

The Fall 455

Chapter 455: The Machine God Faction

"We're in the 43rd age right now," Jaol said, seemingly understanding Zac's thoughts. "Each age represents the pinnacle of technology taking a step forward, which usually resulted in a trickle-down effect that empowered the whole Technocrat faction. But almost all of these ages took place in the early stages of the System Era, before it was as powerful as today. The current has lasted for over 70 million years."

"So you keep doing the same thing over and over again, with no improvement?" Zac asked.

"Isn't Heaven's Path the same?" Jaol muttered. "Cultivating and fighting, doing the same over and over again."

"I guess," Zac shrugged. "So how do you improve? How do you become more powerful?"

"Work and save Bits, buy upgrades for myself," Jaol slowly said. "I've been working on this freight for 4 years, and I was planning on performing my fourth overhaul with my savings along with the reward for completing this mission. But now..."

"So money can simply solve all your problems? You get rich enough and you'll instantly shoot to Class-3?" Zac probed with interest.

Jaol hesitated again, seemingly unsure whether he should answer.

"I don't believe that this is some secret information of your faction. I can probably buy an information packet anywhere explaining this in detail," Zac said.

"Well, I guess you're right. I doubt I can get in any more trouble than I already am," Jaol sighed.

I wouldn't be so sure about that, Zac thought.

Zac wasn't about to say that he not only wanted to steal the shard but also destroy the ship's engines if possible. In fact, he had been consciously vague about what he wanted to do just in case there was some built-in warning system in everyone's head that woke up if he mentioned stuff like 'blowing up the engine' or 'stealing the cargo'.

There was no telling what safeguards the ship had against its employees. Jaol was pretty forthcoming, but Zac had already noticed that the technocrat had tried to hide vital information to trip Zac up multiple times. There was no way he'd warn him that there were certain things he couldn't say without sending an alert to the captain.

"So? What's stopping you from shooting up to Class-3?" Zac asked.

"Well, first of all, I don't have the money for such an upgrade. But secondly, my soul isn't strong enough," Jaol shrugged. "I would need to drastically strengthen it to be able to support that level of power. I honestly doubt I'll ever get there unless Little Bean suddenly strikes it rich with a lucky encounter."

Zac was about to say that it was a bit unscientific for a technocrat to believe in souls, but he stopped himself after realizing that really wasn't the case. He only needed to look inward to see irrefutable proof that the soul existed. Ignoring that in favor of some sort of atheistic technology-centered world-view was akin to burying one's head in the sand by this point.

"You're a soul cultivator?" Zac asked with confusion, some alarm bells going off in his head after his recent encounters.

"Not as the people following Heaven's Path would see it," Jaol said after some hesitation. "Did you board our ship without even basic knowledge of our capabilities?"

Zac only glared in response, making Jaol shrink back again.

"Well. I think you people call us the Machine God Faction, and I guess that is accurate. Our 'cultivation' is essentially slowly upgrading our body parts one by one. For example. My eyes have been improved, along with most of my organs. I no longer require food, but I rather run on energy cells."

"You're turning yourself into robots?" Zac asked with shock.

"Is it any different with you? Your body is a biomechanical machine controlled by electrical impulses from your brain and nervous system. We are simply upgrading the machine we were born with to become stronger and more durable. The Captain is completely augmented by this point, for example," Jaol said, some jealousy evident in his eyes.

"So he's immortal?" Zac asked with surprise. "If you can call a robot that."

"Robots and Transhumans are different things," Jaol said with a shake of his head. "Transhumans have souls, robots do not. The captain is not immortal, as his soul ages over time. True consciousness is the foundation of life, and it is not something that can be created. At least not until the Machine God awakens. At that point, we'll all be able to digitize our souls and reach immortality."

"So that's what you're fighting for?" Zac asked curiously.

The vision was reminiscent of how some people on Earth wanted to download their minds onto computers and live forever. Some had even believed that the technology for something like that would be invented within their lifetime, if the integration hadn't taken place that is. It looked like the reality wasn't quite so simple as the Machine God Faction had been working toward that goal for billions of years.

"Well, the big shots are, I guess?" Jaol said. "Most of us are just trying to live our lives."

"So what's the point of upgrading soul if you're a machine? You said your soul is too weak to become Class-3," Zac said.

"As we upgrade our bodies our components become increasingly complex while the materials become more and more exotic. But more importantly, the components are infused with the deeper truths of the universe, what you call the Dao. The soul is the core of a being, and it is connected to every component. The stronger a module is, the larger the demands are on your soul. If your mind is not strong enough you won't be able to control it. Worst case the components will put such a strain on your mind that your soul breaks," Jaol explained.

Zac felt that it was an interesting alternative to traditional cultivation. They somehow directly infused their bodies with the Dao rather than learning it and used their souls as some sort of spiritual battery. It seemed like a mortal would be better off as a Technocrat than cultivating the normal path by the sound of it. The only cultivation that mattered was that of the soul, and anyone could do that, even himself with his zero aptitudes.

"So you still need to cultivate in Soul Strengthening Manuals to progress?" Zac snorted. "Isn't that bit ironic?"

"Soul Strengthening was there long before the System, so it's not really a part of Heaven's Path. Besides, our methods are more refined," Jaol said.

"More refined how?" Zac asked with interest, almost moving over to search the technocrat again for soul strengthening secrets.

Fixing his soul was a top priority, and he wasn't above abusing whatever means the Technocrats had. He didn't have the ingrained distrust, or even hatred, of the Dao of Technology like many of the old forces of the Multiverse. He'd use any tool that he could get to protect himself and the people around him. If the Technocrat had some bioengineered elixir to give his soul a power-up he'd drink it in a heartbeat.

"We train through the Neural Network. Our company gives access to a decent algorithm, and as a Comm's Officer I can use the facilities 20 hours a week," Jaol said with some pride.

It turned out that all the Technocrats were connected to a virtual universe through their implants. But it wasn't actually virtual, as one's soul entered the network as an avatar. It was perhaps more apt to call it a synthetic spiritual world, where distances were irrelevant as it existed in another plane of reality.

It honestly sounded like something that should have been created by a great mentalist faction, but it was rather constructed by the Technocrats. It was the piece of technology that defined the sixth era, and it was still considered one of the five greatest inventions among the Technocrat factions. It only went to show how important the soul was for them. It was the whole base of their identity, whereas their body was just a transient and exchangeable coil.

Inside this world were Training Facilities where one could slowly strengthen their souls with the help of some sort of advanced algorithms. There were both public facilities where one could train in return for an hourly fee, but the results in such places were pretty average. Most corporations had their own Soul Strengthening Algorithms, and getting access to those kinds of facilities were one of the means to attract talents to their force.

Even more conveniently, it turned out that Technocrats could access the network while sleeping, so they could work on their Souls at night without disturbing their daily routines. Stronger people could even allocate a part of their minds to constantly train inside the network while going about their days.

Even Zac couldn't help but feel a bit jealous at the convenience of the Neural Network. It was accessible from almost anywhere within their domains, and it was even possible to reach it from much of integrated space. How convenient wouldn't it be if he could gain access to such a place?

"Can anyone enter?" Zac asked.

"Of course," Jaol said, but Zac felt like his robotic eyes were a bit teasing. "You just need to implant a neural device or be given access by one of the other two factions. That will mark you as a member of the Boundless Path though, and you wouldn't be able to live peacefully among cultivators."

Zac wryly smiled and discarded the thought. He had enough problems on his hands, and there was no need to make the whole Multiverse his enemy just to get access to those training facilities, especially when his own Soul Strengthening Manual was probably equivalent to some of the best training algorithms.

"Wait, what is this Boundless and Heaven's Path you keep mentioning?" Zac suddenly asked. "Is it the same as Orthodox and Unorthodox forces?"

He remembered seeing the Boundless Path being mentioned during the quest to take out the Technocrat Incursion, but he had never heard much about it since then. People in his sector only divided factions in orthodox and unorthodox as far as he could tell.

"It's related, but also different. I feel that you cultivators don't really understand our factions because they bunch us together with a bunch of lunatics," Jaol said.

"How so?"

"We're not some heretics trying to tear the world apart. We just want to live free from the control of an insane AI run amok. What good has the so-called System brought to the world? Endless strife and suffering, and for what? Nurturing powerhouses for a war that is long over?" Jaol said with conviction in his eyes. "Yet we're being hunted from all directions because we threaten the interest of the powerful factions who rely on the System to stay in control."

"Do you really think that the universe would be so much better off if you managed to destroy the System?" Zac snorted, though what the technocrat said did somewhat resonate with him.

"At least we would be free," Jaol muttered.

"You still haven't explained the difference," Zac reminded.

"The System is a guidance system, but it also a limitation. A prison. The Boundless Faction are those who don't want to bow down to a false Heaven," Jaol said. "The factions who follow the Path of Technology are part of the Boundless Faction, but so are many cultivators. Some of the cultivators are sinners who try to take shortcuts through nefarious means, but there are also righteous factions."

"Why would normal cultivators choose to cultivate outside the System?" Zac said skeptically. "It seems to create a lot of problems for oneself for no gain."

"Because the Path of Technology wasn't the only path that got cut off when Emperor Limitless began his mad experiment. Some paths are missing, others are broken," Jaol said.

"How do you know all this?" Zac asked. "No offense, but you kind of seem like a nobody."

The comms officer glared at Zac before he quickly remembered where he was and deflated again.

"Everyone knows. The origin of our factions and our goals is something that everyone learns in school," Jaol said. "Besides, my teacher told us that the stronger you cultivators are, the more likely you are to

belong to the Boundless Faction. The Pinnacle Warriors and Emperors can see the truth of the false heavens, and join the Boundless Path to continue their journey."

Zac obviously wouldn't believe something Jaol had been told by some war-time propaganda teacher, but perhaps there was some truth to it. Why would people decide to go against the System? Were there some problems that arose at the higher Grades that forced people away from the conventional path?

But then again, did it matter? He had never heard of anything like that in his sector, so even if it was true then it was some problem that was far far away from him. He had barely taken the first step of cultivation, and he wasn't much better than some random hillbilly.

"Where do you get the components then? Just buy them at a market, or do you make them yourself?" Zac asked.

"You need to contract a manufacturer or work for a company that has manufacturing lines. It's another thing that separates good from bad corporations," Jaol said. "Almost all my components are acquired at a discount through my employer."

"So companies are essentially like sects?" Zac asked. "They both provide body upgrades and Soul Strengthening Manuals?"

"I guess you could say that," Jaol slowly nodded. "Corporations have a database of components that provide high synergy with each other. So the best is to move up the ranks within the company to get access to matching parts of the same series. There's a high risk of compatibility issues arising if you mix and match at random."