastatingly swift and decisive strikes. The thought of such a significant resource being committed to their rescue seemed improbable, making Xalthar's words seem both improbable and surreal to those who understood the stakes involved.

Xalthar watched the disbelief on the faces of the control room personnel, fully aware of the grim reality that awaited them. He made no effort to explain the intricacies of his actions or the contract. While the agreement included protections for himself, his organization, and the ship, it notably excluded the crew and inhabitants of the ship—many of whom were slaves. Though technically

under his protection due to his ownership, Xalthar viewed them as expendable, especially in a situation as volatile as this.

He understood that the anger of those deceived by the false information—the promised mana-rich star system—needed a target. The slaves and those aboard the ship, being of little value to him, would serve that purpose. Their pain and suffering would vent some of the frustrations of the incoming forces.

It was a cold, calculated decision, one that left no room for sentimentality—something he didn't have from the start. His focus was solely on survival and the strategic gain for his organization, and if that meant allowing the useless to be sacrificed, he would do so without blinking.

Amidst his reflections, Xalthar came to a halt just a few centimeters off the ground and began to hover towards Quorani. A few meters away, he extended his hand which sent a pulling force that pulled Quorani into it, gripping Quorani's neck with an effortless motion. Xalthar tightened his hold, causing Quorani's eyes to bulge alarmingly from the pressure. The force on his neck was intense, making it seem as if his eyes might pop from their sockets.

“I would have killed you on the spot,” Xalthar said, his voice calm but filled with a menacing edge, “but since you've managed to buy us some time, I'll extend your stay of execution. I'm even willing to offer you a chance at redemption, provided you ensure that nothing goes wrong and the other side doesn't breach our defenses. Understand?”

As Xalthar's body remained suspended in the same spot, Quorani flailed desperately like a fish out of water. Despite the intense pressure on his neck, he managed to hear Xalthar's words. Struggling to respond, he forced his head to nod slightly, even though it was nearly impossible due to Xalthar's unyielding grip.

Xalthar watched impassively as Quorani hit the ground, wracked with violent coughing. The man struggled to get on his knees and bow, attempting to express his gratitude, but his voice was barely more than a whisper due to his damaged vocal cords. The effort was audible enough for Xalthar to hear, though, and he simply nodded in acknowledgment.

Without another word, Xalthar began to hover away from the control room. The stress of the past hour had been immense, and he was eager to unwind. He intended to indulge in some personal pleasures before resting, fully confident that he would not meet his end here.

But all of that was abruptly halted when the ship's remaining functional antenna—the one made to contact the people of this star system—detected an attempt to initiate contact, something the attacking ships had deliberately avoided.

Upon noticing the incoming call, Xalthar swiftly accelerated his hover and made a direct path back to his chair. He composed himself, maintaining an outward calm that belied the urgency of the situation, before accepting the communication request.

“Greetings, Xalthar Zynara, Sage of the Astral Conclave. I am contacting you to offer you the chance to surrender,” the voice on the other side cut straight to the point, skipping formalities entirely.

Chapter 728 Sealing the Deal

Xalthar stared at the figure on the screen, more surprised than angered by the unexpected turn of events.

"What makes you think we're ready—or even willing—to surrender?" he asked calmly, showing no sign of worry as he was on the cusp of completing the deal that would come to his rescue. In his mind, he was already expecting the enemy to list all the reasons why he and his people were doomed and why surrender was the only logical choice.

But instead, the figure merely replied, "Okay, understood," before abruptly ending the call.

Everyone in the control room was left dumbfounded by the enemy's abrupt response, unable to process what had just happened.

A few minutes of silence passed as everyone in the control room tried to make sense of the enemy's unusual behavior. Typically, when one side is on the verge of victory and demands surrender, they'd follow up with a barrage of threats—promising slow, agonizing torture for anyone captured if they don't surrender, using fear to pressure the crew into forcing their captain to concede, especially if he was too stubborn or prideful to surrender on his own.

But this group did none of that. They attacked swiftly and delivered their surrender demand, and when Xalthar gave a response that clearly indicated he wasn't willing to comply, they didn't bother with threats or intimidation. They simply ended the conversation, as if they had no interest in wasting time on further negotiations. This uncharacteristic approach left the entire control room unsettled, unsure of what to make of the enemy's intentions.

{Sir, the list is complete,} Xalthar's AI spoke, snapping him out of his moment of surprise. The unsettling behavior of the enemy still weighed on his mind, but the AI's prompt reminded him of more pressing matters. The system had finished filtering the people who met his criteria, urging him to act swiftly.

Xalthar straightened, forcing his thoughts back to the task at hand. He couldn't afford to linger on the enemy's unexpected actions or their lack of immediate follow-up. Seeing no further movement through the insulation, he decided it was best not to dwell on what they might be planning.

Without hesitation, he shifted his focus entirely to the filtered list, preparing to make his next move.

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On the other side, Ismail Maylander stood in front of the fast-settling barrier that obstructed their progress. The material was dense—so dense that their sensors couldn't penetrate to its other side. Resting his hand on the surface, he felt the subtle energy pulsing through it, which he already knew was mana which was there supporting the surface.

"How much longer till it's ready?" Ismail asked, his voice steady but eager.

{They are now being sent and should arrive within a few minutes,} Cortana, his AI companion, responded crisply. A map appeared before him, highlighting several objects moving toward the ship from multiple directions. The one headed directly for him glowed brightly on the display, signaling its importance.

After a few minutes, the device arrived—a spear gun-like weapon, just as expected. Ismail wasted no time, having trained extensively in its use. He quickly removed it from its carrier while the rest of his team instinctively stepped aside. Though the device was designed to protect them from collateral damage, none of them wanted to test that theory firsthand.

Raising the spear gun, Ismail took aim at the thick insulation material sealing the corridor. With a sharp pull of the trigger, a half-meter-long spear shot out, speeding toward the obstruction. The spear penetrated the barrier with surprising ease, but just as it passed halfway through, the mana within the insulation surged to life. The material responded aggressively, halting the spear's progress. The rear half of the spear stuck out from the barrier, visibly vibrating as the mana worked against it, preventing it from moving any further.

What followed was a tense silence, with the breachers poised and ready. Weapons raised, their intentions were clear to anyone observing—they were prepared to move the moment the breach opened.

Within seconds, the rods embedded in the insulation began to tremble ever so slightly before sliding downward, like a hot knife sinking into wax. The insulation material responded quickly, softening and melting around the rods. As the spears hit the ground, the changes became more pronounced—the thick barrier began to dissolve at an accelerating pace.

The breachers, undeterred by the settling and rapidly hardening insulation beneath their feet, advanced carefully. Each step was deliberate, yet their pace quickened in sync with the melting material. With the corridor clearing before them, their movements grew increasingly confident and swift, ready to engage the moment the breach was complete.

As the breachers continued their advance, Xalthar remained engrossed in finalizing the agreements, oblivious to the unfolding events. His focus was entirely on securing the final details of the agreements, unaware of the imminent threat.

The rapid melting of the insulation material made it difficult for the ship's observation methods to detect the breach in time. The insulation, once a formidable barrier, was now giving way under the relentless assault of the specialized equipment.

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Those blinded by greed often fail to distinguish between genuine opportunity and mere bait. This was evident in the current situation within the Astral Conclave. Despite suspicions that it might be a trap, no one wanted to gamble on being left out if it proved real. As a result, their fears were ultimately unfounded, leading to an unexpected loop: groups that initially doubted the offer found themselves compelled to join the bidding, driven by the desire to prevent rivals from gaining the advantage if the opportunity turned out to be genuine.

As a result, one after another began reaching out to Xalthar, and he soon had a list of about thirty groups that met his criteria. Each offered to come to his rescue in exchange for the coordinates, with some even willing to provide additional incentives for exclusive access. Despite the tempting offers, Xalthar stuck to his original plan. He decided to provide the coordinates to all the groups on the list, provided they agreed to the mana oath. This way, he ensured that his initial strategy was maintained and all interested parties were in it for the most chaos they could cause.

Some might wonder why Xalthar placed so much trust in the mana oath. The reason was well-known throughout the Conclave: as long as mana was involved in the oath and the terms were meticulously crafted without loopholes, it was considered more binding than even the most formidable power. Mana, in this context, acted as the ultimate enforcer and impartial arbiter. It ensured that the agreed-upon punishments would be carried out if any party breached the terms, regardless of the consequences.

Thus, Xalthar had finalized the contract, securing significant advantages for his side. These benefits were not solely due to the promised rewards but were also achieved by leveraging the demands of various requesting groups. By threatening to grant the contract to those who met his terms, he ensured that some of the provisions the other side wanted were negotiated on his terms. When faced with the possibility of losing out to competitors who accepted Xalthar's conditions, the other side had little choice but to agree, knowing they would be in a stronger position if they did.

He then allowed the ship's AI to send all the necessary components to initiate the wormhole spell successfully. With that step completed, Xalthar returned to his initial plan, unaware of the impending doom drawing closer.

Chapter 729 Time to Leave

Within just half an hour, the material blocking the invading soldiers had completely melted away. Without hesitation, the soldiers resumed their takeover, moving swiftly and methodically. The crew aboard the ship, caught off guard by the sudden breakthrough, scrambled to return fire in a desperate attempt to buy time and reseal the inner parts of the ship.

However, the invaders' speed and precision left them with little chance to mount an effective defense, as the gap between their positions rapidly closed. The situation was spiraling out of control, and panic was beginning to set in among the ship's defenders.

Xalthar, having just begun to rest, was abruptly awakened by the sense of chaos spreading through the ship. His AI quickly informed him that visual monitoring in the blocked-off area had been lost, with all feeds going dark at once, informing him that the breach had likely resumed.

He swiftly donned his armor, bracing for combat. "Power off the ship," he ordered his AI as he moved out of his quarters. His mind was already working on a plan, knowing that even if he lost the ship in the chaos, his primary objective was to escape.

As a result of that he didn't even consider the consequences of powering off the whole ship, he knew the crew wouldn't perish immediately. The lack of power would first manifest as reduced gravity, causing everyone to begin floating. The air supply would last for a while, but with no systems to maintain oxygen levels, carbon dioxide would gradually replace it. Suffocation would eventually be a threat, but Xalthar was fully aware that the enemy soldiers would likely kill them long before that.

As long as he could escape from this ship and stay on the move without being captured for two weeks, by the time he returned, the arriving fleets would likely have finished their battles with each other and discovered that the information he'd given them was false.

However, bound by the mana oath, they would be forced to wait until its agreed period ended before they could retaliate. Meanwhile, Xalthar would have the time to repair his ship and return to the Astral Conclave with little to no fear.

As Xalthar strode purposefully down the corridor toward the escape ship, his command to power down the vessel was finally executed. Thanks to his unrivaled authority aboard the ship, no one knew it was happening or even had the means to countermand it. Suddenly, the lights flickered out, plunging the ship into darkness. A heavy silence followed, but soon the crew began to feel the unsettling sensation of weightlessness as the artificial gravity faded. Caught off guard, they floated aimlessly, confusion and fear spreading through the ship like wildfire.

No one suspected that Xalthar was behind the power outage. The crew assumed it was the result of the enemy forces, and in their panic, they didn't have the time or ability to check the logs for proof. Believing the attackers caused the blackout, they realized with dread that they were now literally sitting ducks—helpless against an enemy who seemed to have caused the situation. This time, unlike before, they had no countermeasures. The enemy, if capable of initiating this, surely had the means to exploit it.

Xalthar, now floating with complete control and precision, maneuvered effortlessly through the corridors, unlike the crew members he encountered, who floated helplessly, as he used his telekinetic powers to push them aside with ease. He had no intention of wasting time on them or venting his anger; his focus was solely on reaching his escape ship.

But he came to an abrupt halt when a bullet, slowed by his telekinetic field acting like a viscous fluid, came to a stop mere centimeters from piercing his stomach as he looked at it in surprise.

The other side didn't wait for Xalthar to regain his composure; they continued to fire at him, targeting different areas of his body except for his head.

Xalthar regaining his composure when a few more bullets punched through his telekinetic field before he got to work countering them. With each successive shot, he used his telekinetic control to halt them at increasing distances. By the time the eighteenth bullet arrived, it was stopped a full five meters away from him, showcasing that he was getting used to this kind of attack allowing him to intercept the bullets with a speed and accuracy far beyond what he did at the start which was from a mere instinct.

Pressed for time and wary of being overwhelmed by numbers, Xalthar wasted no time. He redirected the bullets, sending them back towards the soldiers who had fired them.

To his surprise, the soldiers deftly maneuvered out of the bullets' paths, narrowly avoiding them as the bullets embedded themselves into the ship's walls. Equally astonishing was the fact that the soldiers moved with apparent ease in the zero-gravity environment. They seemed to maintain a localized gravity field for themselves, allowing them to move swiftly and dodge bullets as if gravity were still fully operational for them.

'I need to move fast,' Xalthar thought urgently. The enemies were far more formidable than he had anticipated, and even the six soldiers in front of him posed a significant threat. If he didn't act quickly, they could thwart his escape plans before they even began.

Using the ship's wall anchors and his telekinetic power like elastic bands, he propelled himself forward, accelerating rapidly to close the half-kilometer gap. At the same time, he concentrated on halting the barrage of bullets fired by the soldiers, letting them drop harmlessly to the ground.

team immediately unleashed a barrage of gunfire, testing the limits of the man's defenses, to see if he could stop every round.

But before each soldier could even fire their fourth shot, the man catapulted himself forward with incredible speed. He almost disappeared from view, reduced to a blur even for their enhanced perception. It was clear this opponent wasn't just skilled—he was dangerously fast.

{Move to the left,} Cortana warned, her voice calm yet urgent. Without hesitation, Maylander followed the order instinctively. Simultaneously, his active shield engaged, countering the telekinetic pull.

The shield's anti-tractor beam technology had been developed after a critical lesson learned from a simulation where an enemy unexpectedly won a war using tractor beams. This tech was now proving invaluable, keeping him from being seized by the telekinetic force as he quickly adjusted his position, dodging the incoming threat.

But his attempt at evading failed as Xalthar's hand reacted and latched onto his headgear. Before Maylander could make another move or escape the telekinetic grip, Xalthar crushed the helmet—and with it, his skull.

{You died.}

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“.....”

Silence enveloped the room as the person on the other end processed the shocking news. The gravity of the situation sank in as they reflected on the intense experience and the outcome of the engagement.

{Are you alright?} Cortana asked as a pod opened, revealing a person identical to Ismail Maylander rising from it. He sat, eyes closed, taking a moment to adjust.

“I know I chose this option,” Ismail said, his voice tinged with weariness, “but it still takes time to get used to when some of the blocked memories return.” He reflected on the intense experiences he had just relived.

With the Empire's advanced technology, they had developed various methods to confront unknown enemies while minimizing the risk to their own soldiers. One such method involved technology akin to what the Emperor had used for his initial meeting with the tree folks that was facilitated by a newly established communication line.

As a result, the forces currently engaged in the ship's takeover were actually avatars, with their operators situated in pods light-hours away, aboard a different fleet. This meant that the entire stealth fleet was being controlled by robotic bodies, which were equipped with the consciousness of their human operators, allowing them to perform all the functions expected of a fully manned fleet.

The decision to use human-operated avatars rather than fully autonomous AI robots was driven by several key reasons. Primarily, it was to mitigate the risk of encountering an advanced civilization that could potentially override or exploit AI systems. Such a breach could lead to significant security issues and operational complications. By relying on human operators within the avatars, the Empire ensured that their forces remained adaptable and secure, maintaining control over their technology in even the most unpredictable scenarios.

Currently, only the spearhead fleets were allowed access to this advanced technology. Each soldier in these fleets was given the choice to be aware that they were operating robotic avatars in the real world or to remain unaware, believing they were in their actual bodies. Ismail Maylander had opted for the latter, experiencing the sensation of death and the subsequent disorientation as if he had truly perished. He was now coming to terms with this reality, trying to reconcile his experiences with the knowledge that he was still alive and operating remotely.

“Do I have to go back again, or are the current forces enough?” Ismail asked, eager to know if he needed to return to the pod and use one of his backup bodies in the stealth fleet.

{As you know, after you die, you spend at least thirty minutes in analysis before I wake you up. During that period, they have already taken over the rest of the forces and surrendered quite easily after we captured what seemed to be their leader. The rest were surprisingly willing to surrender, almost as if they were previously fighting only because they were afraid of their leader.} Cortana responded, informing him that the mission was complete.

“Okay then, I'll be resting since I've been feeling quite tense due to the situation,” Ismail said before settling back into his pod, allowing it to provide him with the maximum rest in a short period of time.

As Ismail rested, the stealth fleet began the process of collecting the enemy forces from the ship. Pods were dispatched to pick up everyone, starting with those who had been incapacitated and moving to those who had surrendered willingly. Given the sheer number of crew members—millions in total—the operation was expected to take an entire day.

Meanwhile, Athena had assigned a specially designed breaching AI to access the vessel's computer systems. This AI was tasked with extracting as much valuable information as possible to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the ship's operations and any relevant data.