

## Mech 3851

### Chapter 3851 Hometown Boys

A harmonious atmosphere descended upon the cockpit of the Everchanger. As Task Force Fisherman had just exited the immediate sphere of influence of the Swarm Kingdom, everyone in the group relaxed.

With their lineup and with a distance advantage, none of the mech pilots were afraid of tussling with a horde that consisted of tens of thousands Swarmer fish-whales.

However, no one wanted to waste needless time, effort and resources on wiping out lots of forgettable cannon fodder that the Swarm Kingdom could quickly regenerate in a matter of days!

This was why the mechs of the task force were able to move fairly quickly when needed. Most fish-whales actually didn't excel at speed.

After all, qualified cannon fodder did not need to excel at fleeing or chasing. Since most battles in Purgatory centered around conquering territory, the grunt fish-whales just had to be as tough and resilient as possible in order to make the enemy consume more strength to get rid of them all. Speed was a secondary priority!

The only concern was whether the Swarmers possessed more powerful and elite fish-whale troops. Although the powerful Swarm Kingdom had only shown relatively weak and beatable fish-whales so far, who knew whether it hid an elite force that it could unveil at critical times.

This was why the mech pilots did not dare to relax too much. The Flagrant Vandals dispatched their light mechs ahead of the main force in order to make sure they were not heading into a trap.

As the time of arrival came closer, Ves and Joshua had grown a bit closer than before.

Though Venerable Joshua was an expert pilot who possessed far more confidence and strength than the average mech pilot, he had always looked up to Ves. Advancing to a demigod had not reduced that tendency in the slightest. Instead, it had become a part of his persona!

It took several hours in the same cockpit for Venerable Joshua to put down his apprehension and talk to Ves on a more familiar level.

The Everchanger's cockpit was quite cozy if a bit cramped due to the addition of an extra seat. Ves had invested quite a bit of effort into designing the original interior and he had not touched that at all when he remodeled the cockpit.

When Ves looked at the sculpted metal surfaces and the other little artworks that he had applied in order to make the cockpit a bit more special, he felt as if he had withdrawn to a log cabin together with his good friend and most loyal mech pilot.

Inside this cockpit, it was just the two of them. There was no need for them to put on any airs. The hierarchy didn't matter in this private space.

"Both of us grew up in Cloudy Curtain." Ves smiled as he cast his mind back to the past. "Do you recall the old days? Back then, both of us looked up to the Bright Republic and the Mech Corps. How naive we were back then. Do you know how our home planet is doing these days?"

Joshua nodded. "I heard that it has changed a lot from before. I haven't checked up on it in years, but Cloudy Curtain's population has ballooned after absorbing all of the refugees from the Sand War. Still... it's a pity that Bentheim eventually got sandblasted in the end."

Ves nodded. That was indeed a massive and largely preventable loss of life. At least the Big Two had paid a price for their consistent complacency and underestimation of the threat posed by the sandman race.

He sighed. "The Bright Republic is trying to rebuild the ruined planet in order to put the strategic port system back to use, but it will never be able to return to its former glory in at least a century. The dynamic in the region has changed and Cloudy Curtain has turned into a booming planet because of its proximity to the Bentheim System."

The port system still functioned as an important navigational hub. The problem was that much of its stellar and planetary infrastructure had been wrecked. Rebuilding all of that took a lot of time, especially when the Brighters had to start from scratch.

Faced with all of these delays, it was more convenient and economical to build up nearby star systems such as Cloudy Curtain as stopgap solutions!

Together with settling billions of third-class refugees from a lot of ruined planets, this had led to the odd situation where Ves and Joshua's shared homeplanet had undergone a metamorphosis in a single generation!

Venerable Joshua looked wistful. "If we ever have the opportunity to return to the planet of our birth one day, how much of the city of Orinoco will we recognize?"

"Probably little. The explosive rise of Cloudy Curtain demands an explosive rise of urban development. Back when our home planet only had a population of 15 million people, it didn't matter if the place was a bit shabby. Nowadays... there should be a lot more high-rise structures in order to accommodate all of the economic activity taking place in the star system."

Cloudy Curtain had ultimately done well for itself. Ves, Joshua and the rest of the original gang from this once-quiet rural planet had also done well for themselves.

As Ves thought about their drastic growth, he grew a bit more sentimental.

He had spent so much time moving forward and working towards the future that he hadn't stopped and looked back on how much he and his fellow companions had changed.

It was quite odd to compare his old self who lived in a much simpler time to his current self.

Though he had lost his innocence, he had gained a lot of power and accomplishments in return. This was a profitable deal and a worthwhile tradeoff.

As Ves thought about how much further they could go from their humble beginnings, he directed a speculative look to the expert pilot controlling the Everchanger.

"I have heard that Ketis has recently taken in an expensive design baby based on both of your DNA. Congratulations, Joshua. You'll be a father soon."

Venerable Joshua couldn't help but smile. "Thank you, sir. Congratulations to you too as well. My wife told me that she implanted a designer baby at the same time as your wife. Both of them will be experiencing their pregnancies at the same time."

"Our kids will also have an opportunity to grow together." Ves piped up. "Our wives are already determined to make them playmates. Depending on how they grow up, they might become something more."

"That... is possible, but I don't think it is a good idea to force our children to get along. We should let them sort out their own relationship."

The two had good reasons to tie their offspring together. Ves and Joshua had both developed a symbiotic relationship. Ves was the mech designer who provided the best living mechs while Joshua was the powerful mech pilot that could pilot them to their full potential.

The rapid rise of the Larkinson Clan was inseparable from the fact that the two former kids from Cloudy Curtain complimented each other well.

If their future children could develop a close relationship with each other, then that would cement their implicit partnership and tie them to each other on a more permanent basis!

Of course, Ves and Joshua generally didn't care that much about this method of strengthening their mutually-beneficial relationship. Their wives were a lot more preoccupied about this for some reason.

"I am a little concerned about my future son and other children." Venerable Joshua spoke. "An expeditionary fleet on an exploration mission is not a safe place to raise my kids. How often do you intend to bring us out on an excursion?"

Ves was caught off-guard by this question. He didn't have any good answers available but he quickly collected a couple of scattered thoughts.

"As a father, I share the same concerns. I do not intend to lead our expeditionary fleet into the most dubious and shady places in the Red Ocean, if that is what you want to hear. I have recently come up with a few ideas about our next years."

"Oh? Are you willing to share them to me, sir?" Joshua grew interested.

Ves grew silent for a bit. He truly hadn't settled his mind on this topic, but this might be a good opportunity for him to gather feedback on his ideas.

"None of this is set in stone, but I am inclined to keep our fleet in the vicinity of the Garimel System for the foreseeable future. Our trip to the Garimel System should be our last excursion for quite a while."

Joshua was surprised by this answer! "You are actually thinking about settling down?"

"Not entirely." Ves shook his head. "The reason why we are going out to places like these is because we are in need of harvest. The pocket spaces we have found and the plunder that we are striving for all have the potential to yield immense profits. The money, resources and other advantages that we can gain from this place is enough to allow our Larkinson Clan to digest all of the gains. We won't be lacking money or any other essentials for the time being."

Joshua displayed a mixed expression. A part of him was happy to embrace calm, but another part of him worried about the repercussion. This was why he held a slightly different opinion.

"Isn't the point of entering the Red Ocean to seize the opportunities that are only available in the early period of the invasion? If we squander our best years due to caution, nothing valuable will be left for us to obtain."

"That is true, but have you thought about how much we are benefiting from the Simile Halifax's presence in our fleet?" Ves asked back. "Once the MTA vessel departs from our side, our fleet will become acceptable targets to a lot of jealous human groups. We cannot defend our fleet against any attack launched by shady groups, especially when

we are still weak. Given these risks, I am inclined to adjust my original plan and precipitate in and around Davute for a few years."

Venerable Joshua reacted with surprise. The patriarch of the Larkinson Clan had never hidden his stance on what the Larkinson Clan should do in the Red Ocean. The struggle to climb up was difficult and only through taking risks and exploring dangerous but lucrative places like this phase whale enclave would the former natives of the Komodo Star Sector gain a chance to reach the higher echelons of human civilization!

However, when Joshua thought about all of the new discoveries they had made recently, he understood that it was only possible to take a break after they successfully returned with an impressive haul.

Of particular note was the humongous amount of phasewater!

Even if the MTA flew by and swiped away the vast majority of this amazingly rich find, just the drops that squeezed through the fingers of the mechers was enough to enrich the Larkinson Clan for years!

"It is only after traveling around a bit and encountering unfathomable enemies such as the Titania and all of the fish-whales around us that I realize that our strength is still too inadequate." Ves continued with a sigh. "We started our exploration too soon and the quantity and quality of our older mechs are unable to keep up with our demands. I think it is best for me to focus on building up our commercial ventures for a few years so that we can gradually replace our older, rim-level mechs with newer heartland-level mechs. Once we have reformed and expanded our mech legions, that will be the time when we can more confidently explore the Red Ocean."

He hadn't given up on journeying the new frontier and stumbling upon exciting discoveries like Purgatory and the Royal Tomb, but he gained a deeper sense of unease.

This time, Ves could at least count on the MTA to bail him out to a degree. Next time, he had to make do without this safety net, so he better prepare for the challenges ahead in a patient and honest manner!

## Chapter 3852 Retirement Homes

Venerable Joshua was pleasantly surprised.

Although he was young and eager to earn glory and wealth for himself and the clan, he did not have a death wish.

It was the opposite. Now that his relationship with Ketis had progressed to the point where they were expecting a child, Joshua felt a little less eager to risk his life when he had yet to hold his future baby in his arms.

Becoming a father could change any man, and Joshua was no exception. In fact, he developed an even greater urge to raise his own family due to his own quirks.

He had to make quite a drastic mental adjustment in order to get around the idea that he would be raising kids at this stage in his life. However, that did not stop him from looking forward to the years to come.

If he had a choice between raising his kid in the middle of an alien-infested conflict zone and a more peaceful region, Joshua would definitely choose the latter!

He did not want to put his child under any more distress than necessary. Just the thought that alien warships could come and attack the ship hosting his wife and kids made him feel uncomfortable!

Venerable Joshua smiled even as he made sure to pay enough attention to piloting his expert mech.

"Returning to Davute in order to settle down and grow sounds great. How many years will we stay put exactly?"

"Who knows." Ves shrugged before he thought about his main goals. "It will depend on many circumstances. Strictly speaking, we need to make numerous arrangements. First, we need to design and equip our mech legions with a complete set of exclusive mech models. Our old Bright Warriors and such need to make way for better options that are more adapted to the actual circumstances of the Red Ocean. Second, we need to acquire more carriers. Our mech capacity is too low at the moment. Third, we need to establish a thriving mech company that has at least obtained a foothold in Davute's mech market. Only after we have met these goals will we be better equipped to face the challenges of the new frontier."

"And that will take...?"

"Five years, I think. Any sooner than that and I don't think we will be able to acquire enough combat carriers. They're really difficult to get a hold of and they take time to build. Any later than that and I am afraid that a lot of our clansmen will become too comfortable with their more sedentary lives. I don't want everyone to forget the motto of our clan."

PER ANGUSTA AD AUGUSTA.

Ves twitched a smile. "That's right, Everchanger. It's not just a fancy phrase. A motto succinctly encapsulates our identity, or at least it is supposed to do that. There are so many people trying to get ahead in society that normal means aren't enough to stand out and become successful. We need to get off the beaten path and find opportunities like the one we are attempting to grasp right now. Normal people would never think about taking the risk to head deeper into Purgatory, but that is exactly what makes us

different. I don't want to wake up one day and find out that our clansmen have lost their ambition and their fighting spirit."

This was why Ves did not want his fleet to sit around for longer than five years.

In fact, settling down for five years was already a considerable risk. A lot of people would grow up and mature over this period of time. The patterns they developed during these quiet times would take up a significant chunk of their lives. Ves needed to make sure he could shake this complacency by throwing right back into the fire after the time for rearming and rebuilding was over!

A strong clan needed a strong army. Ves did not invest a huge amount of funding and resources into his mechs and mech pilots just so that they could function as glorified guards! They needed to retain their fighting spirit and be willing and able to fight all kinds of threats, no matter whether they were mechs, alien warships or giant exobeasts!

All of this was for the purpose of getting ahead.

He did not want to give up on massive discoveries like Purgatory. If there was one phase whale enclave in the Krakatoa Middle Zone, then there were doubtless other ones in the region!

Since phase whales were arguably the most powerful alien race in the Red Ocean, their space pockets should never be too shabby! Perhaps the giant aliens stashed the majority of their wealth in these hidden areas!

Although Ves wasn't sure what means he could use to track down and open these phase whale enclaves, he had several years to come up with possible solutions.

If he failed to find a good way to plunder these lucrative pocket spaces, then he could always adjust his goals afterwards.

As for finding the hidden areas, Ves could just leave that job to the Black Cats. In any case, Calabast had taken a lot of MTA credits from him in the name of building up a regional intelligence network. It would only be right for him to expect a return on his investment!

As Ves and Joshua talked about how they would spend the following years if the Larkinson Clan took a five year break, the Everchanger suddenly joined their conversation.

EARLIER, YOU SAID YOU INTEND TO REPLACE OUR OLDER MECHS WITH NEWER ONES BASED ON BETTER DESIGNS. WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE MECHS THAT HAVE BECOME OBSOLETE?



The Everchanger applied a bit more pressure to the cockpit, signaling that this matter was of considerable importance to the expert mech!

Ves adopted an awkward expression. If an ordinary person asked this question, then he would have replied that his clan would do what it had done before. There was no room for redundant mechs on his fleet. Continuing to carry them around when they took up space that could have been occupied by mechs that were 30, 50 or even 100 percent stronger was foolish!

However, Ves reminded himself that he had just promised to treat living mechs better. The Everchanger was apparently highly invested in this topic and would not regard Ves in a favorable light if he expressed his determination to slaughter redundant living mechs en masse like before!

He lightly coughed. "In the past, our options were limited, but now that we have gained a bit more room for ourselves, we don't have to dispose of our older mechs. One of the plans that I have in mind is to buy a large plot of land in Davute or another planet so that we can build an extensive base and industrial compound. It shouldn't be too difficult to add additional storage halls where we can mothball the living mechs that we do not need anymore."

He never thought about doing this in the past because he wasn't ready to extend the presence of his clan outside the fleet.

Now that he had decided to adjust his strategy, the problems that had plagued him in the past no longer sounded like a big deal to him anymore. After acquiring an abundant amount of territory on a planet or two, the Larkinsons would have more than enough storage space to store as much miscellaneous goods as they wanted!

The Everchanger was evidently satisfied with this response.

THE SO-CALLED SECOND ORDER LIVING MECHS IN OUR FLEET MAY NOT BE WORTH MUCH TO YOU OVER THE PASSAGE OF TIME, BUT THEY HAVE FAITHFULLY SERVED THEIR PURPOSE. I DO NOT WANT THEM TO MEET AN IGNOBLE END JUST BECAUSE THEIR USE TO THE CLAN HAS COME TO AN END. IF THEY CANNOT MEET AN GLORIOUS END IN BATTLE, THEN AT LEAST LET THEM RETIRE WITH HONOR.

"I agree." Venerable Joshua said in support. "I was always bothered with the way we treated our old mechs before. They're not as alive as the Everchanger and the other masterwork mechs in our hands, but that shouldn't change the fact that they still deserve to be treated with dignity. I think every living mech in our clan would become happier if they knew that we have set up a retirement home for their kind."

A retirement home. For mechs.



Normally, people referred to them as junk yards or debris fields. The only value that old mechs held was the amount of valuable raw materials that recycling companies could squeeze out of their old and outdated frames.

To change all of that and provide mechs with a lot more welfare than at any point in human history sounded bizarre! Ves started to feel weirder and weirder about the treatment he was prepared to offer to his living mechs.

Still, it felt right to Ves and aligned with the values and principles he held dear in his heart. Though he did not have many qualms about violating them when they got in the way, this was not an urgent situation.

The only problem he had with this solution was what would happen if this kept happening.

If the Design Department came up with another batch of mech models, would the Larkinson Army have to place another batch of tens of thousands of living mechs in their new 'retirement homes'?

The bigger the scale, the bigger the burden. If the Larkinson Clan grew to the point where it was able to field millions of mechs, that meant that Ves would probably have to reserve an entire planet to make sure there was enough space and that the locals didn't get greedy and try to steal the old machines!

Ves frowned as he tried to think on what he could do to prevent the living mech retirement homes from overflowing.

Eventually, he came up with an acceptable idea.

"The living mechs that eventually age and fall behind our standards don't have to stay that way forever." He said with a smile. "For example, the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B that we have used for years may have fallen behind these days, but the concept behind this model is still sound. I will definitely revisit the design and update it so that I can complete a Mark II edition of this easy and dependable mech!"

Both Joshua and the Everchanger perked up when they heard this. They both knew what this meant!

"I learned that upgrading an old mech to modern standards is a lot more difficult and time-consuming than building a brand-new mech." Joshua remarked. "Will the clan be willing to invest all of that extra effort into upgrading all of the mothballed living mechs?"

"Why not? While there is an undeniable cost to doing so, the tradeoff is worth it. These living mechs have already grown from their starting point and have become more formidable in their own way. It would be a waste to set aside all of this accumulation and start over from scratch. By upgrading their physical shells so that they can keep up with

all of our newer mechs, these veterans of the battlefield will be able to make a considerably greater difference on the battlefield!"

IT IS LIKE GIVING EVERY LOYAL AND DUTIFUL LIVING MECH THE OPPORTUNITY TO UNDERGO NIRVANA. NONE OF THEM WILL WAVER IN THEIR WILLINGNESS TO FIGHT FOR THE LARKINSON CLAN IF THEY LEARN THEY CAN KEEP FIGHTING IN BETTER AND BETTER FORMS.

To be honest, Ves had already developed the intention to do this, but he didn't plan to set up this scheme so soon and at this scale.

Doing this meant that he and his fellow mech designers had to abide by a commitment to keep updating the designs of most existing models in use today.

This was a considerable burden and one that Ves did not always look forward to handling. Revising his old work just wasn't as exciting as pioneering brand new mech concepts!

Nonetheless, the strength of his design philosophy was highly related to growth. If he was able to extend the lifespan of as many of his mechs as possible, then the rewards for all of this diligence would eventually be massive!

Besides, Ves didn't necessarily need to do all of the tedious work of upgrading the designs himself. His Design Department could do most of the work and it still had a lot of room for growth as well!

This was why Ves did not object to pushing this plan forward. The obstacles that hindered him before were nothing serious now that his clan had grown to this scale.

#### Chapter 3853 Task Force Fisherman

As much as Ves enjoyed his long and extensive discussion with Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger, they eventually had to set their personal matters aside.

After a fairly quiet and cautious journey, Task Force Fisherman had finally come within plain sight of the Evolution Kingdom.

Though the Swarmers had never shown much interest towards the distant mechs passing through their territory, that didn't necessarily mean the Evolvers were just as nearsighted.

As the mechs and shuttles halted well outside of the suspected engagement range of the Evolver fish-whales, everyone who took part in this mission grew serious again.

Ves had to cast aside all of his earlier thoughts and distractions and recall his own planning and preparation.

Together with Calabast, Shederin and other clever people, he had developed dozens of contingency plans.

Although that sounded like a lot, many of them consisted of branching paths that compelled Ves to make different choices based on the behavior and the attitude of the Evolver fish-whales.

Who knew how the events today would play out. If the fish-whales felt threatened and immediately opened fire on the strange metal objects, there wouldn't be any opportunity for Ves to speak!

This was why the initial plan did not state that Task Force Fisherman should approach the Lab Continent as a single whole.

The mechs first parked a distance away from the site of the Evolver fish-whales in order to announce their presence while showing no obvious sign of hostility.

Still, the presence of so many combat machines already conveyed a certain degree of threat.

While the task force could have parked well away from plain sight of the Lab Continent, Ves and the others eventually decided against this course of action.

Ves wanted to get on friendly terms with the Evolvers, but without showing enough strength, there was a large chance the fish-whales would look down on the foreign visitors.

Therefore, showing up with a considerable force of mechs but also maintaining a respectful distance was probably the right approach.

Then again, the humans knew too little about the fish-whales, particularly the ones who occupied the Lab Continent.

Ves manipulated the interface and accessed the sensor feeds of the Everchanger.

He zoomed in the projected view and took in the asteroid on display.

Just like the other landmasses, the Lab Continent was a brown-ish asteroid that was rich with certain resources. These resource points attracted plenty of fish-whales. Since these resource points were scattered across the surface of the landmass, the fish-whale population was wrapped around the entire ovoid continent.

That essentially meant that there were even more Evolver fish-whales on the asteroid! They were just roaming on the far side at the moment.

Just as Ves had observed from the footage brought back by Venerable Tusa, the Lab Continent was just as barren and devoid of any growth as the other continents. There wasn't any air in Purgatory so the environment wasn't friendly towards flora in the first place.

"Still, wouldn't it hurt to plant a bit of green in this dreary place?"

The alien creator of this pocket space did not think like humans at all. The same applied to the fish-whales. Ves had to be careful not to make too many assumptions based on human thought patterns.

Due to an enormous lack of useful and relevant data, much of the plan that Ves had in mind was built on assumptions and educated guesswork. This did not instill him with a lot of confidence, but what could he do? If he wanted to go forward with his plan, he needed to make contact with the Evolver fish-whales one way or another.

Ves waited for the light mechs of the task force to do their work.

Numerous Flagrant Vandal light mechs had spread out to keep watch over the immediate surroundings. Each of them were tasked with keeping their sensors peeled for any threats that approached under stealth. Though the fish-whales hadn't shown any stealth fish-whales, the expeditionary forces couldn't assume the other party was unable to master this capability.

He didn't forget that the miners of his clan dug out a deposit of Hulivaster. In the unlikely event that the phase whales and by extension the fish-whales were able to make effective use of resonating exotics, then there might be a secret group of threats in the vicinity!

After a while, the Flagrant Vandal mechs reported their findings to the officers of the task force. So far, the light mechs had not detected any signs of suspicious activity.

Everyone paid attention to both the Lab Continent and one of the expert mechs accompanying the task force.

Though the Living Sentinels weren't assigned to this mission, Commander Casella Ingvar and the Minerva were too useful to be left out of the lineup.

Given her abundant qualifications, no one had any objection to putting Commander Casella Ingvar in charge of the task force.

Although various people such as Ves knew that would make Commander Melkor bitter, no one cared about his feelings for a mission of this magnitude.

As long as Ves or Patriarch Reginald didn't say anything, the Sentinel Commander made all of the important decisions.

As Casella carefully parsed all of the transmitted data and reports, she judged that it was safe to proceed with the next step. Tusa, are you prepared to approach the Evolution Kingdom and greet the king fish again?"

"I am ready to move out, ma'am." Tusa seriously replied.

"Then proceed. Your job is critical. Please do your best not to convey any fear, hostility, disgust, greed or other negative emotions. You are our greeting card. How you present yourself to the native life forms will form their first impression of humans."

Venerable Tusa had already been briefed and prepped for this role, so the light mech specialist was not frazzled.

Even so, his body could not completely contain his apprehension. He had witnessed the might of the Evolvers first-hand during his previous scouting run. Now that he was tasked with knocking on the Evolution Kingdom's doors, he would have to come closer than ever to the large and dangerous fish-whales that had the potential to harm his expert mech.

"Sneaking up on mechs and stabbing them in the back is much more relaxing than approaching a group of alien powerhouses. At least I know how to anticipate human mech pilots." He quietly muttered under his breath.

Much of his training was spent on preparing to fight against other mechs. He was still new at figuring out how to fight against the various alien and inhuman threats he might encounter.

One of the biggest difficulties he faced was that his proud evasion and dueling capabilities were heavily reliant on anticipating the actions of his opponents.

He knew how mech pilots worked. He knew how they fought. He knew how they responded to his own moves.

The more he battled against mechs, the better he became at anticipating and predicting their actions!

While all of that effort bestowed Tusa with a lot of confidence, the reality of the expeditionary fleet's recent developments was that the chances of fighting against alien forces was much greater at this time!

Fighting against alien warships was still manageable as most of them had obvious weapon ports that showed where they were pointed at. His Dark Zephyr only had to avoid getting hit by their primary armament in order to avoid sustaining heavy damage.

Alien creatures were a different story. Fish-whales and other alien beasts worked so differently from the opponents he was familiar with that it was a lot more difficult to anticipate and avoid their attacks!

Crazy abilities such as manipulating the space around the Dark Zephyr or simply directing a massive energy spray in its direction were so difficult to defend against that Venerable Tusa had to be ready to retreat at any time.

Everyone got ready and paid attention as the Dark Zephyr cautiously flew out of the formation and moved over to the Lab Continent.

By now, the fish-whales definitely noticed the presence of all of the mechs. They did not make any overly aggressive or defensive moves, which Ves and the others took as a good sign.

The way the Evolver fish-whales had stopped in order to look up and stare at the new presences in the distance looked a bit silly.

They had never seen or heard any outsiders entering this space before. Purgatory had probably remained completely closed for all of these years. This had caused the fish-whales to grow into a highly insular race that didn't know anything about the wider cosmos!

From their perspective, the appearance of these bipedal metal machines were so far away from their own experiences that they might think that they were being approached by the whale equivalent of angels or demons!

"The king fish has emerged from its lab!"

Ves shifted the live feed. He focused intensely on the slow-moving king fish as it left one of the giant labs.

Now that he was physically closer to this titanic fish-whale than before, he felt a lot more intimidated by its size.

"It is at least as strong as a juggernaut or a warship."

This was what he felt, not just what he saw. The king fish projected power in a way that an ace mech displayed its absolute majesty over its surroundings. It was just so obvious to people who were sensitive towards these manifestations.

Although Ves wasn't close enough to get a sense of the powerful fish-whale's emotions, he could already pick up a few clues. The information he gained was incomparable to what he got when rewatching the Dark Zephyr's old footage.

Some elements could only be conveyed in real-time. Ves carefully studied each and every movement made by the king fish. Although he was not an exobiologist who possessed a deep understanding of the physiology and personality of fish-whales, he felt he was right to suspect the massive creature was the top dog in the Evolution Kingdom.

The creature conveyed so much power and authority that it would probably be able to make a good impression of the Iron Emperor if it had turned into a dwarf!

Few other Evolvers on the lab continent could come close to exuding so much authority. A few such as the bladed fish-whale came close, but it was like comparing a star to a planet. The magnitudes were too far apart!

Therefore, Ves made sure he was able to capture the most subtle nuances of the king fish. Fortunately, the Everchanger's sensor systems weren't shabby at all and its projectors were premium products, so the detail and clarity was quite good.

As the Dark Zephyr came close enough that it could get attacked by the fish-whales with long-ranged attack methods, the critical moment had come.

If the Evolvers held any suspicion towards the newcomers, this would be the time for them to repel the intruder and raise their defenses.

"The king fish is moving forward!"

For a time, the humongous fish-whale did nothing, but then it started moving. Its rippling azure scales glinted like shimmering pearls as its humongous body flew forward like a starship that was just about to exit a space dock.

The mass of the king fish was enormous and it took a huge amount of effort just to get it to move!

The king fish approached a more central position of its territory and stopped when it was surrounded by hundreds of other large and intelligent-looking Evolver fish-whales.

"It's like meeting a tribe of natives that have just encountered civilization for the first time." Venerable Joshua quietly remarked.

"Meow." Lucky voiced his own opinion as he adopted a more alert posture on top of Ves' seat.

Ves entertained various thoughts as he waited for Venerable Tusa to inform the task force whether he had made contact with the king fish.



"The Evolvers look like beasts but there are signs they can be reasoned with. Whether we can talk to them or not depends on whether the king fish is willing to hold a dialogue."

#### Chapter 3854 Second Contact

"There is so much phasewater in the king fish's body." Ves whispered even as he tried his best to suppress his greed.

Since he aimed to establish a friendship with the leader of the Evolution Kingdom, it was not wise to hold any malicious thoughts towards this powerful beast.

This was a problem because the more Ves looked at the king fish, the more he saw a floating pile of phasewater and MTA merits!

Not only that, but the biological makeup of the king fish was doubtlessly exceptional. The creature had obviously undergone the heaviest and most powerful sequence of biological augmentations among all of the Evolvers.

If the Larkinson Biotech Institute was able to get ahold of its unique carcass with at least half of the body parts intact, then Ves had the confidence of designing an absolutely exceptional biomech or cyborg mech that surpassed his previous passion projects!

"That's not all I can gain from this beast."

He could already sense that the king fish was absolutely strong in the spiritual sense. It was like looking at a version of Arnold that was a thousand times more powerful and not as docile!

Only the dark gods and the sacred gods of Aeon Corona VII could compare.

In other words, To Ves, the king fish was the equivalent of a juggernaut-sized loot piñata!

He constantly had to suppress the temptation to order a thunderous attack on the king fish in an attempt to crack it open in hopes of obtaining all kinds of riches.

The benefits didn't outweigh the costs this time. The creature had shown incredible battle power and Task Force Fisherman would suffer grievously if it tried to kill this powerful fish.

Even then, the assassination attempt was unlikely to succeed, not when there were hundreds of other Evolvers in the immediate area. They could immediately move to assist their sovereign fish and assault the task force with all kinds of powerful attacks.

If by any chance the expeditionary forces succeeded in defeating the Evolvers before reinforcements arrived, then what was next?

There were at least tens of thousands more Evolvers stationed elsewhere on the Lab Continent and another landmass!

Each of them would definitely converge on the hostile mechs that had attempted to kill their own kind! There was no way that Task Force Fisherman could stay long enough to reap any further profits.

After offending the Evolution Kingdom, the Golden Skull Alliance lost the easiest and most obvious opportunity to ally with a friendly native group.

Ves had no confidence in being able to develop an alliance with the Swarm Kingdom, Phase Kingdom or Hot Kingdom. They were either too hostile or too inhuman to befriend.

Therefore, if Ves wanted to attain all of the objectives that he had set for this brief campaign, he absolutely needed to succeed today!

"C'mon, Tusa. Don't screw this up. Say hi and remain as friendly as possible."

Although Ves preferred to send over the Everchanger with him riding tandem with Venerable Joshua as the first point of contact, the approach of a new and powerful-looking mech might spook the Evolvers.

The Dark Zephyr had appeared in the sights of the king fish once so it should not be a total surprise.

It also helped that it was small and light. Even though the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers had seen it assassinate multiple prominent enemy expert mechs with speed and daring, to the uninitiated the expert light mech looked like a fancier scouting mech.

Ves had especially instructed Venerable Tusa to minimize his posture and minimize his willpower and resonance fluctuations.

The more harmless the Dark Zephyr looked, the better!

"C'mon, you big whale. Take the bait."

Minutes passed by as people wondered whether the king fish had already attempted to contact Venerable Tusa.

The longer time went by, the more it became apparent that nothing happened.

The king fish showed quite a lot of patience in the face of so many new unknowns. Ves gained a better appreciation of the big creature.

Despite its tyrannical power and despite the might of its group, the king fish did not take any risks, but instead opted to observe and learn more about the new visitors.

Ves would have taken the same approach if he was in the big creature's position.

"Go closer, Tusa." He eventually instructed.

"Are you sure about that, Ves?"

Even though the expert pilot expressed his doubt, the Dark Zephyr continued to move closer to the surface of the Lab Continent.

Venerable Tusa was quite aware that his expert mech entered the range of more and more dangerous Evolver fish!

If those dangerous fish attacked at once, not even his celebration evasion abilities could save his mech from getting damaged!

When the Dark Zephyr reached a distance of eight kilometers, the mech suddenly froze in place.

"What happened, Tusa?!"

It took a few seconds for the light mech specialist to transmit a response.

"The king fish... talked to me again. It used the same communication method that it used before. I can't understand its words, though. It's all gibberish to me. Can someone come up who can actually understand the fish-whale language?"

The mood among the people in the task force had lifted a bit. The fact that the fish-whales chose to communicate rather than to attack was already a hopeful first step.

Ves didn't grow complacent, though. A successful first step was not indicative of a smooth journey. He needed to make sure that they made as little mistakes as possible. For now, he wasn't in a hurry to step up and speak to the dangerous fish in person.

"Don't focus on interpreting the alien words." He told the expert pilot. "Focus instead on the emotions and feelings behind them. Can you sense any? If so, describe them to me please."

Tusa recalled what he had just experienced and tried to explain them as best as possible.

"I haven't picked up any strong emotions from the king fish as it communicated with me, but if I concentrate closely enough, I think I can make a few guesses."

"Tell me. What kind of emotions is the king fish projecting to you at the moment?"

The expert pilot struggled to find his words. "I sense... curiosity, caution, vigilance and more. I can't really describe the other feelings. Maybe... concern for others of its kind?"

Ves grinned. "That is exactly what we needed to hear, Tusa. Thank you. What you have told us already provides us with a lot of clarification."

He and the analysts accompanying the task force were starved of data!

The greatest fear they held was towards the unknown!

By lifting the veil that obscured the king fish, Venerable Tusa's tentative contact with the large creature opened the way towards mutual understanding.

"Can you talk back to the king fish in any way?" Ves asked.

"I think I can, but I would prefer not to. I am not good in these situations and I don't have diplomatic training."

"It's fine." Ves quickly said. "You can't understand the fish-whale language and the king fish probably doesn't understand human speech either. Just speak about basic niceties and stuff so that the other side can know that there are communication barriers between us. What is important is that you convey as much respect and goodwill as possible. Given the emotions that it had conveyed to you, the king fish should understand what you are trying to convey in return."

"Roger that. I will try my best."

Though Venerable Tusa was right that he wasn't the best choice to speak to the king fish, he was most definitely one of the safer options.

Compared to the other expert pilots in the clan, Venerable Tusa possessed a relatively simple and unpretentious personality. He did not harbor any darker thoughts nor held any wild or uncontrollable personality traits.

This turned him into one of the safer points of contact with the king fish. He possessed enough willpower and mental strength to communicate on a more equal level to the powerful creature.

As several minutes passed by, Venerable Tusa regularly passed on his impressions of the confusing talks.

"I think the king fish is warming up to me." He cautiously said, though his optimism couldn't be hidden. "Maybe I managed to convince it of my sincerity, but I don't feel as if it holds as much caution towards us as before. We still have a long way to go before we become bosom buddies, but the king fish is talking faster and more frequently to me than before. I still don't understand a single word this fish is saying, though."

The signs were getting better and better. Whether the king fish was able to understand Venerable Tusa's words or not, the creature was showing basic and easily believable signs that it was getting further and further away from treating the new arrivals as hostile threats.

Ves frequently consulted with the exobiologists, psychologists, diplomats and other specialists that were embedded in the task force. The scientists and professionals discussed their findings and opinions aboard numerous shuttles before succinctly presenting their thoughts and recommendations up the hierarchy.

Although he heard a lot of conflicting and divided narratives, Ves never put too much stock in the judgment of others.

He had met and spoken with enough powerful humans and aliens to develop his own cognition towards creatures like the king fish. He trusted his intuition and his gut feeling more than the opinions of so-called experts who derived all of their knowledge from book learning.

Right now, he felt rather good about the situation. The worst-case scenario had not occurred and the Evolver fish-whales were all staying put so far, with only a few showing obvious signs of aggression.

Either the Evolvers were more like-minded and understanding than he thought, or the king fish's control over its own minions was better than expected.

"Uhm, sir?" Tusa eventually spoke to Ves. "The conversation is stalling. The king fish isn't satisfied with this state of affairs anymore. Neither of us can do anything but signal our feelings to each other, but that is starting to get stale. We are not making any progress in understanding what we are saying."

Ves expected that, but he was not in a hurry to move to the next step as of yet. "Keep talking with the king fish. Even if you think it is futile, don't show any frustration or weariness."

They needed to test the patience and self-control of the king fish. If it produced a violet outburst due to getting frustrated, then it might be better for the task force to keep its distance to the Evolution Kingdom!

As more minutes went by, there were few signs of that occurring. Ves studied the king fish's appearance and movements carefully and did not see any overt signs that indicated a lack of control.

To Ves, this signified a high degree of sentience, rationality and self-control. These were uncommon traits among feral and vicious beasts, which meant that the king fish was likely easier to get along with than he feared!

Roughly 40 minutes after Venerable Tusa and the king fish started talking, the conversation finally came to an end.

The king fish seemed to conclude that they couldn't hold any meaningful exchange without a common language and suspended the talks.

The creature's frustration and dissatisfaction were obvious to see, which indicated that it was not a creature that was inclined to deception.

Although the contact between the two sides had taken a turn for the worse, Ves did not intend to end this important meeting in this fashion.

"Joshua."

"Yes, sir?"

"Move the Everchanger forward until you reach the Dark Zephyr's side, but slowly. Make sure you maintain a low state of resonance. We don't want to spook the Evolvers."

"Understood. Moving now. Be careful. If I detect any incoming attack, I won't hesitate to move the Everchanger without waiting for instructions."

"That's okay." Ves dismissively waved his arm. "I trust in your judgment."

## Chapter 3855 ves the Diplomat

The second contact event had become a drawn-out affair, but that was not necessarily bad to Ves. Taking it slow was safer than rushing forward. The risks of offending the other side due to cultural misunderstandings were too great!

Taking it step by step did not prevent the human visitors from violating any taboos, but it would be easy to take a step back and minimize any controversies that might occur.

As the ongoing talks between Venerable Tusa and the king fish had stalled, Ves had finally chosen to go forward at this time.

He grew nervous. He was well aware of the potential firepower the starship-sized king fish could unleash. This biological wonder was one of the more powerful individual entities that he had met in his life.

Ves had made the calculations and compared them to the estimated damage resistance capabilities of the Everchanger.

Though he bet that the masterwork expert mech would be able to survive long enough to get out of range of the king fish's strongest known attacks, the mech would definitely sustain a lot of damage to its Unending alloy!

If the king fish happened to possess a more lethal attack method, then it was hard to say whether the expert mech could hold out. Ves could only hope that Joshua was able to eject the cockpit in time.

I CAN ALREADY SENSE THE BIG WHALE'S POWER FROM THIS DISTANCE. ITS ENTIRE BODY IS FILLED WITH POTENTIAL ENERGY THAT IS JUST WAITING TO BE UNLEASHED.

Ves nodded in agreement. "That is to be expected. The king fish has shown exceptional capabilities, and all of that requires support. Its body is a giant carrier of power. Pay close attention to any major fluctuations. If the king fish wants to unleash any intensive attack, it has to accumulate energy from its body. That will be a tell-tale sign that it may turn on us in the next few seconds."

Of course, the king fish might know about this weakness and develop moves that didn't telegraph its attack patterns. The task force couldn't do anything about it except hope that the massive fish-whale wasn't able to fell too many mechs at once.

It felt strange for Ves to voluntarily approach a creature that already exuded the strength that was equivalent to an ace mech.

When the Everchanger had finally reached the Dark Zephyr's side, Ves was able to get an even better sense of the king fish.

Right now, the massive creature had shifted its massive eyes from the Dark Zephyr to the newly-arrived Everchanger.

Right now, Ves had instructed it to switch its design spirit to the Golden Cat.

Although she had little influence on other humans and aliens, the mascot of the Larkinson Clan possessed a bright and positive vibe that presented a friendly and relatively harmless front.



Was it deceptive? Ves didn't think so. The Golden Cat truly represented the Larkinson Clan's demeanor and was meant to prove that Task Force Fisherman did not come here to raid the Evolution Kingdom.

Ves waited for a response from the king fish.

"The king fish has become vigilant again." He observed. "It is not entirely comfortable with the approach of another mech."

This was a natural response. Compared to dispatching just one mech, the addition of a second one presented a marginally greater threat towards the Evolver fish-whales.

Ves still found it necessary to move forward, though.

If the circumstances were different, he didn't mind spending a few days or even weeks to slowly earn the Evolution Kingdom's trust.

Unfortunately, the tight schedule curtailed his options and forced him to maintain a faster pace than he thought was prudent.

He needed to fulfill as many of his objectives as possible within a week!

There was no way to persist after that as the MTA's reinforcements would finally arrive to take over his discoveries.

This was why Ves was not willing to slow down this process too much. There was a time for caution but there was also a time for boldness.

So far, the signs were good. The king fish and the surrounding Evolvers were more on guard but they did not look as if they were a single trigger away from blasting the two expert mechs with lethal attacks.

"Are we going to communicate with them soon, sir?" Venerable Joshua asked with a hint of tension in his voice. "If the fish whales don't get anything positive out of talking with us, they might choose to ignore us or push us away. No one likes a foreign army squatting right next door."

Ves nodded in agreement but maintained his stance. "You're right. We should hold proper talks soon. Make sure you keep yourself contained, Joshua. With your sensitivity and special strengths, I'm sure you can listen in and maybe even talk to the king fish, but no matter what is going on, I am the sole point of contact from our side. Your job is not to negotiate or befriend the fish-whales. Your job is to protect me and be ready to respond to any outbreak of hostilities that might occur, do you understand?"

"I understand..."

Venerable Joshua had already been briefed on what he was allowed to do, but a part of him definitely felt left out of the party.

As someone who befriended numerous design spirits and other odd creatures, Joshua developed a liking for meeting new and strange life forms.

His willpower quickened as he studied the different Evolver fish-whales floating above the surface of the Lab Continent.

Each of them could probably tell a lot of stories about themselves and their culture!

If they were not on such a critical mission, Ves might have been willing to indulge Joshua a bit. It was unfortunate that he could not risk the relationship between the expeditionary forces and the Evolution Kingdom.

Minimizing contact and controlling all communications through a single channel was the best way for Ves to control the situation. Nothing could be allowed to ruin his plans for this campaign.

His eyes glinted for a second before he purposefully withdrew his aggressive tendencies.

He closed his eyes and made a small connection to Lufa to 'reset' his mind in order to make absolutely certain that any thoughts about harming or exploiting the Evolver fish-whales had temporarily vacated his mind.

After that, he briefly considered his choices before donning a spiritual mask that caused his demeanor to undergo a significant change.

The use of spiritual masks to distort his mentality, thought patterns, body language and spiritual expression was an old technique of his. He rarely used it as of late because it wasn't necessary for him to engage in this deceptive trick towards his own clansmen.

That didn't mean that spiritual masks turned obsolete. They were still highly useful in dealing with all kinds of outsiders.

By consciously shaping his outward personality and behavior, he could consciously manipulate the impression that others would form of him. In a situation as critical as opening up a dialogue to a powerful alien fish-whale, such an old and relatively simple trick came in quite handy at the moment!

The spiritual mask he chose was not an average one, of course. None of the ones he prepared were rush jobs. In order to make sure they did the job without any flaws or shortcomings, he had spent hours on refining them. He did not hesitate to borrow the spiritual energies of numerous design spirits in order to take advantage of their spiritual attributes!

"From now on, I am just a mech designer with an interest in exploration and science."

In order to reduce the risk of exposure, Ves did not adopt a completely different personality from his 'normal' self.

Instead, he chose to isolate and emphasize a facet of himself, which in this case happened to be 'Ves the passionate mech designer'.

The spiritual mask he had donned a moment ago was based on ingredients based on himself, Vulcan and the Solemn Guardian.

He had carefully chosen this mix to generate the demeanor of a mech designer that was passionate and dedicated to his work without paying much attention to other concerns.

Ves wanted to downplay his greed, his responsibilities as a leader and his exploitative attitude towards the fish-whales and other native alien races hailing from the Red Ocean.

At no point should he ever show disdain or disrespect towards the king fish and its fellow Evolvers!

From now on, Ves had to see them as fascinating biological organisms that could provide him a lot of inspiration for his next mech designs!

Ves purposefully stimulated his mind so that he became a bit more scatter-brained. As he shifted his sight to various different Evolver fish-whales, he gained inspiration from several of them and began to imagine how he could translate their biological traits into innovative new mech designs.

Normally, he would try his best to push away these distractions when he met with other important people, but this happened to be a situation where being passionate to the point of getting a little absent-minded was a positive development!

He smiled. "Bring the Everchanger closer, Joshua. It's time to talk."

The expert hero mech had conspicuously stayed by the side of the Dark Zephyr so far. This put them at an equal level and made the king fish uncertain who to contact.

The advance of the green-coated expert mech cleared up the confusion. Under Ves' direction, the Everchanger did not raise its resonance shield or other defenses.

Joshua purposefully had to lower his guard in order to present the Everchanger as positively as possible. With the glow of the Golden Cat, the expert mech exuded a friendly, protective and family-oriented aura that was unlikely to provoke any hostility from the Evolver fish-whales.

Whether all of this was enough to initiate a proper dialogue would soon be clear!

Ves breathed a little heavier as the Everchanger continued to close the distance. The mech approached the Lab Continent and made itself more and more vulnerable against attacks.

"Stop. This is close enough."

Getting any closer was too risky and would make it far too easy for the fish-whales to prevent the Everchanger's retreat.

Ves wanted to show that he was willing to communicate, but that did not mean showing weakness.

With the backing of a thousand mechs, Ves had put himself well within the king fish's talking range.

Now, he just had to wait for the massive creature to reach out with his powerful mental communication method.

Ves had heard Tusa describe the sensation of getting contacted by the king fish by remote. The method was similar to how design spirits were able to speak to people, and that gave him a reference to the magnitude of the king fish's spirituality.

"This creature is not only powerful on this front, but also fairly proficient in its use. How many years has it spent on training its abilities?"

The king fish was obviously an old or even ancient creature. Every fish-whale's genetic code was derived from phase whale DNA, and that bestowed them with extraordinary strength and vitality. When combined with many targeted genetic treatments and biological mutations, Ves wouldn't be surprised if the king fish had lived over a million years!

This was the inherent unfairness of life. While some organisms such as humans struggled to live beyond half a millennium due to all of their racial shortcomings and deficiencies, large and massive races such as astral beasts did not need to undergo any artificial procedures to live thousands of years!

After reminding himself that he might be dealing with an old and incredibly wise creature, Ves further tried his best to restrain his wild side.

His disguise was so good at the moment that anyone who did not know him well would definitely dismiss as an over-eager nerd!

As another thirty seconds went by, both Ves, Joshua, the Everchanger and even Lucky froze in their tracks.

A distant but massive presence had descended onto them. Although it did not bear any hostility or aggression, the other side's wariness was hard to miss!

After the powerful presence scanned each of them, it eventually directed most of its attention towards Ves, as he had tried his best to reach out to the powerful entity.

Then, the alien communicated.

What others interpreted as a bunch of alien gibberish, Ves was able to interpret the actual meaning of the mental transmission.

If Ves was correct, the king fish had just greeted them with a single word.

OUTSIDERS.

Chapter 3856 Outsiders

"Interesting."

The fact the king fish communicated this particular meaning spoke much about what it knew and how it regarded the human visitors.

Ves and the others had constructed numerous different mental models of the king fish's personality and cognition.

Most of them assumed that the king fish and the fish-whale race as a whole were completely insular and unaware of the outside cosmos. Purgatory was their entire universe and the concept that races other than the fish-whales could exist should be nonexistent.

An individual's knowledge and views shaped their vocabulary. The king fish shouldn't be able to communicate word 'outsiders' unless it had a clear idea that there was life outside of this phase whale enclave!

Ves rapidly made a few conclusions based on these thoughts and adjusted his strategy.

Now that he decided to initiate actual contact, he did not leave the king fish hanging this time. He consciously reached out to the powerful alien presence and formulated his response.

"Greetings. New arrival. No fight. Curiosity. Outsider."

He didn't know anything about the richness of the fish-whale language, so he did not try to overly complicate his speech. He was afraid the king fish might misinterpret his words and take offense.

It was enough to convey the meaning of a couple of words at a time.

Ves was able to make himself understood by many different life forms as long as they possessed spirituality, so he did not think the king fish heard a bunch of gibberish in return.

From the small spike in the massive presence enveloping the Everchanger, Ves knew that this step was a success!

Not only did the king fish respond more actively than when it talked to Venerable Tusa, the underlying emotions of the creature had also changed!

Ves carefully studied the king fish's spiritual presence and sensed an increase in excitement and curiosity but also vigilance and wariness.

Whether these emotions were truly reflective of the king fish or merely a smokescreen to hide its actual attitude, Ves couldn't tell.

For now, the king fish presented itself in a fairly friendly manner even though it was the first native life form to communicate with humans!

Perhaps this was because the king fish was confident in its own strength. As a powerful fish-whale whose strength had reached the top of the primitive hierarchy of this pocket space, it had spent much of its life dominating others.

It shouldn't be easy for it to put down its airs in the presence of other individuals.

If Task Force Fisherman didn't bring so many mechs and if the Everchanger didn't exude enough power, perhaps the king fish would have shown less scruples towards the outsiders!

Having received a clear reply after an extended period of fruitless exchanges, the other party soon conveyed another set of meanings.

IDENTITY. ORIGIN. INTENTION.

Ves smiled wider. "Human. Outside. Learning."

LEARNING?

"Exploration. Discovery. Learning. Science. Research. Development. Production."

CLARIFICATION.

"Willing. Exchange. Closer. Friendly. Not dangerous. Reassurance."

The two kept swapping meanings like this for a few minutes. Their communication was so stilted and unnatural that Ves found it stressful to pick the right words to convey without sparking any conflict. Still, the effect was pretty good as the emotions projected by the king fish became more and more positive!

In order to increase the richness and specificity of his own speech, Ves made the bold decision to upgrade the complexity of his responses by formulating them in simple sentences.

His armed hand pressed against his chestplate. "Entered by accident. Fought against different fish-whales. Too many of them. Want to find friendly fish-whales. Not hostile to you. Want to exchange knowledge."

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE. WHAT KNOWLEDGE?

"I propose a simple exchange. You tell me about yourself and your race. I tell about myself and my race."

NOT ENOUGH. MORE KNOWLEDGE. NEED MORE.

Ves raised his palm. "Slow down. Not fast. Learn about ourselves first. More exchange of knowledge later. Must be careful first. Agreed?"

...AGREED. KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE. NOW.

"Careful. Move closer. Maintain a safe distance. Away from soldiers. Suggest location."

SAFE DISTANCE. FOLLOW. LOCATION HERE.

So far, it appeared the king fish did not have much trouble interpreting what Ves was trying to communicate. It fully showed it understood what Ves had just conveyed as it distinctly moved away from its fellow Evolvers and approached a nearby hill that was not as busy.

The king fish looked at the surrounding Evolvers and did something to disperse them a bit. The fish-whales moved further and further away and were no longer as tense as before.

It seemed that the king fish's prestige was impressively high among its own kind! There were no dissenters among its crew. Every single fish-whale retracted their aggressive tendencies though it was obvious that many of them were still on guard.

However, even if the Everchanger was slowly moving towards the site that the king fish had designated, the Evolvers did not show any fear that the mech would harm their leader.



Each of them had witnessed the king fish defeat so many enemy fish-whales with ease that it was hard to imagine that this smaller metal object could pose any threat.

It helped that the Everchanger did not look particularly dangerous at the moment. It had holstered both of its primary weapons on its back and kept its hands empty.

Its uplifting green color scheme and its overall theme as an inspiring machine reinforced the Everchanger's friendliness.

This was a contradictory phenomenon to Ves. Mechs were first and foremost war machines. They were engines of destruction that had been responsible for the deaths of an uncountable amount of humans, many of which were merely innocent civilians who were caught at the wrong place at the wrong time.

A part of Ves felt as if the Everchanger turned into a deceitful scammer!

Its current facade was not a complete falsehood but definitely a distortion of the truth. Ves may have designed the Everchanger with the intention of turning the expert mech and its pilot into inspirational heroes, but they were both killers at their core!

Still, the current facade worked well in lowering the king fish's vigilance.

One of the observations that Ves and many others had made was that the more powerful fish-whales tended to possess bigger bodies as well.

Bigger bodies and greater mass offered more carrying capacity for powerful organs. It was probably hard-wired in their mentalities that smaller individuals were also weaker.

With that in mind, the Everchanger flew closer to the Lab Continent until it gently touched down on the rocky surface.

The modest gravity of the artificial landmass forced the expert mech to expend energy at a constant rate in order to keep levitating. Ves felt this was wasteful and silently instructed Joshua to set foot on the Lab Continent even if the other fish-whales rarely did so themselves.

The move not only explained why the humans possessed legs, but also emphasized the differences between the two groups.

When Ves briefly directed his attention to the other fish-whales, he noted that they had begun to show a lot more curiosity towards the unknown visitors.

They didn't look as wise and astute as the king fish, though. Ves couldn't really explain it, but he noticed a clear difference in intelligence and awareness between the leader fish and its subjects.

"The Evolvers are all sentient, but the king fish is definitely smart on another level!"

Together with the way the conversation had proceeded so far, Ves raised his estimation of the king fish's intelligence.

As the Everchanger and the big creature stopped at a distance of roughly 120 meters from each other, both of them paid careful attention to their counterparts.

With the king fish's powerful and polished spiritual intelligence, it had already detected that the Everchanger actually contained multiple life forms.

The huge fish should have been able to differentiate between Ves, Joshua, Lucky, the Everchanger and the Golden Cat.

All of them were stuffed inside a fairly small metal machine from the perspective of the king fish.

Who knew how the king fish interpreted this odd and unheard of combination to the fish whales. The native alien races had not shown any instance of using vehicles or combining themselves on a deeper level.

After the staring game had gone for several minutes, the king fish finally broke the silence.

HUMAN. EXPLAIN.

The important part had come. Ves had thought long and hard how to explain the existence of humans and the context around his race.

On one hand, he had to hide as much about humans as possible. Information asymmetry is a valuable advantage. Even if the king fish was aware of the concept of outsiders, it clearly didn't know anything about humans or the threat they posed!

Ves did not want to spill the beans and reveal so much that the king fish could gain more parity in the conversation.

On the other hand, the king fish clearly did not want to reveal anything about itself and its race unless the human visitors were willing to reciprocate.

Fairness and equal trade was one of the many commonalities of sentient races. While not all of them respected these concepts as much as everyone wished, they should at least be able to understand them to a degree.

The way this massive creature stared down at the Everchanger betrayed its expectation of receiving information. It would probably stop the expert mech from leaving if Ves did not satisfy the giant fish's curiosity!

"Humans are life. Different from fish-whales. We come from outside. Bigger space outside. We are visitors. I am leading the visitors. My goal is to explore and learn. Do you understand?"

His answer probably wasn't sufficient to the king fish because he sensed a spike of impatience from the creature.

HUMANS. FIGHT. THREAT. DANGEROUS.

"I do not deny that we are able to fight. We had to defeat many different fish-whales earlier. We do not want to fight. We are no threat to your group. We only want to exchange."

Ves wasn't sure whether the fish-whale race understood concepts such as deception, lying, betrayal and other nasty words. If this was the case, then earning the king fish's trust would be a lot harder than he wished!

However, as Ves continued to don a mask that completely signaled his desire to study new phenomena in order to advance his design philosophy, he presented a completely innocent image that shouldn't put the big whale on guard.

WHAT IS OUTSIDE.

"Outside is... immense. Lots of space. Many planets. Many lives. Many fights."

EXPLAIN MORE.

"There is too much to tell you. Outside is too big and too diverse."

"Explain."

"I will, but I want to learn from you as well. Trade information for information. Both of us will benefit. Is that acceptable?"

The king fish remained silent for half-a-dozen seconds before it lightly flicked its tail.

ACCEPTABLE. WANT TO LEARN. MUST LEARN OUTSIDE.

Apparently, the king fish's attention was mostly centered around what lay beyond Purgatory!

Ves understood the massive creature's sentiment. If it possessed any awareness that this pocket space was only a tiny isolated slice out of a greater whole, then he would also develop a lot of curiosity towards what lay beyond the familiar!

He smiled wider. He was happy to tell the king fish about the Red Ocean, especially when he could trade for valuable information about the fish-whales in return.

In any case, he could pick and choose what sort of information he wanted to supply to the king fish. He could say anything as long as he made sure he did not reveal any hint of humanity's domineering invasion of the Red Ocean and his society's intense animosity towards other alien races!

"Ah. Before we speak, let me learn who you are. What is your name?" Ves carefully asked.

NAME?

"Identity. Title. Status."

KURRRGUURANEEN.

"That's... a nice name. Can I call you the Cerebral King instead? As a powerful leader, it is only right to refer to you by your majestic title."

Chapter 3857 A Name

There was no way that Ves could call the king fish Kurrrguuraneen. He wasn't a giant artificial hybrid organism, and didn't possess the mouth and organs to pronounce all of the subtle harmonics and other sounds that accompanied the name.

It took a bit of convincing and explaining for the king fish to supply Ves with alternative labels for itself.

I. CEREBRAL. STRONGEST.

I. PROTECT. FREE. KIN.

I. INHERITOR. LEGACY.

The king fish conveyed quite a lot of information at once this time! Much of that was because the creature couldn't help but puff itself up this time. It raised its massive head and radiated clear pride and confidence in its own identities!

As the king fish announced its roles and identities, Ves did not forget to transcribe what he received in a text format which he instantly passed on to the analysts embedded into the task force.

The various exobiologists, linguists, psychologists and other professionals were enthusiastically applying their own expertise on the ongoing contact event. Each of

them transmitted a running stream of commentary and advice that Ves idly browsed in order to enrich his understanding of the current situation.

This was the strength of humanity! Humans had always been a cooperative race, just like most successful races in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean. The achievements of a single individual could never surpass that of a collective. Even the powerful and mighty phase whales were not exempt from this role!

In comparison, his alien counterpart appeared to be going at it alone. So far, it appeared the king fish enjoyed a high prestige among its fellow fish-whales, but that also meant that its subordinates did not play a useful role in talks at this level. This was a severe disadvantage and one that Ves fully intended to exploit.

Ves entertained various thoughts as he contemplated the words conveyed by the king fish.

According to the advice of his analysts, the first sentence represented the greatest source of pride of the king fish.

Interestingly enough, the massive and immensely powerful beast chose to emphasize its intellectual excellence first. This was a massive clue that revealed how the beast saw itself.

It was just as Ves had predicted. It was impossible for the Evolvers to develop their varied augmentations naturally, so the fish-whales here definitely made use of artificial intervention!

The reason why Tusa called this landmass the Lab Continent was because of the presence of those conspicuously large artificial structures not too far away from this location.

If Ves was right about the character of the king fish, then this big fellow was actually the chief experimenter among its people!

Its role was similar to that of Ves in the Larkinson Clan, though there were numerous differences.

The biggest one was that it reserved all of its best efforts for itself. While mech designers were unable to pilot their own work due to their lack of genetic aptitude, the same rules didn't apply for biological augmentation!

Many biotech experts from the Life Research Association did not hesitate to tinker with their own bodies in order to make them smarter, healthier and more resilient. Even Director Ranya Wodin applied her own experimental procedures to her physique early on, causing her hair to become half-plant that possessed photosynthetic properties.

If the biotech researchers of humanity were already lacking in constraint, then what about a fish-whale that lived in a much more primitive society where combat strength reigned supreme?

Not only was the king fish able to gain supremacy over its people by augmenting itself to an extreme, but it was also able to augment the other fish-whales under its command!

It was because Ves happened to be a mech designer who also led his own organization that he understood the king fish's perspective so well. He comprehended the challenges and difficulties that an individual in such a prominent leadership position had to endure.

Ves consciously amplified this sympathetic attitude in the hopes that his 'shared understanding' would resonate with the king fish. Figuratively, of course.

"I will call you the Cerebral King, is that acceptable? Names are important to humans. They announce identities and determine how to treat each other."

CEREBRAL. KING?

The word 'king' was a human construct that did not always have straightforward equivalents in alien languages and cultures. There were alien civilizations that only used the words with the meaning of 'patriarch' or 'matriarch' to refer to their highest leaders, but there were also other alien societies that possessed an extremely rigid hierarchy based on bloodline and inheritance.

Ves tried to figure out how he should explain this word.

"A king is... a leader. A decision maker. A king is strong. When a king speaks, others must listen. You are a king, are you not? You command these other fish-whales."

YES.

The king fish conveyed this meaning with pride and not a little bit of ferocity. Despite being proud of its intellect, the only way for fish-whales to dominate over each other was to possess bigger muscles than the competition!

"Then you are a king." Ves flatteringly replied. "You are the strongest, the smartest and the most qualified fish-whale to lead the fish-whales. A king is a title that formally establishes your dominion over the others. Only other kings can speak to you as an equal."

KING... YES. I AM KING.

Despite the creature's age and formidable knowledge base, there was only so much that it could learn in a barren and desolate place like Purgatory. Tusa's scouting trip had not revealed any places with a more advanced fish-whale society.

As such, Ves bet that the king fish might be incredibly smart in numerous areas, but also incredibly naive and inexperienced in other areas! there was a chance that the king fish was staging an elaborate show, Ves did not think the creature was so skilled at deception, especially when it wasn't necessary to develop this skill in a simple fish-whale society where strength decided everything.

In addition, the king fish should not be able to fabricate the emotions that colored the creature's expressions!

ARE YOU KING?

Ves blinked and tried to come up with a quick answer. "I am not, I mean, I am a king of my people. The mechs that are behind me are part of my army. I am also strong and qualified to be a king."

He did not have the patience to explain his title of patriarch and how it was different from a king.

The critical part of this conversation was to persuade the king fish that Ves could speak to it as an equal!

However, Ves could already sense a hint of skepticism from the massive fish-whale.

YOU, KING? YOU SMALL. YOU WEAK.

Ves did not get flustered due to this accusation. He had expected it already and already prepared a response.

"Small does not mean weak." Ves smiled. "I am a king. I have gathered followers. My army fights on my behalf."

INCOMPREHENSION. KING IS SMALL AND WEAK. STRONGER HUMAN MUST BECOME KING. NOT YOU.

Though the king fish's speech pattern had slowly become more sophisticated due to talking with a human, the creature's thoughts and attitude were still far behind!

"There are different styles of kings. Some rule by strength. Others rule by appointment. I rule by creating value."

CREATING VALUE?



Ves tapped the side of his helmet. "Yes. Creation means making things that can make humans stronger. You see these large metal objects with four limbs and a head? They are mechs that I have created myself. Mechs can make weak humans stronger. Because I am the best mech maker in my kingdom, I have become the king of my people."

The fish-whale did not respond for a time. Ves had exposed quite a lot of information and the fish-whale had to try its best to interpret his words.

This was all part of a test. How well the fish-whale was able to keep up with the increasing complexity and profoundness of his speech would tell a lot about the giant creature's adaptability, open-mindedness and learning ability.

Right now, it seemed that it had trouble wrapping its head around the idea that a 'weak' individual could become a king. It was as if the beast was a Hexer who just heard that boys could become a leader and rule over women!

Cultural dissonance would happen sooner or later. If the king fish did not get bothered over this particular issue, then it would have shown the same reaction to another issue.

This was especially problematic to more isolated cultures. The Hexers and Ylvainans were typical examples of this in human society. Here in Purgatory, Ves was afraid that none of the fish-whales were able to cope with cultural differences.

However, the king fish's age and curiosity eventually won out. Although it clearly looked as if it did not understand why a weak human was in charge, it was too fond of the information that Ves provided to risk breaking up this fruitful exchange.

Ves was the first outsider to speak to the 'Cerebral King'! There was no guarantee that the other humans could speak to it. The king fish had already tried and failed to talk to Venerable Tusa, so it should know that humans that could talk to it were rare.

SPEAK MORE ABOUT HUMANS.

"Ah, not so fast." Ves responded. "I have spoken much about humans. You must reciprocate by speaking about fish-whales. Let us conduct a fair exchange."

EXCHANGE... ACCEPTABLE.

The king fish fell silent again. It was as if it didn't know where to begin. It had never imagined that it would have to explain its own race to those who were vastly different.

WE ARE... THE CHILDREN OF OORUGANIOAS.

Up to this point, the Cerebral King spoke as if it was the biggest fish in the pond.

Yet as soon as it conveyed this alien name, it had suddenly converged its arrogance and displayed so much respect that it was practically indistinguishable from religious worship!

Ves immediately understood that this name was exceptional.

"Who is... this individual?" Ves cautiously asked.

The Cerebral King arced its massive body, causing its majestic scales to ripple.

FLESH CONQUEROR.

The giant fish-whale arced towards the cluster of giant lab structures.

SECRET KEEPER.

The creature then looked up in a disturbingly reverent fashion.

GOD...

Ves quickly figured out the identity of 'Oooruganioaus'. If his suspicions were correct, then this name referred to the source of everything in Purgatory!

What the Cerebral King had said about Oooruganioaus matched everything that Ves and his people had figured out from their own findings!

This was valuable information! Not only did he confirm that the fish-whales, the abandoned labs and the various continents were created by a powerful fish-whale, but he also gained greater confidence that the giant skeleton in the Royal Tomb happened to be a remnant of this ancient figure!

Of course, there was no hard proof Oooruganioaus was the clean whale that left those massive bones behind, but it should at least be related to this mysterious name.

"Tell me more about the 'Flesh Conqueror.'"

OOORUGANIOAS IS GOD AND CREATOR. ALL OF US ARE CHILDREN OF GOD.  
WE EXIST BECAUSE OF THE WILL OF GOD.

"...That... is nice."

GOD IS NICE.

Ves should have expected it. Primitive and underdeveloped societies were more likely than not to hold religious beliefs. This was common in both human and alien civilizations.

If the fish-whales had at least some idea that they were part of an artificial race that had only come into existence due to the efforts of a maker, then it was not unreasonable for them to worship this individual as their literal god!

"How do you know all of this?" Ves asked as he remained skeptical of what he heard. "How do you know that the Flesh Conqueror is your maker and your god? Who taught you this belief?"

The Cerebral King grew more intense all of a sudden. Its pressure had raised, making it difficult for Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger to remain indifferent at this time.

I. SAW.

OOORUGANIOAS MADE ME AND OTHERS.

OOORUGANIOAS IS GOD.

Ves froze. He had become shocked by what he heard! If the Cerebral King wasn't lying, then it was older than he imagined!

It had witnessed its very creator at work!

Chapter 3858 The Cerebral King

Ves still couldn't get his head around the idea that he was talking to a living fossil!

Although he already had an inkling that the Cerebral King had experienced a lot of events and grown old, it was still a stretch to believe in the claim that it had actually lived in a time where its phase whale creator had brought its own race to life!

This was amazing!

The Cerebral King was not just a relic from the past, but a creature that had witnessed the slow but drastic transformation of Purgatory.

From a prosperous enclave to a fallen and degenerated home to mutated fish-whales, the king fish was a living history book of the evolution of the pocket space!

In fact, having first-hand experience of the creator back when this ancient phase whale lived and conducted his studies in Purgatory was even more valuable!

Everything here was set up by this mysterious ancient figure. As outsiders, Ves and his fellow humans knew precious little about Purgatory, the Royal Tomb and the Garimel System.

Therefore, it was crucial for the expeditionary forces to obtain solid information about this Flesh Conqueror as the king fish called their supposed god.

Ves struggled to suppress his frown or displeasure.

He had bad experiences with religion. He looked down on any ignorant individual that believed that gods existed and that they should mindlessly worship their deities.

However, as Ves continued to study the Cerebral King, it didn't appear that the word god meant the same in human society.

Though the Cerebral King clearly looked up to the phase whale that it referred to as the Flesh Conqueror, Ves detected an ambitious and hungry streak from the ancient fish-whale.

Why this was so, he didn't know. He needed to gather more information before he could make a guess.

"Can... you explain why Oooruganioaus created you and other fish-whales? What did your god do in this space?"

OOORUGANIOAS IS CREATOR OF EVERYTHING.

"You already told me that, but why did he create everything?"

OOORUGANIOAS IS GOD.

"What does that mean?!"

The Cerebral King had become a lot less understandable to Ves ever since the massive fish-whale brought up its supposed god.

It was as if the king fish expected that mentioning god was enough to answer most questions!

Ves had to put increasingly more effort into suppressing his frustration at the Cerebral King's block-headed responses. It wasn't the fish-whale's fault for possessing so many stupid ideas about the phase whale that set everything up. The fish-whale race had never gone through enlightenment during all of its years.

In that regard, the fish-whale development potential was too low! The ability to learn, pass on knowledge and work towards improvement were some of the essential requirements to form a civilization.

Believing in a god and assuming that its existence would solve most problems was a major shortcoming!

If the king-fish was the sort of idiotic fanatic who prayed to its god all the time, then having a conversation with it wouldn't be fruitful.

However, the Cerebral King soon turned a bit more normal once it got over its compulsion to praise and worship its god.

Its massive eyes gazed over at the Everchanger. The king fish appeared to be weighing the outsiders.

It eventually made a decision.

COME.

Much to Ves' surprise, the Cerebral King turned around its massive body and headed over the the cluster of abandoned structures.

"Follow the king fish, Joshua." Ves quickly instructed. "Make sure you match its pace and avoid any abrupt movements. We don't want to spook any of the fish-whales.

"Roger that."

The Everchanger flew forward and steadily followed the king fish as the ancient alien creature headed towards one of the massive structures that looked like it had seen better times.

The partially-ruined structure matched the phase whale aesthetic. The organic composition along with the sheer scale of the building was impressive and exotic in an alien way. No human would have thought to build a structure in such a way.

The interior was dark as whatever light sources once lit up this structure had long faded away.

What was peculiar about the kilometers-long hall was that it was large enough to accommodate the Cerebral King but clearly couldn't fit the exaggeratingly large phase whales like the one whose skeleton now graced the Royal Tomb.

"What is this place?" Ves asked as he observed the interior of this fallen structure.

It was impossible to determine what this hall originally held. There were many signs that it had changed over the years. From crushed and ruined materials to old bloodstains, the fish-whales had definitely brawled here, and not just once!

There was a great sense of history in this unmaintained and unrepaired hall. The vacuum environment might have helped with preventing it from decaying entirely, but there were many other signs of disrepair.

The fish-whale radiated a light glow that illuminated the surroundings to an extent.

"Murals!"

Ves and the other members of Task Force Fisherman who had access to the transmitted footage looked astonished as they observed what the fish-whales had painted on one of the walls!

The rather crude and symbolic images made them feel as if they had all turned back in time.

The fish-whales evidently weren't good at art because their wall paintings were all simple and stylized.

They were also massive. The size of the structure was great so there was lots of room for a fish-whale to paint a story in the form of images.

"What is this?" Ves asked the king fish.

The creature displayed heavy emotions when it gazed at the murals. It held a strong sentimental relationship with the artwork that went beyond respecting the work of its predecessors.

"Wait a minute! Did you... paint these murals yourself?"

The massive creature made an affirmative gesture.

**MUST NOT FORGET.**

Ves looked at the artwork in a new light. For some reason, the fish-whale started from the right and worked leftwards. This was an odd order for humans but completely normal to the Cerebral King.

After observing it with the sensors of the Everchanger, he could pick up enough details to know that the earliest murals were a lot rougher, basic and cruder than the later ones.

It was actually quite helpful and exciting to be able to study the growth of the king fish's artistic ability.

Although the Cerebral King's artwork was still nowhere comparable to that of a professional human artist, Ves could see that the intelligent fish-whale was earnest about its work.

The king fish floated over to the earliest mural. Due to the rather basic and crude artwork, Ves wasn't able to figure out what it was trying to convey at first.

SANCTUARY.

"A sanctuary of what?"

SANCTUARY OF GOD. SANCTUARY OF OORUGANIOAS.

"Is this the home of the one you call the Flesh Conqueror."

SANCTUARY. KNOW NO MORE. ALL I KNOW IS GOD CREATED ME HERE.

Ves still couldn't figure out this meaning from the mural. It did not depict anything that was related to Purgatory. The art was so crude and abstract that only its creator knew what it was trying to convey!

The king fish moved to a second mural which was a little better in quality. The image tried to convey a massive, odd-looking lab that had to be the site where the Flesh Conqueror conducted its experiments!

A small and gray fish-whale appeared to be swimming around in an enclosed tank that was large enough to fit dozens of fish-whales.

If Ves was interpreting the scale of the objects in the mural correctly, then the mighty warship-sized Cerebral King used to be as small as a grunt fish!

He couldn't imagine how much the king fish had been through to reach its size and strength level.

While the mural regretfully did not depict the Flesh Conqueror in any way or form, what Ves did manage to spot was the presence of other fish-whales in the laboratory!

Numerous other captive fish-whales were swimming around in other water-filled cages.

Ves counted up to eight additional fish, and the view provided by the mural was woefully unable to show too many details due to the shortcomings of the artist.

However, seeing those other fish being held captive in these large aquariums made him a lot more interested in the identities of those early fish-whales.

"Who are they?" Ves mentally gestured towards the fish-whales stuck in cultivation tanks or whatever.

A sense of nostalgia and loss overcame the king fish. It was clear that the story of the second mural played an important role in its 'childhood'!

THEY ARE CHILDREN OF GOD. WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD. EACH MADE WITH FLESH OF GOD.



That did not require much thinking to interpret. Although the Cerebral King had dressed it up, the massive creature and those other fishes from the same batch were nothing but test subjects to the Flesh Conqueror!

Ves did not take the initiative to share this opinion. It was likely that correcting any of the stories that the Cerebral King held dear would invite an enormous backlash!

The king fish pointed at one of the fishes stuck in a cultivation tank.

TOUGH FLESH. INHERITED THE BODY OF GOD. NEARLY UNKILLABLE. DIED FIRST.

"What? How can this tough fish-whale die when it is supposed to be the toughest?"

The Cerebral King deflated by a small margin.

TOO STRONG. TOO CONFIDENT. CHALLENGED OTHER BUT LOST. STRENGTH CONSUMED DUE TO MANY ENEMIES.

That sounded familiar! That had to be the Swarmers!

"Are you referring to the fish-whales that have the most numbers?"

YES. HATEFUL. ENEMY.

The increasingly angry king fish glanced at one of the other cultivation tanks but did not get there yet. It still wanted to introduce the other notable fishes that used to be valuable test subjects to the Flesh Creator.

Fortunately, the creature did not lose all of its self-control and resumed explaining the other notable fish-whales.

FUSION. ENERGY WIELDER. POWERFUL. HOT.

This also sounded familiar! The fish-whales from the last two continents explored by Venerable Tusa were all capable of harming mechs from a distance.

Ves carefully spoke his next words. "Does this mean that this enemy is still alive?"

YES. HATEFUL. TRAITOR. ATTACKED EACH OTHER. TRAITOR.

"I see."

POWERFUL. STILL ALIVE. HARVEST ENERGY.

The Cerebral King shifted its massive body so that it could gaze upwards. The message slowly dawned upon Ves.

"You mean... this 'brother' of yours is still alive?!"

IS POWERFUL. IS LEADER. IS... KING.

"You mean this 'Fusion King' that controls the two energy-rich continents is the same one in this mural?!"

TRAITOR TO KIN. TRAITOR TO GOD. DEFILES TERRITORY OF GOD. BLOCKS ENERGY. FALLEN TERRITORY.

The information content of this speech was immense! The Cerebral King's hatred against the Fusion King was so big that it did not think about revealing his grievances, thereby giving the human visitors a much clearer image of what had happened in the past!

It appeared that the phase whale that created Purgatory had experimented upon creating new life forms and eventually succeeded with a batch of 9 test subjects.

At some point, Oooruganioaus disappeared or died, causing Purgatory to become an unattended garden.

Perhaps nothing much happened in the initial years, but over time the fish-whales living in the environment started to forget about the rules imposed by their creator.

In this context, the Fusion King was just the first to make a move!

After capturing the crucial energy-gathering continents where much of the filtered starlight of the blue supergiant landed upon, the ambitious fish-whale not only captured one of the strategic resources of the phase whale enclave, but also took advantage of its position to cut off the flow of energy towards the rest of Purgatory's various systems and facilities!

This was how much of the structures and other functions in this pocket space had collapsed.

If each of them were still intact and supplied with energy, Ves seriously doubted that his mech troops would have been able to enter this space so easily!

If this story was true, then Ves actually owed the Fusion King a lot for making Purgatory vulnerable to the point where outsiders could roam around without bumping into barriers.

He still had one important question, though.

"What is the Fusion King trying to accomplish by cutting off the energy flow to the rest of this pocket space?"

## Chapter 3859 Ethical Command

While Ves received a guided tour from the powerful but cordial king fish, the other members of Task Force Fisherman waited nervously as they hovered a respectful distance away from the Lab Continent.

The mech pilots had never put down their vigilance towards the Evolvers.

Different from the Swarmer fish-whales which were much more numerous and obviously weaker than a mech on average, the Evolver fish-whales were not as numerous, but each of them possessed the power to fight against two to dozens of mechs at once!

Certain champion figures among the Evolvers such as the bladed fish-whale and the silver fish-whale could even challenge expert mechs and gain the upper hand in a duel!

It couldn't be helped. Despite the long-term isolation and lack of development among the fish-whale societies Purgatory, the Evolvers still had far more time than the Golden Skull Alliance to accumulate its strength and develop effective combat solutions.

Even if their options were limited, they spent so many years on polishing and perfecting their battle solutions that they had become extremely skilled and familiar with the usage of their own powers!

When faced against this powerful indigenous alien battle force, the chances that Task Force Fisherman could defeat them in a straightforward confrontation was low!

Not even the presence of a powerful expert pilot such as Patriarch Reginald Cross or an amazing force multiplier such as Commander Casella Ingvar could make up for the difference in individual battle prowess.

Every mech pilot was fully aware that they had entered the other party's turf. While the Evolvers could count on the advantages of fighting on home ground, the members of the task force had to cope with the opposite and fight far away from any support from the expeditionary fleet!

Powerful helpers such as Venerable Davia Stark, Venerable Jannzi Larkinson and Venerable Brutus Wodin had been left behind in order to guard Fort Fishblood and the fleet back in the Garimel System.

Although many people like Commander Casella understood the necessity of retaining strength in their home base, she still felt that they had traveled to this place on a precarious basis. She at least wanted the Amaranto in her lineup so that she had an

asset that could quickly snipe the threats such as the phasewater-rich silver whale that were most likely able to block their retreat.

"The Everchanger and that big fish-whale have entered a structure." Imon Ingvar commented. "What if it's a trap?"

"It's fine." Vincent Ricklin confidently said. "Ves is an old driver. He knows how to handle situations like these, and he has Joshua by his side."

Imon grew concerned. "If this meeting really turns into a fight, we'll be hindered even more. The Everchanger is powerful, but it is only a single machine. It can't possibly hold its own against that powerful king fish."

"The Everchanger can't beat the king fish, but it should be fast enough to run away. Don't worry. The B-Man's weapon systems are all on standby and ready to open fire. As long as your sister passes on the order, my hybrid mech is ready to collapse the roof of that building!"

Although both of their mechs looked relaxed, that was just a show for the Evolver fish-whales. The Blade Chaser, the B-Man and many other mechs were just seconds away from ramping up to their battle mode.

The tension within the task force was still high despite remaining for several hours!

All of this did not escape the attention of Commander Casella Ingvar.

As the overall commander of the task force, she was not only able to tap into the data feeds transmitted by every friendly mech, but she was also able to feel out the state of the mechs and mech pilots more directly with the help of her Command Field.

The product of her cultivated talent combined with the purposefully-designed resonance characteristics of her masterwork expert mech had granted her an advantage that other battlefield commanders could even dream of. The more she piloted her expert mech, the more she was able to realize its potential.

In addition to that, she could even take more direct control of her subordinates, which was extremely handy at certain times though she felt a little bit ambivalent about it. Taking direct control meant superseding individual control, which went against the principles she abided by.

She knew there would come a time when she had to decide whether she needed to drive her mech pilots to their deaths in order to achieve a greater goal.

Casella didn't know what she would choose to do at that point.

Would she grant the Commandeered mech pilots back their autonomy so that they could choose for themselves whether to brave certain death?

Or would she just maintain control over them in order to make absolutely certain that they fell in line and acted their roles for the betterment of the Larkinson Clan.

The last thing she wanted was to deprive her mech pilots the choice to fight and possibly die in the line of duty!

"This is the burden of responsibility." She quietly sighed to herself.

THE PRESSURE IS GETTING TO YOU, CASELLA. YOU HAVE REMAINED TENSE AND ACTIVE FOR MANY HOURS AT A TIME. YOU MUST REST AND RESTORE YOUR MENTAL FACILITIES. LET COMMANDER MELKOR TAKE CHARGE OF THE TASK FORCE IN YOUR STEAD. HE ISN'T THE DEPUTY LEADER OF THIS TASK FORCE FOR NOTHING.

Casella twitched a smile. The great thing about piloting a living mech was that she was never alone. The Minerva stood out just like the Quint she had piloted in an earlier phase of her career. Compared to the cranky mech that had pushed her to expert pilot, the Minerva was a much better complement to her role and piloting style.

Since the Minerva was designed to be an expert command mech from its inception, it had already come into existence with a ready base of knowledge centered around leadership. Supposedly, Ves was responsible for instilling it into the expert mech.

Although Casella did not always agree with the Minerva's suggestions, she appreciated the opportunity to obtain a second opinion. It was especially great when she could gain it from a close partner that was not part of the chain of command. She did not have to worry about the discussions leaking out or affecting her relationships with her immediate subordinates.

"This is the most critical time, Minerva." She said while shaking her head. "Commander Melkor is a decent leader, but he is too slow and deliberate. Now, our patriarch has entered the other party's home ground. If the Evolver fish-whales turn on us for any reason, then extracting our patriarch from the clutches of the king fish and those other dangerous beasts will require a quick and decisive response."

As long as Casella remained alert, she could take action at any time with minimal delay. She could even flex her power and Commandeer every single mech in the task force at once so that they could move to rescue the patriarch with the most optimal movements!

Although she was beginning to struggle with the ethics and morality of letting mech pilots give up control over their own actions on the battlefield, she was not willing to hold herself back when it came to rescuing the nucleus of the Larkinson Clan.

If anything happened to Ves Larkinson, then most of her dreams of advancing further and seeing the Larkinson Clan bloom into an increasingly stronger family would fade!

For this reason, she pushed herself to remain attentive and alert.

"This is not a big deal." She said. "I have trained for this. Every mech pilot must be able to endure hardship on the field." willpower helped her focus on her goal. She did not have any thoughts about taking a break unless this situation dragged on for many more hours. Right now was too early for her to think about taking a break.

As the minutes went by, she did not forget about paying attention to the activities taking place on the Lab Continent.

Casella had access to a direct feed transmitted by the Everchanger, so she was fully aware of the current state of the expert hero mech and its important passengers.

What concerned her more was the behavior of the hundreds of Evolver fish-whales that had never stopped staring up at the mechs floating above their continent.

Despite belonging to two completely different species, the humans and fish-whales both regarded each other with plenty of vigilance.

As Casella zoomed in closer to observe the large but remarkably clear eyes of the different fish-whales, she thought she could sense numerous different emotions from them that wouldn't look out of place in human gazes.

She saw plenty of fear, suspicion, protectiveness and repulsion from them. Even if they never saw human mechs before, they could recognize the threat these metal machines posed to their lives.

However, what Casella found interesting was that the proportion of fish-whales that looked like they wanted to push the human mechs away were in the minority.

A lot of fish-whales held less negative emotions. If her ability to read their eyes and body language correctly, then there were plenty of them that were curious, challenging or even playful.

One of the fish-whales that was part of this second group was the bladed fish-whale.

This organic killing machine was larger than almost every other fish-whale. It needed all of that body mass to support its unusual fighting approach and withstand all of the forces acting against the machine.

Though the bladed fish-whale had retracted its characteristic bone blades into its body, it was still able to project a dangerous presence.

The more Casella looked at the fish, the more it attracted her attention. There was something of a spark in the bladed fish-whale's eyes. She did not like the look in its alien eyes.

"Alert! One of the fish is moving in our direction!"

Much to Casella's surprise, the bladed fish-whale took action on its own. The large beast ascended from its place and flew directly towards Task Force Fisherman, making no secret of its intended destination!

"Inform the patriarch! Spread out your formations! Do not come within 200 meters of the bladed fish-whale! Ranged mechs, stand by to fire warning shots. If the bladed fish-whale insists upon getting closer, then try your best to avoid getting close while not allowing it to push you away from the Lab Continent. Right now, our highest priority is to preserve the Everchanger's escape route!"

The reaction from the mechs clearly showed that they were reacting to the bladed fish-whale's actions. Everyone tried to figure out what it was doing. Was the powerful fish-whale closing the distance because it was curious, or was it preparing to launch an attack by getting into range?

The formation of mechs quickly adjusted in response to this unannounced and unanticipated approach.

While tight formations were ideal when fighting against the Swarmers, it was better for the mechs to spread out when fighting against the Evolvers.

The fish-whales of the Evolution Kingdom had spent a long time strengthening their ability to kill tightly-packed enemies en masse. A lot of their ranged fish-whales were able to bombard wide areas while their melee fish-whales could easily fight against multiple enemies at a time.

Of the latter, the bladed fish-whale was the most exemplary fighter among them! Its organic bone blades were so hard and sharp that the ordinary mechs in the task force wouldn't be able to resist if they relied on their armor systems alone!

"It's slowing down!"

"Remain alert and do not let down your vigilance!"

"Look at the fish-whales behind their champion. They're moving towards us as well!"

"Our patriarch needs to ask the king fish what the hell is going on! Have we truly fallen out with the Evolvers?!"



"The patriarch tells us not to worry! The king fish hasn't shown any hostility towards humans so far, and it enjoys a lot of respect among its subordinates."

'Are you sure about that? Because it looks as if these fish-whales have other ideas!'

## Chapter 3860 True Man

The bladed fish-whale stopped roughly halfway between the task force and the Lab Continent. It continued to hover in place while directing an ambiguous look towards the human visitors.

The other fish-whales that had come closer as a group slowed down as well. It didn't look as if they were ready to launch an all-out offensive at the moment.

While this reassured the mech pilots to an extent, neither side were comfortable with the

"What... is it doing?"

"I don't know. None of us can talk in fish-whale language."

A lot of tension and confusion emerged as the members of the Task Force wondered what the bladed fish-whale was doing.

This precarious situation continued until the Bolvos Rage suddenly flew forward.

"What are you doing, patriarch?" Commander Casella frowned.

"I know what it wants. It wants to test our strength. Let's oblige the fish-whale."

"Are you crazy, sir?! We are in a high-stakes situation right now. Patriarch Ves has the situation under control, but that might change if your actions cause our relations with the Evolvers to deteriorate!"

Patriarch Reginald made a dismissive snort. "I will take responsibility for whatever happens, but I will not let this challenge go unanswered. This fish has the eyes of a warrior. It wishes to test its strength against us while also observing our combat prowess in return. The relationship between our two groups will become a lot clearer once this fight is over. Trust me on this. I have experienced similar scenarios back in the Garlen Empire."

"This isn't Vicious Mountain, patriarch! This is Purgatory, an alien phase whale enclave that is occupied by a completely alien race! How can you be certain that the bladed fish-whale is challenging us to a duel?!"

"I just know. Call it a warrior's intuition. This bladed fish-whale is an all-out fighting enthusiast. It won't stop bothering us until we oblige it with a fight."

There were so many things wrong with this situation that Commander Casella was tempted to call the Everchanger back so that the task force could retreat from the Lab Continent!

The main concern she held was that a possible duel could easily cause the situation to spiral out of control.

There were many written and unwritten rules surrounding duels in human society. Since humanity is so diverse, the way that duels between mechs were fought also differed from place to place.

This problem was even worse for cross-species duels!

A fight between two combatants from dramatically different species and cultures could easily lead to dangerous misunderstandings. Who knew if the fish-whales would take offense to an attack that humans considered acceptable.

In addition, when was the duel supposed to end? The fish-whales might find it common to fight to the death.

No matter whether the Bolvos Rage gained the upper hand or the bladed fish-whale pressed its opponent to its limits, Commander Casella did not want the Bolvos Rage lose its battle effectiveness before it participated in any proper fights!

At the very least, they needed Patriarch Ves to come forward and negotiate the rules with the king fish.

Without defining and agreeing to a common set of rules surrounding the duel, the upcoming confrontation between the two champions could easily lead to one of them going too far and dealing permanent damage to their dueling opponent.

As Commander Casella frantically waited for Patriarch Ves to mediate the duel on behalf of the task force, she was shocked when the bladed fish-whale and the Bolvos Rage charged at each other without consulting anyone else. They just went at each other as if they were bulls who saw red!

"PATRIARCH REGINALD CROSS! Disengage from the bladed fish-whale and abort the duel. You are initiating an unsanctioned duel against an alien group that we are contacting for the first time."

"I know! That is what makes this so exciting, haha!" Patriarch Reginald laughed as his expert mech's resonance shield reflected his battle lust! "You don't need to be afraid of this bladed fish-whale. It's not overly hostile towards us. It is just unconvinced of our strength. Once I beat some sense in this bony tuna, it will behave a lot more respectfully."

"You don't know that, patriarch! You are ascribing human emotions and behavior patterns onto an alien!"

Patriarch Reginald closed all of his communication channels, making it abundantly clear that he was not interested in continuing with this argument. Besides, now that the duel had commenced, he had to direct all of his attention on defeating the bladed fish-whale. In his opinion, there was no point in talking to Casella anymore!

"This clan leader..." Casella looked incredibly irked.

If there was one thing that Commander Casella couldn't stand, it was willful mech pilots who completely disregarded the overall situation! These uncontrollable factors that constantly gave in to their urges presented lots of headaches to a commanding officer that liked to control as many variables as possible on the battlefield.

She did not believe that Patriarch Reginald was stupid enough to be ignorant about the stakes. Without establishing at least one alliance with a local power, the expeditionary forces had no choice but to limit their movements around Fort Fishblood and no further.

Trying to perform operations elsewhere was incredibly dangerous because the mechs were too far away from friendly lines. . com

It would have been better if the spatial portal was large enough to fit a carrier vessel, but since that wasn't the case, the expeditionary forces had to be a lot more careful where they moved.

If they could turn the Lab Continent into a safe harbor, then that would make it a lot safer to engage in any subsequent operations in this pocket space.

In addition, the only way for them to succeed in any attack against the Phase Kingdom was to work together with the Evolution Kingdom.

What if the chances of establishing an alliance with the local fish-whales floundered because of Patriarch Reginald's reckless actions? She wouldn't be able to provide Ves with an explanation!

However, when Ves heard about what had happened, he surprisingly didn't voice much disapproval.

"I'm busy trying to get closer to the king fish, so I'll keep it short." He transmitted back to the Minerva. "We both know what Patriarch Reginald is like as a pilot and a leader. He's the strongest individual combat asset of the Golden Skull Alliance and has a lot of say due to that. He's akin to a force of nature. We can't stop him when he insists on entering Purgatory and we cannot prevent him from initiating this childish duel."

"What are you trying to say, sir?" Commander Casella frowned.

"Strength comes at a price. We can't control Patriarch Reginald, so why bother? We need to accept that he will go maverick and follow his own whims at times. As strange as it might sound, not all of his actions are stupid. He can't change the way he is but I believe that he has learned from the lessons of the past. When he claims that the bladed fish-whale is trying to determine the pecking order by initiating a duel, I think he might be right. Let him fight on his behalf. The Evolvers need to learn how strong our mechs can be, and there is no one better to demonstrate humanity's might than our only high-tier expert pilot."

Ves made a few good points, but Commander Casella still found it disturbing how easily they were supposed to tolerate Patriarch Reginald's lack of foresight and impulse control as if they were just camping instead of exploring an extremely dangerous and highly unfamiliar pocket space!

"I have talked with the Cerebral King long enough to learn a bit how they live and what they value." Ves quickly explained. "It is best to see the Evolution Kingdom as a primitive tribe. The local culture is fairly simple and based on strength. The fish-whales aren't sophisticated at all and probably don't have a good idea what the concept of etiquette even means. You can just act directly as long as your actions are not out of proportion. Do you understand what I am saying? If the bladed fish-whale takes the initiative to present its cheek to get attacked, then just punch the big fish. I bet you that both humans and fish-whales will all have a laugh at the end."

Commander Casella was mortified. She had read a few books on diplomacy or two. She was certain that they did not advocate coming to blows with foreign cultures during the first meeting!

Patriarch Reginald completely disregarded the carefully crafted diplomatic plan and strategies that the experts had formulated after spending many hours of their time.

Although the plan wasn't fast or exciting, it accounted for many different scenarios which helped minimize the risks.

She couldn't understand why Ves was so willing to derail this safe and steady plan after he had only spent a short time talking to the king fish. Whatever he learned from the alien leader during this interval was no guarantee that the expeditionary forces had already figured out the Evolvers!

While she lamented the change of course, most of her subordinates didn't worry as much as she did. They had become completely engrossed in the first real duel against a mech and a fish-whale!

Of course, the Evolver fish-whales were incomparable to the Swarmer fish-whales. The strongest among the former were elites that could readily compete against expert pilots while the latter only consisted of different degrees of cannon fodder!

Still, no one knew for certain which combatant would be able to win this bout. Neither side looked weak. Each of them clearly possessed their own strong points, but since the human forces had never directly fought against the Evolver fish-whales, it was difficult to make accurate comparisons.

Imon held a lot of confidence towards the only high-tier expert pilot of the Golden Fleet Alliance.

"I bet that the Cross Patriarch will win with ease in fifteen minutes. The Bolvos Rage is armed with ranged weapons while that big fish-whale doesn't have any ranged attacks to speak of. Even if the Bolvos Rage is a medium mech, it is the best expert mech in our fleet, so its speed is not low! The fish-whales have never excelled at speed and it's clear to see that this big fat fish is not the sort that is good at racing."

Even if he wasn't as smart and studious as her sister, the recently-advanced expert pilot was not stupid!

"Are you kidding?" Vincent Ricklin vehemently disagreed. "This fight is already a win for the bladed fish-whale. While I think you are right that the Bolvos Rage can endlessly kite the slower and bigger bladed fish-whale around, who says that Patriarch Reginald Cross will fight in such a dishonorable manner? This is a man's fight! The only way we can truly convince the fish-whales is to beat them at what they are best at! If we take the initiative to avoid the bladed fish-whale's strongest means of attack, doesn't that send a message that we are afraid of the Evolvers and can only rely on despicable means to cheat our way to victory?"

"Who says the fish-whales think that taking advantage of an opponent's openings is a sign of weakness? The Evolvers do this all the time towards the Swarmers! In my opinion, fighting in a clever manner and using your strength to target the enemy's weak points is true virtue!"

Vincent contemptuously shook his head. "That sounds nice, but I have spent enough time to know that Patriarch Reginald is too prideful to resort to such a cheap strategy. Maybe you need to resort to every trick in the book to win an actual battle, but this is different! This is a sacred duel! Just look at his Bolvos Rage? Does it look like it is slowing down or turning away? No! He's diving directly towards the bladed fish-whale like a real man should! He even holstered his shotgun so that he could take out his new mech saber!"

This move was enough to show Patriarch Reginald's determination to win this duel according to his ideas!

"He's a true man!"