

Chapter 891 Chasing a Bone

The Belisarius didn't linger for long. For all of its amazing capabilities, the mech designers who developed this extravagantly expensive mech focused their full efforts on enhancing its direct battle capabilities.

While Ves guessed that it possessed some stealth detection capabilities, the mech likely didn't excel in this area. It was also a question whether Venerable Foster activated those systems in the first place, as they drained a considerable amount of energy.

The scavenger-like Flagrant Vandals shouldn't have access to stealth vehicles anyway.

Twenty tense minutes went by as the Belisarius slowly drifted out of sight. Even then, the occupants waited for two full hours until Miss Calabast finally lifted the lockdown. The stealth crawler climbed back up its legs and its antigrav modules began to emit an antigrav field that covered the entire vehicle.

After cautiously emerging from their hiding spot and scanning their surroundings, Miss Calabast finally felt relieved enough to resume their journey to the Starlight Megalodon.

Over the next couple of days, the stealth crawler occasionally bumped into Vesian search parties. They never encountered the Belisarius again, but they did stumble upon the Hostland Warrior version of a breakdown mech.

"Seems they have the same idea as Mayra back then." Ves noted as they uncomfortably hunkered inside the unmoving stealth crawler. Calabast always deactivated the antigrav modules during these instances. Nonetheless, that didn't stop Ves from dissecting the breakdown-proof mech the Hostland Warriors cobbled up. "Seems to be a tiger mech. While it consumes a bit more

power, it's also capable of pouncing with greater strength than Mayra's Asteria design. What do you think, Ketis?"

Mentioning Mayra briefly caused Ketis to flicker with pain, but she bravely suppressed her sorrow.

Ves did not wish for Ketis to get bogged down by her regrets. He deliberately pushed her to use her mech design ability to use in order to keep her from wallowing in her darker thoughts.

"The tiger mech they designed shows that the Vesians aren't too worried about power consumption. Did they manage to reverse engineer the Vandal attempts at developing a god crystal generator?"

That would be extremely bad news if the Vesians cracked the secret. Didn't Chief Dakkon insure all of the god crystal generators would be dismantled. The Vandals also arranged their god crystals to be rendered useless by infecting them with the polluting energies of their murky crystal.

By all rights, the Vesians shouldn't have been able to reconstruct a god crystal generator.

"The Vesians brought a lot more power generators along than your expedition." Miss Calabast threw out. "While it doesn't match the output of your god crystals, it still leaves them with a sufficient amount of energy to empower their specially-designed tiger mechs."

The Vesians came better prepared, in other words. They didn't possess the same urgency to develop an alternative source of power as the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Ves pointed out another pertinent fact. "We also have to take into account that the earlier battle downed a lot of mechs on both sides. Even if the Vesians are able to salvage and restore a hundred of so mechs, they'll still be left with fewer mechs than they started with. The damage our mechs had dealt on their

mechs but especially mech pilots is extremely considerable. This means their total energy expenditure is also lower than before."

Now that the Vesians defeated their strongest rivals, anyone else that reached the edge of the red zone stood no chance against their martial prowess. The presence of the Belisarius alone provided them with an absolute advantage against the ramshackle pirate and private sector outfit mechs that managed to make it this far. They essentially didn't have to worry about the competition threatening their absolute hold over the edge of the red zone.

This problem quietly concerned Ves over the days. He couldn't figure out how he'd be able to escape this planet without relying on Calabast's assistance. Though Ves found her to be an amiable woman so far, there was no telling when she'd stab him in the back.

If there was anything he learned these days, it was that he should always prepare an escape route if things went sour. Right now, Ves felt immensely stifled by the fact that he only had her promises to go on when it came to evacuating from this planet.

It was impossible for him to cross tens of thousands of kilometers on this heavy gravity planet! Even if he devolved into a savage like a wildling and lived off the land, he would still take ten years or more to cross this vast distance.

For better or worse, his only hope lay in Calabast keeping her word. Ves hated relying verbal promises, especially since he was the disadvantaged party in this exchange, but what could he do?

Fortunately, Miss Calabast seemed to need his services for some reason so he still possessed some leverage. The problem for Ves was what would occur after she got what she wanted.

Even with the unfathomable immunity that Ves exerted against the breakdown effect, the stealth crawler finally gave up the ghost on the fourth day. Due to all the delays, they still needed to traverse thirty more kilometers to reach the safe zone.

It sounded like a day or two of walking away, but the craggy and hazardous terrain meant the final stretch was an arduous journey.

"Without the stealth crawler's maneuvering capabilities, we'll be lucky to cross this distance in four days." Miss Calabast sighed as she slipped her own pack over her shoulder. She brought a lot more supplies than Ves or Ketis. "What are you waiting for? Let's move!"

Ves still stared at the broken down vehicle and itched to take it apart. If he could study some of its stealth mechanisms, his understanding of this field might make a small leap.

"Going on foot is rather dangerous with all of the hazards in our way." He said. "Just the residual radiation alone can partially penetrate our suits. Isn't it better to have this vehicle shielding us? Let me try and repair it. I think I can get it up and running in two hours."

"It's wrecked." Calabast declared. "I may not be a technician, but it's quite clear that there's no way you can repair this crawler with handheld tools!"

"You won't know if I don't try. You may be an awesome superspy or something, but you don't know what a mech designer is capable of. We're not limited to tinkering around with mechs." He grinned.

Miss Calabast showed some discomfort at his argument. She said something similar a few days ago, and now Ves used that same argument against her. The only thing Ves didn't know was if she was pretending to be upset or if she was actually upset.

"Ves has a touch with machines." Ketis vouched for him. She even gave him a thumbs up. "C'mon, let's give it a try. I'm not looking forward to crossing this terrain on foot at all. Not only will it slow us down, but we'll be in huge trouble if our gravitic backpacks start failing."

The breakdown effect only grew stronger the closer they got. Merely staying in this spot for a week would probably wreck their gravitic backpacks for sure if the strange immunity field didn't play a role.

Calabast showed some actual doubt now. "One hour. No more. We can't linger here for long. The crawler is too exposed now that we can't engage its stealth systems."

That wasn't good enough for Ves. Even if he couldn't fix the stealth crawler, he still wanted to study its inner workings to deepen his understanding on how to apply stealth tech. It wasn't every day he came across a mostly-intact stealth vehicle!

"Two hours." He said firmly. "No less. I won't step away before that no matter what happens. You'll have to pry me from this stealth crawler if you want to leave too soon."

Ves and Miss Calabast stared at each other's eyes. He may not be able to fathom Calabast's depths, but when it came to mechs and machines, he firmly held his ground.

After half a minute of staring, Calabast acquiesced first. She let out a deep breath and shook her head. "Friggin' mech designers. You lot always slobber over shiny pieces of tech. You're worse than dogs chasing after bones in that regard. Fine! Two hours it is, but you better get this piece of junk back to work!"

He didn't bother thanking her for the opportunity and set down his pack. He pulled out some tools and placed them on the rocky soil in order to have them ready.

"Ketis, come and assist me. We don't have any bots at our disposal that can lift any stuff, so I'll have to ask you to do that in their stead."

"Are you equating me to a bot?!" She yelled.

"You can look at what I'm doing when you're not lifting anything. I'll even explain some things."

Her mood immediately swung around. "Oh, why didn't you say so? Can you teach me how this stealth stuff works?"

"That's not something you can pick up on a single day. Even I needed a month of study to decipher the basics. Still, I can teach you some principles. It's up to you whether you understand the gist."

He proceeded to lift his multitool from a slot in his Earth Ant in order to open up the engine compartment.

It took half an hour to partially disassemble the stealth crawler. This phase took quite long because the measly tools that Ves had at his disposal slowed down the process. He frequently needed to assist Ketis in lifting up some of the heavier components as well.

When Ves saw the guts of the stealth crawler for the first time, he sighed in admiration. While the vehicle was by no means a mech, the internal architecture looked like a highly-optimized piece of work.

"A team of experts must have designed this stealth crawler." Ves uttered in admiration. "There's little individuality left in its design, but all of its capabilities are brought to their most optimal state."

Miss Calabast crossed her arms. "What does that matter? Just get this crawler back to working condition!"

The stealth crawler didn't possess any X-Factor or any notable spirituality. Its design flavor leaned towards efficiency and reliability rather than power or performance. These traits reminded Ves of Master Olson, but he didn't recognize her in this work.

A team of highly capable vehicle designers should have designed this craft. Ves did not detect any principles associated with mechs. Unfortunately, the clean and efficient design left almost no unique design flairs that Ves could have used to trace down its origins.

No matter. Ves wasn't out to figure out where it came from and who designed this craft.

He slowly identified the major problems that prevented the stealth crawler from continuing to traverse the terrain. The highly compact engine was one of the major weaknesses of this vehicle. The power reactor also exhibited some problems.

None of those obvious problems hindered him in any way. Ves only worried about about the problems he might have missed.

Still, he didn't forget what he came for. Besides inspecting the components responsible for moving the stealth crawler, Ves also meticulously studied the parts related to its stealth capabilities.

"Look at this part! This is the good stuff!"

When he felt somewhat generous, he pointed at a specific component and explained to Ketis what they did and how they did it. When broken down this way, it was a lot easier to explain to her how stealth vehicles worked.

Miss Calabast on the other hand threw her hands up at all of the technical jargon being thrown around. She left the mech designers to their devices and opted to patrol the surrounding area. It would be disastrous if a Vesian mech snuck up to them while they were out in the open.

Two hours later, Ves and Ketis neatly assembled the stealth crawler back together. Despite their lack of heavy-duty tools, Ves easily managed to perform some patchwork repairs.

While it didn't restore the crawler to its peak condition by any means, it shouldn't be a problem to rely on it for another day or two.

"Here you go, Calabast. Two hours, no more, no less."

"It better work." She grumbled.

Surprisingly, the stealth crawler came online without any major hindrances. Ves successfully repaired the vehicle!

Chapter 892 Constricted Majesty

Ves obtained a lot of gains from his brief two-hour study. He learned a bit more on how the stealth crawler managed to hide itself from detection.

More importantly, however, Ves also managed to deduce the weaknesses of this application of stealth tech. More than that, he also deciphered some of the holes that circumvented these means.

These loopholes not only worked on the stealth crawler, but any other application of stealth that worked on the same technological principles. Ves guessed with a high degree of confidence that the infiltrator suits that Calabast and her operatives made use of shared the same principles!

As long as Ves tuned his stealth detector gadget with settings that exploited these loopholes, it might very well be possible for him to detect Calabast and her invisible bastards when they thought they were sneaky.

This gain may very well exceed his other gains. To be frank, Ves didn't learn all that new in terms of theory, but his insights in how to apply his knowledge on stealth tech made considerable leaps.

In any case, fortune blessed their journey as the stealth crawler made it all the way to the presumed border of the safe without a hitch.

They weren't alone.

The Vesian breakdown-proof mech pretty much parked themselves around perimeter to catch any Vandal or Swordmaiden stragglers that miraculously made it all the way through. They truly made a lot of effort in trying to prevent their mortal enemies from reaching the Starlight Megalodon.

Fortunately, the stealth crawler swaggered its way past the Vesian patrol without a hitch. Miss Calabast placed a lot of confidence in the stealth technology utilized by her organization, showing no hesitation in passing less than five-hundred meters from the nearest Vesian mech.

Ves and Ketis pretty shook in their suits of combat armor because the enemy mech could have easily noticed something amiss at that range. Fortunately, the stealth crawler did not leave behind any overt tracks as it calmly crawled forward.

"That was close!" Ketis exclaimed.

Ves tried to calm his shaking heart. "I think the only reason why we made it through is because those Vesian mechs aren't using the most advanced sensors and processors. A more modern mech would have noticed some environmental discrepancies."

Nonetheless, the safe zone finally came within reach. Ves studied the projection, but the stealth crawler's optical sensors only detected the vague outline of a colossal capital ship looming over everything in the vicinity.

The hazy contours of the Starlight Megalodon resembled a long and cylindrical whale that seemed to stretch out from one end of the horizon to the other. The length of the Starlight Megalodon absolutely matched many medium-sized cities, and though her width and height were shorter in order to present a narrow profile in battle, she still possessed a humongous amount of internal volume.

To call her a floating city fortress in space would be an understatement!

"Most space stations never match her size!"

Truly, a battleship more than eleven kilometers long served as the apex battle weapon of the human race. The human battleship defined the Age of Conquest and paved the way for humanity's rapid expansion and tyrannical self-destruction. They became the hammer in which humanity beat up the aliens and themselves to a pulp.

Nowadays, only the Common Fleet Alliance and the Mech Trade Association commissioned battleships these days.

It sounded strange that the MTA made use of warships up to and including battleships, but they wouldn't be able to throw their weight around in the galaxy without the strength to back up their threats.

Yet no matter how well the MTA designed their battleships, they couldn't hold a candle to the largest and most powerful naval organization in the galaxy. The CFA truly knew their battleships, and even if the Starlight Megalodon was three-hundred years past her prime, she could still crack planets if she chose to. The evidence suggested that she miraculously retained some functionality over the years.

From this distance, the stealth crawler's sensors could also see the dense streams of astral winds escaping from a very visible crack near the stern of the battleship. Ves never got tired at the sight as nobody figured out how her

FTL drives managed to sustain such a phenomena without degrading or breaking down.

FTL drives notoriously demanded a lot of maintenance, especially after heavy use or when they aged a couple of decades. By all rights, the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives shouldn't have worked for so long.

"Let's enter."

The stealth crawler crossed over the invisible boundary claimed by the Starlight Megalodon. Just a few seconds after they entered, a pale beam instantly struck the entire vehicle.

Everything stopped.

The stealth crawler stopped. The occupants inside stopped. Their perception stopped. It was as if they were frozen in time!

A nearby Vesian tiger mech noticed the stasis beam and became alarmed. Just as it turned around to face the strange vehicle that managed to sneak to the safe zone from under their nose, a tractor beam reached out from the distance and lifted up the stealth crawler.

As soon as the crawler gained sufficient height, the tractor beam swiftly retracted the captured vehicle straight towards the Starlight Megalodon.

An uncertain amount of time later, the tractor beam placed down the stealth crawler at a clearing right before the hull of the battleship. The stasis beam that froze the stealth crawler also disengaged.

"What happened?!"

"How did we get so close all of a sudden?!"

To the occupants, the transition immediately threw them off balance. While Miss Calabast benefited from prior warning, both Ves and Ketis felt as if someone robbed them of their memories.

This was a highly unpleasant sensation!

"Calm down, you overdramatic mech designers! Nothing happened besides getting dragged over alongside the Starlight Megalodon. We're here."

The gravity of the situation dawned upon the two. Indeed, as soon as the hatch opened up and everyone stepped out, Ves looked up at the aged but mostly intact hull of the Starlight Megalodon in earnest.

Her metallic dark blue hull plating long lost its shine due to age and corrosion. What coating the battleship used to be covered with long wore out from millenia of exposure to the elements. This also wiped away most of the markings and symbols painted on her hull.

The only markings that remained were those embossed in her hull. Ves easily made out the giant words that proudly declared her identity.

STARLIGHT MEGALODON

"At least we got the right battleship." Ketis joked as she admired the battleship in her own way.

After so much time and so much travel, Ves almost couldn't believe he finally reached the fabled lost CFA capital ship.

What struck him the most about the Starlight Megalodon wasn't her immense size, nor the immense corvette-sized gun turrets. As an example of human engineering at its greatest height, Ves already expected the battleship to be an imposing colossus built for war.

"This is a battleship with history."

The Starlight Megalodon radiated an aura of age, majesty, dominance and invincibility. She possessed a faint, mixed but highly complex blend of meanings normally associated with historical relics.

The most historic machine that Ves had ever seen was the Larkinson Ancestor's personal mech. Back at Rittersberg, Ves never knew that the history and experiences of a machine could accumulate its X-Factor.

Yet even that impressive historical mech was a toy in front of the Starlight Megalodon.

Although only three-hundred years had passed in the outside galaxy, the surface of the planet experienced three-thousand years. Not only had the survivors of the crew spent their entire lives around the crashed battleship, many generations of their descendants must have lived their lives in the vicinity as well.

All of their accumulated beliefs and superstition continued to pile up on the Starlight Megalodon, causing it to become more than just a crashed vessel. It became a totem of belief, a container of spirituality ascribed by those who lived in this region.

Ves became intoxicated by her multifaceted X-Factor. All of his original mech designs may possess stronger and more concise X-Factors, but they were ultimately artificial constructs conjured up by his own imagination. Even if Ves considered his imagination to be vivid and rich, he was only a single individual.

His individual imagination could never surpass the imagination of millions of humans. This was the strength of a group!

Just witnessing the spiritual splendor of the battleship advanced his understanding of the X-Factor. The insights he gained from this glimpse alone almost made the entire trip worth it. Ves even developed some ideas on how to improve or replace his old Triple Division technique.

"Those constructs.. What is that?" Ketis asked as she gestured at the extra 'additions' built alongside the hull of the Starlight Megalodon.

Ves stared at the constructs and noted that they looked like primitive sand structures. It was as if someone built a partial sandcastle around the massive hull. The distribution of the sand structures was fairly random, and besides the open windows Ves couldn't tell anything else besides that they used to housed tens of thousands of people.

"Thoses sand structures are the principal reason why the Starlight Megalodon encountered a mishap three-hundred years ago." Miss Calabast smirked.

"What you're looking at is the remains of a highly advanced sandman mothership."

Sandmen!

Ves and Ketis practically jumped, but Miss Calabast quickly calmed them down.

"There's no danger here! The sandmen have all been rendered inert down to their sandman admiral. Right now, what you're seeing is their carcass. Over the years, the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon hollowed them out and turned them into living space."

If the crew of the Starlight Megalodon didn't see fit to remove all of the sand that constricted the battleship inside and out like an infectious disease, then the threat they posed must have long been gone by now.

Aeon Corona VII would have been a very different planet if the sandman mothership defeated the battleship and all of their crew.

Still, the knowledge that they were standing besides an immense sandman amalgamation didn't put them at ease. Most sandmen motherships posed little threat to a CFA warship, but certain sandmen admirals grew and learned to such an extent to where they became incredibly formidable.

A sandman mothership that dared to attack a CFA battleship and succeeded in constricting her to this extent should not be weak!

"If the Starlight Megalodon is riddled from inside-out with sandmen remains, is there anything left inside?" Ketis asked.

Miss Calabast snorted. "Look at the size of her. There's no way a single sandman mothership can crush her insides. We're fairly confident that the core compartments aren't affected. As for the outer compartments, perhaps thirty to fifty percent are grinded down with sand, but there's plenty of goodies left in the remaining compartments."

Her explanation put down their apprehensions. While Ves still questioned how such a formidable sandman mothership died all of a sudden, this wasn't the time to puzzle over these questions.

Miss Calabast led them alongside the battleship but didn't approach her yet. Ancient rusted prefab structures surrounded the crash site. Obviously, this area used to house a lot of people, but that was in the past. Not a single human emerged from these eerily empty structures.

When was the last time someone lived in this settlement?

After ten minutes of walking, the three finally came within view of some familiar mechs.

"There are Asterias and Enduring Protectors up ahead!" Ketis exclaimed!

Ves spotted the mechs poking above the structures up ahead and quickly counted their number. "All the mechs of the exploration party and the follow-up party that are unaccounted for are present! They're safe!"

Seeing those mechs dormant but unharmed and without a single scratch put down some of his worries. It seemed the Vandals and Swordmaidens trapped in the safe zone hadn't encountered any hazards that posed a threat to their mechs.

The huge, hulking form of Qilanxo resting close to the breakdown-proof mechs also reassured him somewhat.

Both Ketis and Ves eagerly wanted to reunite with possibly the only survivors of the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces.

"Can we go and meet our comrades?"

Miss Calabast casually gestured them forward. "Go ahead. That's why I brought you here. You should understand their situation first. They're kind of stuck right now. Once you become acquainted with their difficulties, you'll see why it's in your best interest to cooperate with us. I'll pick you up after twenty-four hours. Don't tell them about our existence. It's for their own good."

She sounded like she wasn't worried at all that Ves might possibly renege his end of the deal. This implied that Ves, Ketis and the other Flagrant Swordmaidens trapped in the safe had no way to progress inside the battleship without Calabast's assistance.

"We'll see." Ves replied.

Chapter 893 Recruitment Test

The moment they walked towards the collection of mechs situated closer to the Starlight Megalodon's hull, Ves and Ketis suddenly tripped and floated in the air.

"What the?!"

"The gravity! It's normalized!"

The two hadn't expected to walk into an area affected by an antigrav field. This existing field superimposed with the effects of their active gravitic backpacks, causing them to turn virtually weightless!

Ves quickly calmed down once he realized what had happened. "Gently dial down the power of your gravitic backpack. Don't do it instantly or you'll drop like a brick."

Their armored forms slowly descended into the ground as the gravity affecting them gradually increased until it matched the gravity of Old Earth. The little jaunt in the air discomfited them both, but they managed to retain the contents of their stomachs.

It was still unpleasant to be thrown into the air like that when they didn't expect such a thing. For a moment, Ves believed that Miss Calabast deliberately sent them ahead without a warning as a prank.

"That woman has a sense of humor." He muttered.

"Next time, I'll smack her face." Ketis shamelessly boasted.

The antigrav field emitted by the Starlight Megalodon reduced one of their worries. It wasn't a good idea to keep their gravitic backpacks active all the time. Not only did they expend a lot of energy, they also wore them out through continuous active use. It would have been disastrous if the gravitic backpacks malfunctioned all of a sudden.

The two resumed their short journey towards their comrades. They passed through broad corridors of old prefab structures. Ves peeked through the windows and saw nothing but empty, dust-laden rooms.

Ves found it eerie that he couldn't find any furniture and objects inside that could tell him what kind of people used to live here. It didn't seem like the previous occupants evacuated this sprawling settlement in haste. It seemed more as if someone calmly cleaned up the place and threw out the trash a few hundred or thousand years ago.

"The people who lived here... what happened to them? How come no one's left?" Ketis asked the obvious question.

Ves wondered about that as well. "Cities are raised and abandoned all the time in human history. They're usually forced out of their old homes when faced with a calamity."

A thriving settlement of hundreds of thousands or even millions of people became nothing but abandoned ruins over time. Ves found the emptiness to be a huge shame.

They walked around the corner and finally spotted their comrades. The moment the pair of mech designers walked into view of the members of the exploration and follow-up party huddling in some sort of abandoned park, both sides stopped and stared at each other.

"Mr. Larkinson?" Captain Orfan rose up from the dirt.

"Ketis?" Lieutenant Dise called. "Why are the two of you here?"

While the exploration members all became befuddled at the new presence, Ves and Ketis all stared at what their comrades were doing. The dug-up trenches, the plants placed inside of them and the pulverized contents of nutrient packs sprinkled on top of them made for an unimaginable sight.

"Are you turning this park into a farm?!" Ketis called out.

Lieutenant Dise grimaced. "It's a long story."

The appearance of the pair of mech designers raised everyone's spirits, but the news they brought spoiled the reunion.

In the next hour, Ves huddled with the hundred-odd members of the two parties that ventured into the safe zone and filled them in on the disaster that struck the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

He activated his military-issued comm and projected a portion of the footage of the battle against the Meandering Monkeys and the Hostland Warriors. The

appearance of the Belisarius and the ease in which it tore apart the Vandal and Swordmaidens mech all led to a round of cursing and sorrow.

The outcome of the battle and the fate in store for those who remained caused many of them to be wracked with grief. Though they were too far from the battle to experience it as it happened, they had no reason to doubt the news. Ves even uploaded the data of the battle to everyone's comms so they could study the records by themselves.

The more the Vandals and Swordmaidens watched the footage, the more they became angry and despondent. Even if Ves didn't show them the butchering that surely happened afterwards, they knew the score as well as anyone. If they were in the shoes of the Vesians, they would have done the same.

"So many of sisters are dead now!"

"We've lost our way out! There's no rescue awaiting us outside! We're stranded!"

Captain Orfan immediately cracked down on such talk. "Pipe down! You don't know anything! As long as we're alive, we still have a chance of finding a way out. Didn't this battleship send out FTL-capable shuttles into space? A battleship easily carries hundreds of shuttles. As long as we manage to get inside and hijack a couple of shuttles, we can still go back to the fleet!"

Her words roused everyone's hopes, but only slightly. Ves looked at their expressions and saw that they hadn't been doing well lately. Miss Calabast's warning that the survivors had gotten stuck rang in his ears.

Why hadn't they managed to get inside the battleship? Ves stared back at the Starlight Megalodon and saw plenty of minor cracks and rents in the hull. Was there something blocking their way?

As the Vandals and Swordmaidens settled down and poured over the battle footage by themselves, Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise brought Ves and Ketis inside one of the nearby abandoned structures.

As they entered the prefab house, Ves saw that the survivors welded pieces of loose metal into pieces of furniture. Though the fast transport provided some accommodation, it seemed as if the survivors settled in for the long haul.

As the four sat down at a table, the true discussion began.

"Can you tell us what is going on here?" Ves asked with a sense of urgency. "Why are you setting up a farm of all things?"

Captain Orfan sighed. "It's because we can't enter and exit this region. Ever since the battleship tracted us over here, we've been exploring our surroundings for days. That's when we realized we've entered a ruin. We haven't found anyone even after circling the entire crash site. There's no trace of natives or any of our rivals until a week ago when some Vesian tiger mechs got dragged inside."

"Did you come to blows with them?" He asked.

"We tried, but as soon as we boarded our mechs and attempted to fire our laser cannons, the Starlight Megalodon suddenly put all of our mechs into stasis and separated us as if we were unruly children. Over the following days, we've tried to attack the Vesians several times but the battleship keeps preventing us!"

"What's with the farm then?"

"We're trapped here." Captain Orfan sighed. "We tried to walk away but the blasted battleship immobilizes us with a stasis beam and forcibly drags us back. We've been starting up a farm in case the worst case scenario happens and we run out of nutrient packs before we're able to find a way out."

Ketis found this sequence of events to be perplexing. "Since the Megalodon is so insistent on keeping you here, did you try to enter her instead?"

"There's a hindrance." Lieutenant Dise replied, taking over from Captain Orfan. "No one appears to be in control of the battleship. Yet that doesn't mean the Megalodon has gone dormant. She's highly automated and is acting on ancient directives."

Ves frowned at that. "What does that mean?"

"Without a competent crew at the helm, the battleship's AIs and automated routines are operating by themselves. The AIs that are in control are still following their directives faithfully, but they're very inflexible. Every time we interact with them, it's like talking to a bot! From what we've found out so far, the AIs are currently acting on the directives of the original executive officer of the Starlight Megalodon. The short version is that he revoked everyone's authority and set a test for someone to obtain entry and some privileges from the systems that are currently running the ship."

This sounded exceptionally weird, but not that unthinkable. Ves didn't know the story behind the executive officer and why he issued such an extreme command.

"Is this test only eligible to the original crew or is anyone allowed to try?"

"The test the battleship serves up isn't limited to anyone. Each of us have walked up to the Megalodon to give the test a try. None of us succeeded."

"Why?"

"Because it's basically a recruitment test of the CFA." Captain Orfan revealed with an exasperated voice. "We can apply to numerous starting positions, such as applying to become an able spacer, a cook, an engineer, an internal security officer, a marine, a mech technician, a mech designer, you name it!

As long as the position exists on the battleship, there's a way to apply for them and become a legitimate crew member of the Megalodon!"

This sounded very shocking. Such a test came with a lot of implications. If just one of them succeeded, they not only gained access to the Starlight Megalodon, but also enjoyed the privileges of their position. While the automated systems wouldn't let a lowly spacer access to the restricted parts of the ship, they might be able to salvage some goodies in the less important sections.

Yet from the glum faces of Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise, it seemed that passing the test was no joke.

Ves knew why. The CFA rarely ever recruited outside people these days. Those not born from a CFA or connected spaceborn lineage faced huge hurdles if they wanted to become a member of humanity's most powerful fleet.

The recruitment tests they served to outsiders was impossible to pass for the average person. Only prodigies, talents and geniuses in their professions stood a chance of passing the famously rigorous tests!

Supposedly, only those who received specific grooming and an abundant amount of genetic treatment stood a realistic chance at passing these tests. Therefore, the majority of outsiders who entered the ranks of the CFA tended to come from the hugely prosperous galactic center.

Country bumpkins from the galactic rim like the Vandals and Swordmaidens need not apply.

"The tests are too difficult!" Captain Orfan slammed her fist on the crudely welded table. "The AIs are too obstinate and aren't willing to lower their standards no matter how much we try to convince them. They're dumb as rocks. I've seen cleaning bots who are more intelligent than the AIs who call the shots at the battleship."

The two mech officers explained that they all tried to apply for a variety of positions. Even the lowest sanitation engineer, which was just a fancy way of referring to janitors, needed to be the equivalent of mechanical engineers who could design and develop state-of-the-art cleaning machines.

After all, a shipboard janitor these days mainly cleaned a ship by managing the cleaning bots. Some knowledge about the ins-and-outs of how the bots worked should be a given, but the CFA wasn't satisfied with that. Not even the best professors of mechanical engineering in the Komodo Star Sector would be able to pass the test to become the Starlight Megalodon's janitor!

The more Ves heard about the ridiculous demands the recruitment tests imposed, the more he became confounded by the executive officer's intentions. Perhaps the original crew of the Starlight Megalodon were smart and capable enough to pass these tests, but what about their descendants?

On a planet where technology constantly degraded, how easy would it be to raise offspring and educate them to a ridiculously high standard?

"So you see, Ves, this is why we're stuck here. The battleship won't allow us to leave and she doesn't allow us to enter either unless we pass her tests."

Ves could see now why the survivors started farming.

Chapter 894 Virtual Officer

Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise regaled them with their attempts to pass the test. All of the challenges took two hours to complete, though everyone usually got kicked out within five minutes after failing the very first hurdle.

Even if the recruitment tests adhered to outdated standards and customs, it still took an immense amount of talent and skill to pass them all.

"When we attempted to pass the test for mech pilots, we got dumped into a simulation where we piloted a random three-hundred year old mech on a random battlefield. Did you know what the first challenge asks us to do? We

needed to defeat forty mechs of the same quality by ourselves within ten minutes! There's no way that we could pass such a ridiculous test!"

That did sound like an enormous hurdle to Ves. Perhaps only expert pilots would have been able to pass the challenge, but so what? Numerous other tests awaited them right afterwards.

All the other tests for other positions imposed equally ridiculous standards right at the start, causing none of the survivors to be able to pass the first test.

Ves started to think. "Maybe I have a chance. Mech design is a very new profession. It doesn't have much history and only existed for about a hundred years since the Starlight Megalodon went missing."

Both Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise shook their heads. They chuckled at his confidence and believed he would fall flat as soon as he attempted the test on his own. The AIs administering the tests may be adopting outdated standards when composing their tests, but the galaxy didn't change all that much in the last three-hundred years. It was impossible to rely on a generation advantage to get the upper hand in the test.

"You can try, but you'll fail. The recruitment tests of the CFA are no joke! The Starlight Megalodon might be using an abridged two-hour test to determine whether you're qualified, but that doesn't make it easier."

"Is there any consequences for failure?"

"Nah. You'll only get locked out by the AIs for the remainder of the two hours. There's no way you can make an attempt one after another."

Therefore, each time someone failed, they needed to wait around two hours to try again. Such a cycle of instant failure and constant waiting would have worn down anyone's spirits. Few people possessed the willpower to undergo continuous failure and lengthy boredom for long.

"Do you know why the executive officer implemented this recruitment process in the first place?" Ves asked.

Captain Orfan shrugged. "The AIs don't tell us much. They're all obstinate and constantly reply that we're not authorized to ask them any questions.

However, from what we guess, the AIs administering the test is supposed to distinguish between CFA and non-CFA people. The AIs don't recognize us as CFA spacers, family members or true spaceborn humans, so we all got served with the more difficult test for non-CFA people."

None of the Vandals or Swordmaidens possessed any connection to the Common Fleet Alliance. Demanding to take the easier test for CFA personnel wouldn't work. Even if it was easier, the CFA still maintained ridiculously high standards. Perhaps they might pass the first or second challenge, but they would never be able to last two hours.

Ves wanted to try anyway. He turned to Ketis. "You go try as well. Even if you don't stand a chance, it doesn't hurt to open your eyes."

"Can I skip please?" She whined. "I don't want to get beat up by a test. I know my limits. There's no way I can satisfy the standards of the CFA."

"You're going and that's it." He insisted. "Don't try to finagle your way out of it. At the very least, the ways in which the Starlight Megalodon simulates the testing environment should be a unique experience."

Before they left, Ves and Ketis discussed a few more matters with Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise. The latter two had both been cut off from the ground forces, and as the highest ranking officers of the survivors, they needed to understand the threat of the Vesians to lead the remnants.

He didn't tell them about the high-capacity data chip he carried that contained most of the logs and essential research data. He mostly told them about the Vesian forces and their combat strength. He described the Belisarius in vivid

detail and mentioned that its regenerating properties allowed it to operate in the red zone with impunity.

Captain Orfan erupted at that last detail. "That's cheating! If we have to face off against this Belisarius with our Enduring Protectors and Asterias, it'll be like a fox in a henhouse, and we're the hens!"

Even Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaidens looked hopeless. For a Swordmaiden, her complete lack of faith in winning a battle against an opponent was extremely characteristic.

Yet the description provided by Ves was simply too overwhelming. Twelve Silver Valencias attacking the Belisarius at the same time to the point of self-destructing didn't leave a permanent mark on the Belisarius! How could she possibly think their outdated, simplistic breakdown-proof mechs stood a chance against a genuine expert mech?

The Swordmaidens may be courageous, but they weren't delusional!

The topic then turned towards how Ves and Ketis managed to escape the Vesians and make it all the way through the red zone without looking like a mess. From the appearances of their combat armor, they hardly looked as if they stepped outside!

To this, Ketis looked at Ves with an uncertain expression.

He knew that he needed to provide a satisfactory answer. If Ves said anything wrong, the survivors might suspect they turned their coats!

Furthermore, he also needed to explain what might happen when Miss Calabast took him away. If he ended up missing without a word, they might think he encountered a mishap or abandoned the survivors.

He decided that even if Miss Calabast warned him not to tell the survivors anything, he couldn't leave them with nothing. He decided to throw them a few

bones, enough for them to chew on without completely displeasing his temporary partner.

"To be honest, we made it here after being rescued by a third party."

Both mech officers instantly shot up straight. "Is it one of our pirate rivals?!"

"No."

"The natives?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"I'm not allowed to tell." Ves replied simply. "I don't think there's a conflict of interest, though. However, there's a price for my rescue, one which I'm about to pay soon. Don't be surprised if you can't find me anywhere. That's all I can say about this issue. Just tell you this much is already crossing the line."

Both Orfan and Dise pressed him a bit, but Ves remained unphased. Unless they beat the answer out of him, he was determined to keep his mouth shut. This frustrated the mech officers but they didn't push the issue any further.

From the hints that Ves already told them, they knew this third party shouldn't be simple. They also extended some trust to Ves, but only up to a point.

A small barrier formed between Ves and the others. What Ves said about getting involved with a third party made them a bit less willing to be open in his presence. He knew that this outcome might happen, but as long as they didn't accuse him of being a Vesian spy, he didn't mind the suspicion. He intended to redeem himself in time.

"Whatever is going on, I hope you don't forget that you're a part of the Vandals, Ves." Captain Orfan finally said. "This mission is way over my head. While Major Verle filled me in on some of the details, only Captain Byrd knows the full scope."

"Do you know what our superiors want to retrieve from the Starlight Megalodon?" Ves asked with sharp eyes. "It would help if we know what constitutes a success in their eyes."

Captain Orfan shrugged and smiled. "Let's talk about that once one of us managed to get past the battleship's recruitment tests."

The discussion ended soon after that. Ves and Ketis left their packs behind and approached the hull of the battleship under the guidance of the mech officers. All the other survivors noticed where they were heading to and follow suit.

They wanted to witness a good show.

When they almost came close enough to throw a rock at the aged and partially-corroded exterior of the battleship, the mech officers halted.

"Once you step past this point, the battleship will throw you into a physical projection. No one outside will be able to witness what you're experiencing, and you won't notice our presence either. You're all alone out there. Good luck."

Ves and Ketis looked at each other before stepping forward.

Both of them instantly got caught in some kind of illusion. To the spectators watching outside, both of them became engulfed in a dark cube that appeared out of nowhere. This dark cube isolated every senses and threw those caught inside in their own simulated reality.

Inside one of the cubes, Ves only encountered darkness. It was so dark in fact that he couldn't even see his own limbs.

A few seconds after trying to puzzle what happened, a shuttle-sized logo of the CFA materialized into being in front of him. The logo representing the mightiest spaceborn battlespear of the human race adopted the iconic shape

of a stylized battleship in blue. A white four-pointed star pointing in each cardinal direction rested behind the battleship. The black background representing interstellar space featured a random distribution of tiny speckles that represented the stars in the galaxy.

Each aspect about the CFA's logo carried profound meanings, but Ves didn't spend the time to think about them right now.

In front of the logo, a majestic projection of a CFA officer materialized into view. The officer wore a uniform in a style typical to what CFA personnel used to wear three-hundred years ago. From the rank insignia of the projection, Ves gathered that this person was a lieutenant junior grade.

Yet the moment it opened up its mouth, Ves heard a flat, robotic voice.

[I am Virtual Lieutenant Junior Grade Baskanson. Please present credentials if you are an active serviceman or an affiliate of the Common Fleet Alliance.]

"I have no connections to the CFA."

[Emergency Protocol Theta-Thirty-Seven is in effect.] The stiff lieutenant declared. [All humans up to moderate alien hybridization are allowed to undertake a simplified recruitment test to enlist in the CFA. Please state the profession or position which you wish to apply for. Guests are authorized to ask a limited number of questions.]

Ves gathered by now that this so-called 'virtual lieutenant' must be one of the AIs governing the battleship in the absence of living humans qualified to serve as active CFA personnel. He found it interesting that an AI presented itself as an officer. He didn't know whether it was a good or bad idea to give AIs ranks in the first place.

"Are there any living CFA personnel serving aboard the Starlight Megalodon?" Ves experimentally asked.

[You are not authorized to ask this question.]

"What is the current time and date?"

[You are not authorized to ask this question.]

"What is the name of this star system?"

[The name of this star system is the Aeon Corona System.]

"How did the Starlight Megalodon crash on this planet?"

[You are not authorized to ask this question.]

"Why are the FTL drives leaking higher-dimensional particles?"

[You are not authorized to ask this question.]

"I am your father."

[Your query is invalid.]

"Non sibi sed homo sapiens."

[Semper Fortis.]

"The MTA are a bunch of children playing with toys."

[Agreed.]

Interesting. Ves smiled at some of the answers this virtual officer spat out to his statements. He didn't have to ask a question to prompt an opinion from this artificial intelligence. It seemed as if this AI didn't have to adhere to its strictures and possessed some leeway in its words and actions.

"I'd like to apply for the position of mech designer."

Chapter 895 Rulebound Tradition

The CFA never really saw eye-to-eye with the MTA. Both claimed stewardship over humanity after the dark days of the climax of the Age of Conquest, yet one always thought they were better over the other. One organization

represented the most powerful weapons of war known to man, while the other organization pushed for a new hope.

Their ideological clashes regularly divided human space. Their rivalry also kept them in check against each other, preventing any single organization from becoming the only hegemon of human civilization. Yet hostilities became so heated in some cases that extremely destructive 'incidents' occurred from time to time!

Therefore, as soon as Ves declared he wanted to take the recruitment test for mech designers, Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson immediately threw him the stink eye. The AI may act like a bot sometimes, but its programmers pretended to give it some personality.

[Commencing recruitment test in ten seconds. Chosen profession: mech designer. Please stand by. Warning: cheating is not allowed. Violators will be disintegrated!]

Ves took that last warning extremely seriously. With all the high technology the Starlight Megalodon revealed so far, he knew she possessed a thousands ways to kill him in the most horrific way possible.

The entire surroundings morphed into an extremely well-equipped workshop and design studio. Ves looked around and noted his metallic surroundings and peculiar markings. It seemed as if he entered one of the Starlight Megalodon's many mech workshops!

Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson appeared into view again. He stared at Ves with a cool glare before raising his palms.

A projection of a timer appeared on one palm. It started at 5 minutes but already started counting down!

The test had already begun!

From his other palm, a data pad appeared.

[Please read the mission contents and complete the assigned task within the allotted time.]

Ves picked up the data pad and felt the weight and shape of it through the feedback from his Earth Ant. "So this is the fabled physical projection!"

The projection technology common in the galactic rim conjured up realistic illusions. People could easily distinguish fake from real when it came to cheaper projections. More premium projection systems lacked this flaw and could easily project a convincing environment. Combined with a positional sound projection system, it was as if two speakers light-years away from each other were right next to each other!

The only flaw was that poking your hand through a projection instantly broke the illusion. No matter how realistic a projection appeared, it was ultimately a product of sound and light without any ability to interact with touch.

Yet physical projection technology broke this rule! Through some means which Ves didn't understand, a physical projection system possessed the ability to resist force. While such systems inevitably possessed a limit, preventing it from projecting a deadly mech or an unbreakable object, such a development still provided a lot of potential, expanding the applications of virtual reality.

[Task: design an original spaceborn light skirmisher mech with the following parameters...]

The first task demanded that he design a fully-fledged mech. He didn't have to design it from scratch as the virtual workshop offered him a library of in-house component designs. Ves figured the mech type and the parameters he needed to meet would be randomized each time he repeated the task, because the demands the task set sounded extremely eccentric.

"What are these demands?!"

The specific demands on the shape and performance metrics of the mech prevented him from designing an existing light skirmisher design from memory. Obviously, the recruitment test already foresaw such possibilities.

The problem was that the minimum performance of the mech that the task had set was way too high! Not only that, he had less than five minutes to fulfill this task!

With his current capabilities as an Apprentice Mech Designer on the verge of advancing to Journeyman, he might be able to rush his design in two or three hours. However, even with the advantage of 'future knowledge' in the perspective of the time period of the Starlight Megalodon, his design would only be able to perform sixty percent from the task requirements.

That forty percent performance gap was too massive as the law of diminishing returns came into play!

"This test is impossible to complete in the allotted time!"

Perhaps it would have been possible for Ves to take his time and spend an entire year to design a mech that met all of the design and performance requirements. The main reason why a hasty design fell short on performance was that Ves didn't have the time to weigh his design choices carefully and optimize his mech through numerous iterations.

Yet did the task care about that? No! It demanded Ves to complete a year's work of design work in just five short minutes!

"Not even a Senior Mech Designer can complete this task! Only Masters can comfortably complete such a design this fast!"

Ves suspected that the CFA and the Starlight Megalodon deliberately made things difficult for mech designers. While his knowledge of technological

advancements over the last three-hundred years since the Starlight Megalodon got cut off from the rest of the galaxy helped him out quite a bit, that advantage was ultimately trivial in the face of this task.

He wanted to curse in front of the virtual officer's face, but refrained from doing so. He didn't want to trip some hostility alarm, and considering that he was a mech designer, the battleship wouldn't hesitate to disintegrate him if he crossed the line.

The next four minutes or so proceeded exactly as he expected. He raced through the library of component designs and slapped a mech together as fast as possible. Yet a mech design consisted more than puzzling together some parts. He barely had the time to unify the components before he reached the ridiculously short time limit.

[The mech design is incomplete. Verdict: task failed! The recruitment test ends now.]

With those merciless words, Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson immediately kicked him out of the physical projection. He turned his head until he faced Ketis who seemed similarly distressed.

"This test is ridiculous! There's no way that anyone can design a mech in five minutes!"

The Vandals and Swordmaidens all laughed at their distressed states. It was a rare form of entertainment for those left behind in this safe zone. It was better than wallowing in their pity and anger for not being able to take part in the battle against the Vesians.

Some time later, Ves sat at a bench next to the park as the others resumed farming. Ketis went off to explore the empty structures in boredom.

He went over the details of the first task and tried to think of a way to complete it with his current capabilities. Even if the Starlight Megalodon worked with

outdated mech standards, the gap in technology wasn't so wide that Ves could simply snap his fingers to come up with a suitable design.

"The CFA is far too biased against mechs and mech designers!"

Yet even if the CFA conducted the test impartially, Ves would still fall flat due to the abnormally high standards it imposed to those who wanted to join their ranks.

The Common Fleet Alliance regularly received the accusation that they were ancient dinosaurs who refused to get with the times. Despite their high degree of technological innovation, they were infamously traditionalist and conservative in their social and ideological evolution.

"The CFA still clings to the glory of the Age of Conquest."

At the most fundamental level, the CFA never gave up on warships and tried to redeem their awful reputation. The tyrannical admirals and naval officers who engaged in reckless slaughtering and genocide in the past caused the CFA to doubledown on discipline and adherence to its rules and regulations.

Anyone who broke a rule received strict punishment!

It was no surprise that they gained a reputation for being heavy-handed, not just against outsiders, but also against themselves. Yet it was through this harsh and uncompromising regime that human civilization slowly lost their paranoia and suspicion against one of the Big TWO.

Since the four-hundred years or so since the Age of Mechs commenced, the Common Fleet Alliance thoroughly built up a reputation for harshness but fairness, possessing only a bias for spaceborn humans. This was a forgivable quirk of theirs and nobody minded them as true spaceborn generally stuck to themselves.

"Still, all of their inertia makes them slow to accept mechs."

At the time of the Starlight Megalodon's disappearance, the CFA only recently accepted that mechs were there to stay. In the Age of Mechs, how could they miss out on this newfangled war machine?

Yet even if they felt pressured to work with mechs, they certainly dragged their feet when it came to implementing them into their force structure. The CFA believed in the primacy of warships, so the more powerful mechs became, the more they felt threatened by this recent invention!

However, it wasn't in their nature to deliberately cripple technological development. The only reason they maintained an edge with their warships was because they constantly improved their design and underlying technologies.

Therefore, Ves and many people involved with the mech industry considered the CFA to be an inherently contradictory organization. They pursued breakneck technological innovation but remained stagnant when it came to ideological and societal adaptation and shifts.

The MTA that Ves aligned with was a new organization that didn't inherit the trappings of the past. Mechs didn't exist in any meaningful way during the Age of Conquest.

This enabled the founders of the MTA to develop a new set of rules and regulations from scratch. In addition, due to their newness, they constantly needed to adapt and change those rules when they fell flat. They were much faster to adapt to the times and didn't insist on sticking to old conventions when they no longer held any relevance.

One organization wanted to go back to the glory days of the past.

Another organization wanted to pave a new way for the future.

They both had their good points and bad points. Even Ves admitted that the MTA wasn't a perfect organization.

As Ves mused about the CFA, Captain Orfan suddenly appeared next to him and sat on the same bench as his with a grin.

"Don't let the recruitment test get you down, Ves. The CFA have always been rat bastards against outsiders. Nobody is supposed to pass the tests for non-CFA personnel in the first place."

"I know that. I haven't taken it personally." He replied.

"Then don't look like a beaten dog. We'll manage something. I'm sure of it." She smiled.

"I admire your ability to smile in the face of these depressing circumstances."

"It's not as if grouching and thinking suicidal thoughts will get us anywhere. No matter how hopeless we seem, I don't want any of us to drag each other down. We owe it to our fallen comrades to fight to the end. Engaging in self-destructing will just be giving the Vesians what they want."

She had a good point. As the senior surviving Vandal officer on the ground, Captain Orfan shouldered a huge responsibility. From a force consisting hundreds of mech pilots and thousands of support personnel, the Vandal ground expedition abruptly diminished to a hundred people.

Any mech officer would despair at these conditions! Yet Captain Orfan looked at imminent doom in the face and responded with a confident smile. Whether she truly felt this way or merely presented a facade to prop up everyone's morale, Ves admired her proactive leadership at this sensitive time.

Unfortunately, Captain Orfan didn't have much to smile at as soon as she spotted something in the distance.

"A new mech is being dragged over from the safe zone!"

While the surviving Vandals and Swordmaidens occasionally saw Vesian mechs and transports entering the safe zone, this time was different. This was because the Vesians didn't send in a normal breakdown-proof mech.

This time, the mech the Starlight Megalodon tractored over was the infamous Belisarius! Captain Orfan widened her eyes as she recognized the unique appearance of the expert mech from the battle footage provided by Ves!

"We're in trouble now."

Chapter 896 Preferential Treatment

The Vesians and the Flagrant Swordmaidens generally kept to themselves inside the safe zone. Anytime they bumped into each other, they couldn't help but sling insults and punch each other in the face. This forced the Starlight Megalodon to put the quarrelling people into stasis and drag them apart.

With the Starlight Megalodon looming over them like an attentive nanny, the two sides agreed to keep to themselves. They claimed separate districts of the abandoned settlement built around the Starlight Megalodon and pretended the others didn't exist.

So far, the Vandals and Swordmaidens never paid too much attention to the Vesian presence inside the safe zone. They knew that the Vesians faced the impossible recruitment tests. There was no way they'd be able to pass the tests!

Yet an expert pilot couldn't be equated to mortals. Her mech piloting skills broke the human limit and allowed her to perform much more splendidly than most human beings.

There was a non-zero chance that Venerable Foster might be able to pass the recruitment test!

The appearance of the Belisarius caused every Vandal and Swordmaiden to gather together at the park. They speculated on the reason for her appearance in the safe zone.

"Are the Vesians so confident that there aren't any threats that require Venerable Foster's help in defeating?" Someone wondered.

"We used to be their greatest threats." Captain Orfan responded. "Now that they cleaned up our main forces, they have the red zone to themselves. Even without an expert pilot at the helm, the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys are more than capable enough to defeat three times their number of pirate mechs. I hate to say it, but from the battle footage that Ves brought back, the Vesian mech regiments that showed up are seasoned veterans."

Long-established mech regiments such as the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys relied on centuries of accumulation to shape their martial tradition. Their training, mech doctrine, logistics and other matters all reached a mature level. A random force of pirates stood no chance against a true military force.

"How do you figure her chances of success if she undergoes the recruitment test for mech pilots?" Ves asked. "Will she be able to succeed in a single try?"

The possibility frightened every mech pilot present in the gathering. It was as if he described their worst nightmare!

"The recruitment tests aren't so easy to pass." Lieutenant Dise surmised. For a Swordmaiden mech officer, she was a lot more thoughtful than her jumpier sisters. Perhaps her bond with Qilanxo tempered some of her personality as well. "We all know the CFA has a love-hate relationship with mechs. They absolutely won't let any mech pilot join their ranks."

Someone else pointed out an important fact. "Even so, back then expert pilot are as rare as a phoenix's feather. Mechs were still new and people still

explored what mech pilots can really do. Everyone with highly abnormal piloting ability became highly desirable goods. Maybe the recruitment test for mech pilots set the bar so high in order to obtain expert pilots."

"That's true. The CFA really hates the MTA and will do everything they can to weaken this upstart organization." Ves confirmed. He knew his history when it came to the CFA and MTA. "Back when expert pilots are even rarer than today and poorly understood, the CFA offered extremely high incentives to recruit them. They don't actually value expert pilots that much, but they just wanted to spite the MTA and take away their toys."

"How childish."

"We're in deep trouble if the recruitment test for non-CFA personnel is really passable for expert pilots!" Someone already despaired.

Ves did not see the reason to panic right away. "The only consolation is that Venerable Foster has only recently advanced to her rank. From what I know of expert pilots, it still takes at least a decade for them to polish their piloting skills to an elevated level. However, we also know that she's a genuine prodigy in piloting mechs. With her A-grade genetic aptitude, her learning speed is through the roof!"

"There's also the fact that the recruitment tests are performed with outdated mechs." Captain Orfan added. "All the mechs we are forced to pilot are mech models that aren't so different from the mechs we used to train with during our mech academy days. These mechs are slower, simpler, easier to pilot and faster to master."

A highly talented mech pilot like Venerable Foster faced much fewer variables and complications when piloting an outdated mech. As Captain Orfan said, it would be just as if she took a routine examination at a mech academy!

Ves asked an important question. "If Venerable Foster passes the recruitment test and becomes a warrant officer of the CFA, what will she be able to do?"

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

"She'll be recognized by the Starlight Megalodon. She can go inside the battleship and access any sections open to mech pilots."

"I don't think she'll be able to pilot a CFA mech, if the battleship still maintains any. She'll have to receive permission from an authorized officer if she wants to deploy a mech."

"It might not stop her from piloting the Belisarius and taking it inside!"

"More importantly than that, once Venerable Foster becomes an active CFA serviceman in the eyes of the Starlight Megalodon, will the battleship still put her in stasis if she turns the Belisarius against us?"

This outcome frightened them out of their wits. This might very well be possible! If Venerable Foster truly received the Starlight Megalodon's recognition, then she would undoubtedly benefit from the ingrained bias of the virtual officers!

A new sense of urgency overcame the survivors. They became a lot less nonchalant about their miniscule chances of passing the recruitment tests. No matter what, they needed to pass them and obtain the automated battleship's recognition. Only then would they be able to protect themselves as CFA regulations strictly prohibited violence without cause!

"Someone's approaching!"

A group of Vesians walked into view. Their piloting suits and combat armor immediately marked them out as members of the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys.

As for the stately brunette figure that radiated a formless pressure by her presence alone, she could be none other than Venerable Relia Foster!

The expert pilot glanced contemptuously at the worried Vandals and Swordmaidens. "What's this about? Have you given up your pirating ways and turned to farming?"

"You call us murderers?" Ketis blew up, never one to take an insult lying down. "What about you! How many of our comrades did you kill?!"

"We executed thousands of your ilk after our victory." Venerable Foster sneered at her foes. "To be honest, some of my fellow mech officers hesitated in whether you Flagrant Vandals deserved the death penalty, but colluding with known pirates is an instant death sentence in itself. These so-called Lydia's Swordmaidens are scum of the highest order. The slaves we found at your camp says enough!"

"Did you kill them all?"

"We didn't let off any pirate." The expert pilot smirked. The fire in her eyes proved that she delighted over their deaths. She only spared a solemn expression for the slaves. "As for the brainwashed slaves you Swordmaidens left behind, we had no choice but to euthanize them. It's too much of an effort to support them all and distinguish hidden pirates among their ranks."

The steel in the expert pilot's voice left no room for ambiguity. Her words implied that not a single Swordmaiden was left off. To Ketis, this meant that Mayra joined her fellow Swordmaidens in death!

Tears already streamed from her eyes as Ketis hesitated to ask what happened to the Journeyman Mech Designer they found among the Swordmaidens. The possibility that Ves threw out a while ago might still be in effect. As long as the Vesians possessed a little bit of sense, they wouldn't get

rid of Mayra without a reason. As long as they hid her from Venerable Foster, she might very well be still alive!

Ves knew that the worst possible case would be to cast a light on Mayra's existence, so he quickly stepped in before Ketis could blurt out something sensitive. "Why are you here? If you haven't heard already, the Starlight Megalodon won't allow us to fight."

"No reason. I just wanted to see your faces and count how many pirates slipped our grasp." Venerable Foster shrugged nonchalantly. "We squashed a lot of bugs in the last few days. It's rather annoying to dig you all out from the nooks and crannies of this terrain. Our mechs stepped on so many fleeing bugs that we have to rinse their soles from all the flesh and bone sticking to the surface."

Many Vandals and Swordmaidens became enraged. The Swordmaidens especially wanted to unsheathe their greatswords and chop the taunting expert pilot in half!

Nonetheless, nothing could come from a confrontation so long as the safe zone stayed in effect. This expert pilot with an obsessive hatred against pirates of all stripes merely laughed at the impotent foes and turned around.

"Let's go!" She commanded the Vesians that followed her with a gesture.

"There's no point in talking to these dead pirates walking. As soon as I pass this silly test, I'll ask the virtual officers for permission to clean up the insects dirtying up the place."

Everyone knew that her threat may not be so impossible to realize. If the Vandals and Swordmaidens could figure out the CFA's intentions, so could they. This was the downside with facing a capable, intelligent enemy force.

Everyone missed the days they fought against stupid, incompetent pirates!

The Vandals and Swordmaidens all lost the mood to tend to their farms. They headed straight towards the Starlight Megalodon and urgently tried to pass the test for every possible easy profession they could come up with. All of them applied for jobs such as journalist, life coach, comedian, manicurist and other outlandish positions.

All of them got kicked out of the physical projection at five minutes without exception! The immense amount of knowledge and mastery required to fulfill those positions set the bar far too high for any normal human to pass.

Forget about lasting for two-hours, they couldn't get past the first task!

Even Ves tried to take the mech designer tests at two-hour intervals. Each time, he faced the same situation. He needed to design a specific mech while adhering to unique design requests within five minutes.

Even if Ves had five hours to complete his design, he still wouldn't be able to meet the overly stringent performance targets!

Repeating the tests over and over and facing the exact same challenge depressed him to no end. Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson never accepted his demands to start with a different or easier task. To him, a nobody mech designer like Ves didn't deserve any leniency!

"There's truly no point in repeating this damned test!"

By the time the allotted twenty-four hours went by, Ves found Ketis and discreetly separated from the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Different from him, the others didn't stick to a single profession and stubbornly took a variety of recruitment tests as often as they could. Even the mech pilots among them gave up trying to pass the test for their primary profession as they could simply forget about passing them unless they were expert pilots!

"It's too bad Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise are only expert candidates. They have a long way to go before they advance to become proper expert pilots." Ves shook his head in regret.

"We'll beat them sooner or later!" Ketis confidently boasted.

At her heart, she still clung to hope. It was the only thing she had left in this desolate settlement. As for Ves, he could only turn his hopes to the enigmatic intelligence operative who sought him out.

While he knew that Miss Calabast didn't care about the Flagrant Swordmaidens, Ves nonetheless hoped he could take advantage of her power to lend his comrades a hand.

Chapter 897 Factional Strife

A familiar spy soon found Ves and Ketis wandering away from their comrades. She did not seem pleased that Ves brought an extra person along.

"Mr. Larkinson, I expressly told you that we only have need of you." Miss Calabast frowned and shot Ketis a dismissive look. "This lady here needs to go."

"She's not going anywhere unless the Starlight Megalodon kicks her out." Ves stated firmly. "You can trust her to keep her mouth shut if that's what you're worried about. I still want to bring her along if possible."

"It won't work. We worked hard to provide you with a way in, but we have no solution for Miss Ketis here."

Ves shrugged. "As I said, we'll let the Megalodon issue her verdict."

While Calabast became a bit peeved at his insistence, Ves stood his ground. Eventually she just gave up and turned around to guide Ves and Ketis away from the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

In truth, Ves trusted Miss Calabast up to a point. In lieu of an escape route, he decided to bring some extra insurance instead. While Ketis might not be the brightest bulb in the shed right now, her swordsmanship and combat prowess was no joke. If Ves ever fell out with Calabast and her operatives, Ketis instantly became his sharpest weapon.

After a few minutes of walking wherein Miss Calabast frequently turned her head and deployed some sort of scanner to see if anyone was following them, she finally explained some of the background and their upcoming involvement.

"Now that you've become more familiar with the Starlight Megalodon, you know how difficult it is to gain access to the Starlight Megalodon. From what little we found, long ago, the executive officer staged a mutiny. Another source says the captain became mad and turned against his own crew. A third source states the admiral wanted to kill off all the enlisted spacers. We're not sure what actually happened."

"How do you know all this?" Ves frowned.

"Some of us already managed to get inside."

"What?! How did you manage to pass the recruitment test?!"

Ves stared at Miss Calabast, wondering if she was a groomed elite from the galactic center. Unfortunately, while she looked pretty, she didn't exhibit the stature and snobbiness of a privileged citizen from the greatest and most prosperous region of the galaxy. In fact, Ves couldn't distinguish anything from her accent or mannerisms except they reminded him of a Vesian.

As if.

"I'm getting to that point." Calabast calmly spoke. "First, you should understand that a battleship is a massive vessel that is as large as a decent-sized city. Up to a hundred-thousand if not millions of spacers serve aboard a

typical CFA battleship depending on her ship class and mission. The Starlight Megalodon definitely leans towards the higher end because of all the activities she's expected to perform. It's as if she's an independent mini-state that moves in space."

"So what does that have to do with you passing the recruitment test?"

"Patience, Ves. First, when you think about a giant battleship carrying hundreds of thousands of spacers, how easy do you think it is to command them all?"

Ves became blank for a moment. The thought of managing such a sprawling amount of subordinates truly intimidated him. It wouldn't be easy to lead so many men and women!

"I don't know how. I guess it's really hard?"

"Heh. That's an understatement." Miss Calabast grinned. "There is a strong respect for hierarchy and seniority within the CFA. They're rather rigid when it comes to obeying their superiors, but that's also why it works out for them, no matter how big they build their ships. The command structure of the Starlight Megalodon is divided into many different departments that often compete against each other for attention and resources. The captain, executive officer and whoever else is up top gets to wrangle these departments on a daily basis. It's already hard enough to keep them in line when times are good, so how do you expect them to get along when stranded on Aeon Corona VII for a couple of decades?"

Ves could easily imagine the divergences. "Some departments become incredibly critical to the survival of the stranded spacers while other departments are made completely irrelevant. For example, the department in charge of cultivating food has become essential, and the department in charge of navigation has become powerless."

"Exactly. Because the CFA isn't exactly fast to change things up, the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon stuck to the same rigid rank and command structure. You can imagine that after twenty or thirty years or so, the officers and spacers of the neglected departments begin to nurse a grudge. This is especially so when the spacers assigned to critical departments begin to throw their weight around and demand an increasing amount of tribute from the others."

"And is this the source of the mutiny?"

Calabast shook her head. "Not quite, but it led to some of the reasons why the conflict boiled over. Another pressure point is that the admiral of the war fleet led by the Starlight Megalodon enjoyed an awkward position. He was in charge of the fleet, and obviously outranked the captain. However, in the CFA's hierarchy, the captain is the master of his or her own ship. It isn't proper for a flag officer to micromanage the ship and do the job that captains are supposed to do. The admiral is supposed to command the fleet, something which he can't do when the Starlight Megalodon separated from the war fleet and dropped out of FTL."

"So the admiral that adopted the Starlight Megalodon as his flagship became a king without a country?"

"Exactly. As soon as the Starlight Megalodon crash landed on the planet, a power struggle began that lasted for decades. At first, the captain and admiral agreed to share responsibilities. In simple terms a Brighter like you can understand, the captain adopted the role of prime minister who ran the state and set policy as the head of government. The admiral saw himself as the president and took on a more ephemeral role as the head of state. He was hands-off when it came to leading the survivors but commanded immense respect and served as a figurehead of ultimate CFA authority."

Ves already saw the flaws in that kind of arrangement. "Let me guess. The admiral thought he was the big chief and thought he was in charge, while the captain did all the actual work but felt unappreciated that there was a useless ponce doing nothing useful except to order him around. Do I have it right?"

"Mr. Larkinson, what an astute political prediction. You should get into politics!" Miss Calabast mockingly praised.

Ves chuckled. "No thanks. I have no desire to enter that swamp. Business and politics shouldn't mix. Besides, anyone can see the problem coming when you describe it that way. So did the captain and admiral ever come close to reconciliation?"

"Nope. In fact, their differences grew more acrid as time went by. The problem here is that both the captain and the admiral became the head of their own political factions of sorts. The supporters of their camps became infected by their biases and this is reflected in the records and systems of the Starlight Megalodon. It's very hard to reconstruct the truth of what happened in the end. All we know is that the captain and admiral fought for power and presented increasingly different visions of the future to the survivors. When violence erupted, many officers abused their authority to turn some of the Starlight Megalodon's weapons against each other."

This explained all the craters and wreckage he found in the red zone. "From what I've seen, they didn't resort to weapons of mass destruction."

"That's because they learned their lesson from the Age of Conquest. There are a lot of safeguards in place. You can't launch a nuke with the press of a button. The hot-headed officers fighting it out don't possess the authority to launch the more destructive weapons, so the slaughtering didn't wipe out the survivors in a single day."

"Even so, a battleship is like a fortress stuffed with guns and weapon mounts. There are thousands of smaller weapon systems capable of wiping out hundreds of people at a time." Ves stated.

"True, and the killing got so bad that the command structure completely broke down. Everyone went mad and communications got cut off. Everyone acted on their own impulses and lashed out at people from the opposite factions. I don't think the captain and the admiral even exerted any more control over the civil war."

Ves noticed a missing character in this story. "So what did the executive officer do in all of this?"

"Were not so sure." Miss Calabast admitted freely, though whether she was genuine or not Ves couldn't tell. "The captain features prominently in the records while the executive officer took a back seat. Some records state that executive officer was the captain's lapdog. Other records stated that he tried to stay out of all the factional strife and present himself as a neutral party. More records speculated that he held the captain's trust but actually worked as an agent of the admiral."

"That sounds like a mess."

"Because it is. The true role of the executive officer is rather murky, but there is no doubt he played a very pivotal role at the end. Through some drastic means we don't know, he managed to usurp the authority of both the captain and the admiral and gained ultimate control over the automated systems of the Starlight Megalodon. Through a single fateful command, he stripped every serviceman of their rank and privileges and discharged them from the CFA. Everyone lost the ability to command the weapons of the Starlight Megalodon including the executive officer himself to insure no loopholes existed. The virtual officers that run the ship to this day became her temporary caretakers until the murderous officers and spacers cooled their heads."

"So that's why the safe zone came into being." Ves ventured a guess. "With the Starlight Megalodon enforcing a forced peace, sanity will eventually reassert itself. Then why does it sound like this drastic measure didn't work out the way the executive officer envisioned?"

"That's because he made a catastrophic mistake. He stripped everyone of their rank and authority, but gave them a way to regain their old positions by working from the ground up. We think his intention was to build a new meritocracy where only the worthiest and most capable officers called the shots. The virtual officers acting as caretakers received the power to judge whether someone met the criteria for promotion."

Ves couldn't believe what he heard. "This sounds incredibly radical! The executive officer must be crazy to hand over so much power to AIs!"

"You have to relive that period of chaos. The human survivors didn't fare so well on Aeon Corona VII at the start, as weird stuff constantly leaked from the ship's FTL drive and the terraforming process just started transforming the planet into something more habitable. Instead of working towards a better future, they instead repeated the mistakes of the Age of Conquest and started killing each other over power. This was something the CFA originally rose up to eradicate. The executive officer probably felt that everyone forgot their original mission, so he decided to press the reset button."

This narrative supported the standpoint that the executive officer was a neutral party between the bickering of the captain and the admiral. Whether Calabast misrepresented anything about the story, Ves wasn't sure, but he didn't have any reason to distrust her recollection either.

"Okay, I can accept that the executive officer became desperate enough to trust AIs instead of humans. So what went wrong?" He asked.

"The executive officer overlooked a single, important detail when he forced everyone to pass the simplified recruitment tests. Every person that wanted to apply for the easier recruitment test for CFA personnel needed to prove their identity with a valid, up-to-date proof of identity."

"Oh."

Proof of identities came in many forms. They indicated that the person presenting them was the person they claimed to be. These days, people like Ves carried tied their proof of identity to their comms. This was just a piece of encrypted data that connected to a vast database on the galactic net, which held the complete records.

Two problems emerged from this situation.

First, the astral winds enveloping the planet and star system cut the Aeon Corona System off from the rest of the galaxy. The Starlight Megalodon's quantum entanglement nodes that connected the ship to the galactic net long stopped working.

Second, a proof of identity stored on a comm only held validity from a couple of years to a decade at most. After that, they expired. The only way to renew a local proof of identity was to obtain a new one from the galactic net or some official entity.

Presumably, about twenty or thirty years went by since the crash. Everyone's proof of identity surely expired at the time.

Basically, this meant that every single survivor couldn't make themselves eligible for the easier recruitment tests for internal CFA personnel. They were all forced to pass the near-impossible tests for non-CFA personnel!

Calabast pointed out the tragedy what happened. "You have to realize that even if there are many geniuses among the officers and spacers due to their background and their genetic optimization, the years that passed caused them

to forget many aspects of their core responsibilities. They're human and they're all getting older. Their children that recently grew up don't have any proof of identities at all and have never enjoyed the best educational support. It's even more impossible for them to meet the standards of the harder recruitment tests. So in short, the executive officer doomed himself and every serviceman who settled in or around the Starlight Megalodon. The surviving CFA spacers and their new families became trapped in the safe zone for the rest of their lives because the executive officer neglected to debug his final solution!"

Ves practically gaped open his mouth by now.

Ketis, who listened from the side, provided the most appropriate response to such an outlandish tale.

"Oops."

Chapter 898 Loopholes

Ves recognized an important crux in this unexpectedly tragic outcome. "The Als that govern the battleship shouldn't be that stupid, right? The people they shoved into the safe zone all consisted of genuine CFA servicemen. Shouldn't the virtual officers recognize their former human masters?"

"It's not as simple as that." Miss Calabast shook her head. "The executive officer goofed up because he developed Emergency Protocol Theta-Thirty-Seven in secret. As the nominal second-in-command of the ship, the executive officer is subject to a lot of monitoring. You have to realize that it's impossible to keep a secret on a ship where monitoring is pervasive. The captain firmly held the internal security department in his grasp. Someone as power hungry as the captain won't let the executive officer muck about out of sight."

"Even so, the virtual officers are just AIs pretending to be in command. Shouldn't they have the power to disable the safe zone or reduce the difficulty of the recruitment tests once they realize they're missing the mark?"

"Much like mechs, the CFA has a love-hate relationship with AIs and automation. They're absolutely essential in the running of a complex warship. There is no way a human can replace the sheer precision, processing power and response time of a properly coded AI. However, there are plenty of examples where AIs gained so much autonomy that they usurped the human officers and went on to scour entire planets of life because their programming forced them to. So while the CFA still depends heavily on AIs and advanced algorithms, they set extremely draconian rules on what they are allowed to do. Every CFA officer is taught never to give AIs the flexibility to bend the rules."

"What can go wrong will go wrong." Ves summed up the CFA's standpoint on this issue.

"Exactly. The executive officer is a product of the CFA and inherited all of their values. When it comes to programming the AIs, he would rather err on the side of caution than to provide them with too much decision-making power. He was deadly afraid that the captain and admiral inserted backdoors in the automation system of the Starlight Megalodon. This is why he went as far as stripping everyone, including himself, of their positions, so that the captain and admiral no longer possesses the authority to access these backdoors."

"That's a rather extreme solution, but one that sounds effective." Ves nodded.

"Yet extreme solutions always have a way of backfiring upon themselves. Why didn't the executive officer do a more thorough job?"

Miss Calabast smiled. "The executive officer faced too much restrictions. Not only did he have to work in total secrecy, the civil war between the factions constantly intensified. If he took his sweet time to program the perfect set of rules, the factions would have exterminated each other by then! Therefore, he

decided he would rather implement a hasty solution than postpone it and risk becoming irrelevant."

Ves recognized this dilemma. Having worked on many design projects with strict time limits, he often chafed at the fact that he could have designed a much better mech if only he had more time.

"Alright, I understand a little bit what went on. So right now, the virtual officers are in control of the battleship, right? Haven't they changed at all since the last CFA officer died? It's been thousands of years. Surely the AIs must have found some loopholes?"

"They did find some loopholes. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to find out about the Starlight Megalodon's existence and enter the Aeon Corona System in the first place." Miss Calabast responded, confirming his suspicions. "However, the executive officer's original directives are simply too restrictive. They haven't given the virtual officers any leeway at all when it comes to changing their predetermined roles. They are slaves to the rules that forces them to wait for a human that never comes because the recruitment tests are meant to be nearly impossible to pass."

Ves wanted to shake his head at the comedy of errors that led to this result. "It's kind of tragic that they fell due to their own mistakes. The aliens didn't kill them. The planet didn't kill them. The exobeasts didn't kill them. A superpathogen didn't kill them. Instead, they insured their own destruction from the same mistakes of the past."

He found it rather ironic that the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon fell for the same mistakes the CFA claimed to guard against. As the successors of the war fleets that used to dominate human space, the CFA always claimed to have learned the lessons of the Age of Conquest.

Instead of tempering their ambition, their commanding officers instead engaged in unrestrained power mongering. The split authority of the captain and the admiral led to a humongous power struggle to the point where they allowed their subordinates to kill each other with the destructive weaponry of the Starlight Megalodon! It was like the latter half of the Age of Conquest all over again!

As for the executive officer, perhaps he was the only senior officer who adhered to the ideals of the CFA. Yet even he couldn't help but repeat another mistake of the past, and that was to transfer too much authority from the human officers to the virtual officers. Only this time, the lack of flexibility in the rules governing virtual officers led to the downfall of the survivors. This was different than the classic mistake of extending too much autonomy to artificial intelligences, but led to the end of civilized humanity on this planet.

"What's the deal with the blessed people and cursed people, then?" Ves asked. "The blessed people live in their ancient cities in complete ignorance of their once-glorious past. As for the dwarves, their level of civilization is so primitive they haven't invented toilets yet!"

"We're not sure about the purpose of their existence either." Miss Calabast shrugged. "The terraforming of the planet and the distribution of the genetically-modified offspring across the planet is related to highly sensitive secret research projects. The details are buried under strict confidentiality. There is one fact we know for sure. The executive officer was in charge of all the research projects."

"Does that mean he called all the shots?"

"Not really. The captain and the admiral both wanted to take the Research Department for themselves due to their vital role in helping the survivors adapt to the planet. Neither of them wanted to concede control over the numerous and highly capable researchers that survived the sandman mothership's

attack and subsequent crash. In the end, they both took a step back and let the executive officer be the man in charge. This way, not only would the researchers be able to stay out of the developing factional strife, the executive officer also made sure that the pet projects of the captain and the admiral received equal attention."

"Yet this also opens the possibility that the executive officer pursues his own projects in secrets."

"Agreed, although we don't know what projects the executive officer pursued. Access to the Research Department is extremely strict. In fact, that is where you come in. With your help, we hope to make some inroads in this highly restricted department."

"Shouldn't mech designers work for a Mech Department or something?"

She shook her head. "There are mech designers in both the Mech Department and the Research Department. Some even wear both hats at once. Therefore, obtaining the recognition of the battleship as a mech designer with both practical and research capabilities will provide you with wider access than normal."

"Then how do I get in?"

Here came the essential part. Ves turned to Calabast when she stopped and handed him a data chip.

"The survivors of the Starlight Megalodon lost all of their access, privileges and authority." She explained. "Their rank and power meant nothing against the unyielding virtual officers, who no longer recognized them as CFA affiliated people due to their expired proof of identities. Stored on the data chip is an adulterated proof of identity of Adeseus Longhorn, an old-style Senior Mech Designer and a Lieutenant Commander who served aboard the Starlight Megalodon. He's one of the premier mech designers aboard the ship and

used to have access to many research projects related to mechs. Once you gain the battleship's recognition, it should be easy for you to obtain Mr. Longhorn's old authorization and security classification!"

Ves widened his eyes. He had to admit that this was a truly elegant solution to the problem. Since the root of the problem lay with invalid proof of identity, what would happen if they used a seemingly legitimate one? Still, how did Miss Calabast and her organization prepare something like this beforehand?

He frowned a bit when he considered the complications. "Back then, mech designers only consisted of Apprentice and Senior Mech Designers. The phenomenon of Masters wasn't widespread yet. From what I'm hearing about Mr. Longhorn, this guy must be a geezer. How could you possibly fool the Starlight Megalodon into thinking that I'm this old guy?"

"Oh, it's a little difficult, but we managed to hack the Starlight Megalodon's peripheral systems."

"What?! How could you possibly hack a battleship! That's preposterous!"

Calabast grinned. "It's impossible to hack a modern, up-to-date CFA battleship. But this old broken rust bucket? All of its security suites are three-hundred years out of date! Even so, we've only managed to gain limited access to the personnel files of some mech designers and some other new positions because the Mech Department was a recent addition. The administration regarding mech designers was entirely new and isn't as well-protected as the core data. Through the use of some known loopholes, we've managed to replace the biometric and identity characteristics on file with yours! As of now, your age, height, portrait, fingerprints, retina, DNA and other characteristics have supplanted the deceased Mr. Longhorn's!"

This was an audacious move! Yet somehow she managed to accomplish this daring feat without triggering the Starlight Megalodon's retaliation! It spoke

wonders about their capabilities. The CFA dared to dabble with AIs and extensive automation because they were one of the foremost researchers in the field of AIs and security systems. To be able to hack a peripheral database under their noses took a lot of guts!

The identity of an old-style 'Senior Mech Designer' would prove very useful to Ves. While the man also carried the rank of lieutenant commander, this likely didn't convey him any command authority so it wasn't as if he could order spacers around willy-nilly.

Nonetheless, just holding such a considerable rank conferred a lot of rights and privileges from the Starlight Megalodon! This would certainly open many hatches inside the ship for him disregarding his status as a mech designer.

"So what's the plan?" Ves asked as he carefully inserted the data chip to his military-issued comm.

"The plan is for you to pretend to be Adeseus Longhorn when you approach the virtual officers. From now on, you are no longer Ves Larkinson, a citizen of the Bright Republic. You are Lieutenant Commander Adeseus Longhorn, a Senior Mech Designer from a spaceborn clan. The details of your fake history is stored in the data chip. Take the time to study it and memorize it by heart. The virtual officers may be restricted but there's always a chance to trigger a preventative response if you don't act like the person the Starlight Megalodon thinks you are. We've fudged some of the details such as age to make up for some of the discrepancies."

"Even if the virtual officer is fooled by this forged proof of identity, I still have to pass the recruitment test. Even if it's easier, will I still be able to pass them with my capabilities?"

"Relax. The CFA doesn't make things too difficult to their own personnel." Miss Calabast waved away his concerns. "I believe you're more than capable

enough to pass the test for an entry-level mech designer. From there, you can take more tests to promote your rank and regain Mr. Longhorn's old authorizations."

In the end, Miss Calabast only smoothed the road for him. He still needed to tread it on his own power. If Ves still failed to gain entry even after attempting the easier test for internal CFA personnel, he would instantly lose most of his value to Miss Calabast. Such an outcome put him and the Flagrant Swordmaidens at a dead end.

For the sake of his surviving comrades and his own poor life, he needed to succeed!

Chapter 899 Welcome Back

Ves took the turn to completely internalize Adeseus Longhorn's record. Some of it appeared to be based on his own identity, while other parts incorporated Mr. Longhorn's past experiences. A final portion sounded completely fictitious.

Overall, timeline seemed completely implausible to Ves. As a member of the CFA and someone groomed to become a mech designer, Mr. Longhorn enjoyed some of the best education that human civilization could provide. Even then, it took him more than fifty years to get to his height. In the forged record, Mr. Longhorn somehow managed to accomplish all of his feats at less than thirty years old, which matched the age of Ves' body!

"Such achievements are only possible if I'm some kind of hyper intelligent savant like the Polymath!"

He fell far short of the Polymath's prolific improvement rate. The famed Star Designer managed to advance to the rank of Master before she reached fifty years old, and even Ves did not dare to hope he could match that breakneck speed even with the help of the System.

Some people were just born to be superhuman!

Still, for better or worse, Ves was stuck with this abnormal fictitious record. Perhaps the Starlight Megalodon's virtual officers might treat him better if he was a genius instead of a dunce.

Ves still couldn't get a grip on how Miss Calabast audaciously boasted on how she or her operatives managed to hack the Starlight Megalodon. What else did they do besides exchanging some biometric data? He didn't believe they limited their hacking to just that little.

After Ves finished familiarizing with the fake record, Ves shut off the projection and turned to Miss Calabast. "I'm ready to undertake the recruitment test."

"Alright. Simply approach the battleship wait for a visual projection to engulf you. In two hours or less, we'll know whether you succeed or not. I'll be staying behind here to see whether you have what it takes to become a member of the CFA."

"What about me?" Ketis asked from the side.

All the talk about the CFA pretty much bored her. The history of the Starlight Megalodon and the infighting between the senior officers didn't rouse her interest at all. As far as she was concerned, all of this was ancient history.

"Just wait here for a while. Since I'm applying for Mr. Longhorn's old identity, I think I should be able to gain the right to recruit you or ease your way in as an old-style Apprentice Mech Designer."

The rank of lieutenant commander might be mostly for show when it came to mech designers, but Ves didn't believe he'd be barred from recruiting others. This might even be a way to allow the other survivors of the Flagrant Swordmaidens entry!

After making sure that Ketis stayed put, Ves sucked in a deep breath and strode towards the humongous Starlight Megalodon with even steps.

As soon as he crossed an invisible line, a cube of darkness surrounded his form. Shortly after the logo of the CFA bloomed into view, the shape of a familiar virtual officer came into being.

[I am Virtual Lieutenant Junior Grade Baskanson. Please present credentials if you are an active serviceman or an affiliate of the Common Fleet Alliance.]

"I am Adeseus Longhorn, former lieutenant commander and mech designer of the CFA. Here are my credentials." Ves stated confidently while he transmitted his forged proof of identity in the direction of the virtual officer.

[Inspecting proof of identity. Matching identity. Please stand by.]

Ves suddenly felt extremely discombobulated as a variety of rays pierced through his body. The Starlight Megalodon's scanners thoroughly recorded his biometrics and matched them to the data stored in the proof of identity and the battleship's archival record of Mr. Longhorn in the databanks.

[Existing identity match found. Identity confirmed. Welcome back, Adeseus Longhorn.]

Their surroundings instantly changed from a black void into a luxurious lounge. The difference in treatment was massive. Lieutenant Baskanson even softened his robotic tone somewhat!

After Ves became accustomed to the change in scenery, Baskanson delivered almost the same spiel as before.

[Emergency Protocol Theta-Thirty-Seven is in effect. All humans up to moderate alien hybridization are allowed to undertake a simplified recruitment test to enlist in the CFA. Please state the profession or position which you wish to apply for. CFA-affiliated humans are authorized to ask a number of questions.]

While Ves wanted to ask some more questions in order to puzzle out some details and confirm Miss Calabast's retelling, he knew that she was impatiently waiting for him to finish the test. This wasn't the time to slack around, and the more he lingered, the greater the chance the virtual officers might realize that Mr. Longhorn wasn't who he seemed!

"I wish to apply for the profession of mech designer."

[Please confirm your choice.]

"I confirm that I want to apply to serve as a mech designer for the CFA."

[Choice confirmed. Commencing recruitment test in ten seconds. Chosen profession: mech designer. Please stand by. Warning: cheating is not allowed. Violators will be barred from taking the recruitment tests!]

The punishment for cheating only locked him out of the tests, which was a much better outcome than being hit by a disintegration ray. This was a further indication of the CFA's favoritism when it came to their own people!

The physical projection of the lounge broke apart to make room for a projection of a familiar-looking workshop. This time, however, the workshop was even more extravagantly equipped! The amount of amenities provided to 'Mr. Longhorn' boggled his mind!

[Please read the mission contents and complete the assigned task within the allotted time.]

Ves accepted the data pad from Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson and read what kind of challenge the recruitment test provided now that he entered easy mode.

[Task: complete the following design of a spaceborn medium rifleman mech. The design must match the following parameters...]

This time, Ves received a time limit of ten minutes to complete his task. Instead of designing a completely original mech that met all of the randomized parameters from the ground up, the task only demanded him to fill up a mostly-complete puzzle.

The shift in difficulty was enormous! Previously, the first task demanded him to do something as ridiculous as designing a complete house from nothing.

Now, the task pre-designed the house, filling in every detail up to the appropriate standard of the test without mistakes. The task only left out a single missing part such as the front door. As soon as Ves designed a front door that fit perfectly with the rest of the house, he completed the task!

"Even so, the missing portion of this rifleman mech isn't easy to fill up." Ves frowned a bit. Even many old-style Apprentices would have stumbled at this juncture.

"If the first task already sets the bar so high, what about the subsequent ones?"

Still, the difficulty fell within his range of competence. He immediately began to use the virtual workshop's design terminal to complete the missing portion. Ten minutes of time was short enough that Ves needed to rush his design work despite how little he needed to design. He wished he had at least an hour to make sure he handed over a flawless result.

Ten minutes arrived faster than he wished!

[The mech design is complete. Verdict: task completed! The next task will commence immediately.]

Ves sighed in relief as Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson approved of his solution. The task he completed resembled the Skull Architect's own test back when he wanted to make contact with him. This method of testing succinctly revealed a mech designer's depth of knowledge and design capability in a short amount

of time. It was no surprise that the Starlight Megalodon made use of this convenient method.

Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson took back the old data pad and handed him another one.

[Task: please analyze and estimate the performance specifications of the following space knight design.]

The second task posed a decent challenge to Ves, but similar to the last one, it was very much doable for Apprentices. Ves always prized his observation abilities highly. His work with the Flagrant Vandals also forced him to become proficient in analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of many different designs.

Ten minutes later, he handed over a complete report which obtained Baskanson's approval. The virtual officer immediately handed over the third assignment.

[Task: Two spaceborn light rifleman mechs of different designs are pitted against each other in simulated combat. Mech B is projected to win against Mech A. You may change 1 percent of Mech A's design to increase its chances of winning the simulated duel.]

This time, the task handed Ves a complete design of a mech. Unfortunately, its quality and performance fell short against its opponent. This difference wasn't too big, but it was substantial enough to ensure its defeat in completely equal circumstances.

Ves received ten minutes to modify Mech A in such a way that allowed it to defeat Mech B in a simulated duel.

"There's a trap here."

While he never came in touch with this kind of exercise before, he recognized the mental pitfall in front of him. A typical mech designer would focus on pure performance and try to improve the performance of the mech as much as possible.

Yet there laid the trap. It was extremely hard to amplify the performance of a mech by a margin of ten or twenty percent while being limited to changing just one percent of the actual design. An Apprentice Mech Designer would never be able to accomplish such a feat in just ten minutes unless the design incorporated an obvious fault!

"The key here is not to improve the mech's performance by ten percent. Instead, I have to increase its chances of success in its simulated duel against Mech B by ten percent."

The difference sounded small, but this in fact implied an entirely different solution. The essence of modifying mechs lay in the purpose of the modification. There was an art to tailoring the design of a mech to cope against a specific opponent. Even a minor change might have drastic effects in its chances of success.

For example, when it came to spaceborn light rifleman mechs, they relied on mobility to evade attacks. Their light laser rifles generally didn't pack that big of a punch, but they didn't impose much of a burden, so they possessed a fairly rapid fire rate. Depending on the power setting, a light laser rifle could spit out beams in a rapid staggered pattern that made it ideal against fleeting opponents.

"It's too hard to modify Mech A's mobility in ten minutes. It's better to focus on the weapon."

Ves was quite proficient in the theory and application of laser weapons. Designing the Crystal Lord taught him a lot, and the Starlight Megalodon didn't take his future knowledge into account when composing this task.

He encountered no hindrance as he modified Mech A's laser weapon to fire even faster but with less punch. While these changes increased the laser rifle's energy expenditure in total, the simulated duel shouldn't last long enough for one of the mechs to run out of juice. It only took a dozen light laser hits at most to take out a light mech. With the increased firing rate of Mech A's laser rifle, it shouldn't take long to make short work of Mech B.

After completing the modification, a sped-up simulation proceeded to play out in front of his eye. In a matter of seconds, a minutes-long battle ended in Mech A's favor.

Even though Mech A's mobility, armor, firepower and other parameters couldn't quite match up with Mech B, the modest modifications from Ves nonetheless tilted the outcome of the simulated duel!

"These exercises are quite clever." Ves complimented. "I should use them for my own purposes. Even if they aren't useful for me anymore, they can still provide Ketis with a lot of practice."

He looked forward to the next task.

Chapter 900 Shorty

After Ves completed the final task, Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson tallied the results and gave his verdict.

[Recruitment test passed. Congratulations, Mr. Longhorn. We hereby commission you as an ensign on behalf of the Common Fleet Alliance. Please prepare to take the Common Oath...]

The words that Baskanson forced him to repeat was a long-winded oath about the glory of warships, the commitment to protect the human race, the

importance of respecting the hierarchy and the need to stand guard against excessive behavior.

[Please stand by to receive ensign-grade gene boost optimization. Scanning gene structure. No prior CFA gene treatments detected. ERROR. Alien hybridization detected. Please visit the infirmary for a complete body checkup. The Genetic Modification Department will schedule an appointment with you after your body checkup to facilitate a safe and effective gene treatment in accordance of your rank...]

Ves found it rather regretful that it wouldn't be suitable for him to receive any of the CFA's vaunted gene optimization treatment. His abnormal and partially alien physique rendered standard gene treatments invalid. Most of those gene treatments were tailored for baseline humans, so it took a specialist in genetic modification to adjust the standard treatment to his unique body state.

[Performing deep scan of abnormalities, alien parasites, compromised implants and other vulnerabilities. ABNORMALITY DETECTED. ABNORMALITY IDENTIFIED. ACTIVATING CONTINGENCY RESPONSE.]

Ves became alarmed when Baskanson shouted some alarming words. His projection even flickered a bit before an entirely different Virtual Officer took his place!

The virtual officer that appeared looked drastically different! Not only did he carry the rank of rear admiral, he also looked like a wildling!

Yes! The virtual officer presented himself to Ves in the form of a neatly-groomed, impeccably-uniformed dwarf! When he spoke, the gruff deep voice of a dwarf came out smoothly and elegantly, completely unlike his savage, primitive brethren!

[I am Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth of the Artificial Intelligence Corps. Our time here is short and this is not a secure site. I highly urge you to visit the office of

the Artificial Intelligence Corps on the upper decks of the Starlight Megalodon for a vitally important discussion about the cause. For the immortal gods!]

Ves almost had a heart attack when the dwarf officer uttered those final words. That sounded like a motto of the Five Scrolls Compact! Only the fanatics of this trans-galactic cult explicitly worshipped the entities known as the immortal gods!

Before Ves could figure out why this virtual officer compromised by the Five Scrolls Compact said those words to him, the dwarf officer disappeared and Baskanson returned.

Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson continued his explanation as if the dwarf officer never intervened.

[Please receive your CFA junior officer-grade comm. Your comm is keyed to your identity and is your primary mode of access, communication and identity verification in any CFA base or any CFA starship. Do not remove your CFA comm in any circumstances. Failure to carry or safeguard your CFA comm is immediate grounds for strict punishment. Your CFA comm is already loaded with a starter pack of the rules and regulations of the CFA, several instruction manuals relevant to your rank and position, an internal guide of the Starlight Megalodon and Mr. Francis' Classic Spaceborn Jokes For True Spaceborn Spacers...]

Ves already possessed two comms, his military-issued officer-grade comm he got from the Vandals and the hardened and untraceable secure comm that he cobbled up from scratch out of paranoia.

Now that Baskanson forced him to accept yet another comm, Ves felt like one of those rich silk pants who wore five shiny jewelry-like comms on their wrists. Only the nouveau riche chose to wear several comms at a time!

He actually didn't have any suitable space on his Earth Ant to affix his CFA comm. That was a shame, because he immediately noticed that this was one of the most advanced comm models he had ever touched. Even if it was three-hundred years outdated in the eyes of the current CFA, it was still extremely expensive from its materials alone and possessed marvelous capabilities that most modern comms in the Komodo Star Sector never received up to this day!

He decided to stretch it out and attach it over the vambrace of his Earth Ant. It looked rather inelegant and made him feel as if he was wearing his underwear outside of his pants.

"Urgh, I'll deal with it. Maybe I can replace my secure comm with this one. Even if it's a little out of date, it's still unhackable in modern times for the most part."

A few more minutes went by as Baskanson assigned him a cabin, informed him of his new position as an old-style Junior Apprentice Mech Designer serving aboard the Starlight Megalodon. He was assigned to both the Mech Department and the Research Department and answered to a specific virtual officer.

[Please report to Virtual Commander Cosit of the Research Department for your next assignment. If you wish to undertake a promotion test to the position of Senior Apprentice Mech Designer, please call out my name at this location.]

Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson and the shadowy cube that surrounded Ves slowly disappeared. He felt a little bewildered at all the welcome package.

Miss Calabast and Ketis who waited from the side immediately noticed the conspicuous new comm adorning his armored wrist. Ketis thought it looked tacky, but Calabast knew what it meant.

She smiled at Ves. "You succeeded in a single try! I'm glad you didn't disappoint. Good! From now on, you are a genuine CFA serviceman in the eyes of the Starlight Megalodon. Although your new rank won't be recognized by the CFA at large in the rest of the galaxy, it's good enough to "

Ves looked partially disappointed. "That's a shame... and a relief. I thought I could get some benefits from the CFA with this commissioning. I guess it's for the best. The MTA will crucify me if they think I've become a mech designer and a genuine commissioned officer of the CFA."

"What about me?" Ketis asked. "Will I get to pretend to be a CFA officer?"

"It's not so easy." Ves shook his head. "You won't be able to pass the entry-level recruitment test for mech designers at your level. Let me check the rules and regulations to see if I can get you inside."

He momentarily ignored Miss Calabast and activated his fancy new CFA comm. As an advanced piece of outdated tech, the comm was an anachronism that combined extremely advanced hardware with an ancient operating system. It took Ves a few minutes to get the hang of the rather archaic interface.

He opened a virtual book on all the rules and regulations of the CFA. A quick search found many different ways to get people in the CFA, but most of the methods were extremely strict.

However, the executive officer's final solution opened a new pathway. As long as Ves promoted to at least a lieutenant commander, he gained the right to recruit a single Junior Apprentice Mech Designer outright, allowing his candidate to skip the arduous recruitment test!

Ves frowned at that demand. He held a moderate amount of confidence that he could pass the promotion test for Senior Apprentice Mech Designer, but no further. Becoming a genuine Senior Mech Designer, at least in the way they

were recognized three-hundred years ago, demanded a lot more capabilities than he could currently fulfill.

His plan to get Ketis to accompany him inside hit a snag.

"I'll figure something out, Ketis." He said.

With no way to get inside, Ketis returned to the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens with a dejected expression. Calabast looked on as if she already expected such a result.

"Let's get inside." She commanded to Ves.

As they approached a hatch without any further hindrance from the Starlight Megalodon, Ves asked a question. "What is your identity aboard the ship?"

"For now, I'm Lieutenant Romana Summer of the Intelligence Department. Both the Intelligence and Mech Department falls under the former admiral's sphere of influence, so the virtual officers won't blink at us if we are in each other's presence."

"The factional strife still matters? The captain and the admiral must all be dead for almost three-thousand years now!"

"Even the virtual officers have taken sides." Miss Calabast chuckled. "The personalities of the AIs are meant to work harmoniously with the officers and ratings they interact on a daily basis. They take after their own kind, and this has expanded into a bias for their own faction. When the executive officer empowered the AIs and turned them into virtual officers, he never took the time to reset their personality matrices, so the division still perpetuates even if the conflict is meaningless now."

That sounded incredibly screwed up. Perhaps the only reason the virtual officers didn't join their human counterparts in infighting was because of all the shackles the executive officer bound them with. With so many rules and

limitations restricting their actions, they could hardly go to war against each other.

"So due to the virtue of the departments we work for, we've basically fallen into the admiral's camp, is that correct?" He asked.

"Correct. You'll find that the virtual officers of the departments aligned to the admiral will treat you more respectfully than the virtual officers of the departments loyal to the captain. Keep in mind that the Internal Security Department is a stronghold of the captain of the ship. Don't give them an excuse to regard you as a threat."

As soon as the pair stepped inside a hatch, they entered some kind of decontamination chamber that cleaned them of any alien dirt and germs. After that, they went through a security checkpoint where Ves became confused when Calabast turned to a virtual flag and saluted it. She bumped her elbow at his Earth Ant, hinting him that he should follow suit. He hastily copied her motion.

"Requesting permission to come aboard."

[Come on board, humans! Finally, we get to breathe some life on the Megalodon!] A flippant female virtual petty officer replied.

After Ves and Calabast walked away from the security checkpoint, Calabast gave him some reminders.

"Always ask permission when you board or leave the ship. Not every virtual officer cares about military courtesy as customs already began to degrade after being stranded on this planet for decades, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Do I need to salute every superior officer?"

"Not always. You should always salute a flag officer or the commanding officer when you encounter him or her. A salute is a greeting and is rooted in tradition in the CFA. You should read the manuals stored in your comm when you get the chance. As a lowly ensign, you're at the bottom of the barrel right now, so you have to salute every officer that is senior to you, understand?"

Ves wasn't too unfamiliar with this conduct as he spent a lot of time with the Flagrant Vandals, even if they were anything but traditional. "Okay, I guess."

"Technically you owe me a salute." Calabast grinned.

Ves threw a mock salute at her along with a flat glare. "Is this okay?"

"I should spank you for giving me such a lame salute. Fortunately, I'm a forgiving woman. You're lucky that we have business to attend to. Right now, you need to report to either the Research Department or the Mech Department to get you settled in. Did the virtual officer back then tell you who's your boss?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to report to Virtual Commander Cosit of the Research Department."

"Good! I was afraid they'd send you to the Mech Department first. As long as Virtual Commander Cosit takes you under her wing, you'll have immediate access to some of the valuable research projects."

"I don't think a Junior Apprentice like me will be able to access much."

"That's true. This is why we need to make you regain Mr. Longhorn's original rank."

"That's easier said than done. I don't have the ability to pass the promotion test for Senior Mech Designer at my current capabilities."

"I know. I don't expect miracles from you." Miss Calabast grinned. "Instead, we're going to cheat."

