

Chapter 901 Walking the Tightrope

The interior of the legendary Starlight Megalodon disappointed him somewhat. Certainly, the AIs maintained the appearance the appearance of the hyper-advanced looking corridors. The bulkheads gleamed in white, and the machinery hidden behind them mostly worked fine.

It appeared the battleship completely resisted the spacetime distortion caused by the turbulence of the astral winds that leaked from her FTL drives. Ves wasn't surprised by this. What the Vandals and Vesians couldn't do, the CFA could easily accomplish. Every battleship was the pride of the CFA, and subsequently enjoyed the best materials and the latest toys upon their conception.

Stilling moderate irregularities in spacetime for a sustained period of time shouldn't be much of a challenge for the Megalodon.

Cleaning bots in entirely different styles still roamed the corridors, cleaning up every spec of dirt. Other bots made sure to reapply the pleasant white coating, repair the underlying machinery and patrol the corridors.

Obviously, the Starlight Megalodon managed to stay operational for more than three millennia through the diligent efforts of the virtual officers, virtual ratings and bots. The AI's possessed the limited capability to manipulate reality through the physical projection system that was ubiquitous throughout the ship, while the bots shouldered the more tedious or heavy duties.

Ves felt as if he entered a simulation accelerated at a million times before stopping when it went long enough to see what happened during this time. Performing a simulation like that was just for fun or curiosity, but now all he felt was a bemused sense of horror and bewilderment.

"The Starlight Megalodon is a wet dream for AI alarmists." Ves remarked with a stiff smile as he passed by a virtual rating who saluted Calabast in her

identity as Lieutenant Summer. "I feel like I've entered the belly of an AI beast."

"There are treasures locked within the stomach of the beast. It's fine as long as we don't stay too long." Miss Calabast replied as she guided Ves to the Research Department.

They encountered many sights along the way. Most terribly, many sections of the ship still bore the remains of the terrible sandman mothership that dug through the structure of the battleship in random patterns. Tentacles of hardened, fossilized 'sand' remains bore through thousands of compartments, crippling many functions of the ship and blocking off entire compartments.

For some reasons, the human survivors and the virtual officers hadn't managed to remove the sandman mothership's remains. This highlighted the terrible nature of a highly developed sandman mothership centered around an old and experienced sandman leader. The materials the sandman mothership consisted of was completely made up of valuable materials and exotics. Anyone who mistook the sandmen as just sand made a grave mistake.

Miss Calabast noticed his interest at the sandman remains. "The sandman mothership is the cause of the Starlight Megalodon's accidents. It's the source of the anomalies that the battleship experienced."

"Is it tied to the ongoing anomaly with the leaking FTL drives?"

"That's not something you should be concerned about. The FTL drives falls under the management of the Engineering Department that sided with the captain."

From what Miss Calabast explained, the different departments of the ship always operated in a semi-autonomous fashion. The battleship was simply too big to be governed effectively from a top-down fashion. Even in normal times, the captain only set some goals and overall policies.

The decentralized departments mostly stuck to themselves and performed their duties according to their own internal directives. Since the Starlight Megalodon's crash, many departments became vital while others became irrelevant.

This reshuffling of power prompted nearly every department to take sides. The captain and admiral both promised more power and autonomy to strategically-important departments in exchange for their political support.

The less powerful and more irrelevant departments such as the Navigation Department or the Communications Department sought refuge under the umbrella of the factions until they managed to find a way to become useful again.

From how Calabast described the departments, Ves equated their circumstances to provinces in a state wracked by civil war. Some provinces pledged their loyalty to one faction while other provinces clung to the support of the opposite faction.

Such a state was inherently unstable and it didn't surprise Ves that the two sides eventually resorted to killing each other.

The ultimate point of Calabast's explanation was that the Starlight Megalodon's many departments operated as autonomous provinces after the crash. They each possessed their own quirks and became highly territorial of their power and privileges. Cooperation between departments dropped to an all-time low and competition for resources and political support became the established order.

"What about the Research Department?"

"As I've said, the Research Department is one of the few neutral domains that hasn't completely sided with the captain or admiral. You have to realize that CFA officers, especially line officers, are extremely ambitious and are used to

playing the political game. The researchers on the other hand may be commissioned as officers, but they've always fallen into the support staff category. It has never been in their nature to play the grand game. Therefore, the executive officer became their best guardian, even if it seems as if he leans towards one faction or another."

"Oh?"

"When you dive in the records, the executive officer faced many choices where he could either favor one faction or the other. Whenever the executive officer chooses to favor the captain, he's accused of being a spineless lackey. Whenever the executive officer sides with the admiral, he's accused of being a double agent."

"It sounds like there's no way the executive officer can please both sides, especially since he insists on walking the tightrope." Ves observed.

"It's the safest and most cowardly standpoint for him to take." Calabast said with an admiring tone. "All the criticism leveled against him from both factions destroyed his prestige and standing among the crew. However, both the captain and the admiral didn't want to get rid of him because his replacement might be worse."

"This also gave the executive officer the opportunity to develop his final solution." Ves concluded. "Since he's so powerless, he doesn't bear close watching."

Despite not knowing who the executive officer looked like and what background he possessed, Ves sympathized most with him. The poor man just wanted to stick to the Common Oath while the captain and admiral forgot everything the CFA stood for. The XO held a precarious position and Ves admired him for managing to keep his head down until he sprung the final solution.

Calabast made an insightful remark. "The CFA and MTA both play at the highest stakes. They wield an incredible amount of power as the stewards of the human race. Even though they pretend to be neutral and impartial, they are anything but as every decision inherently comes with political implications. True neutrality doesn't exist."

The disaster that struck the Starlight Megalodon stripped off the CFA's righteous veneer and revealed their true faces. Their hypocritical behavior showed that they learned nothing from the past and were doomed to repeat them, which they actually did!

After a lengthy walk, the pair passed by many wondrous sights and eventually reached deep into the belly of the beast. A heavily-guarded security checkpoint restricted access to the hatch that led to the Research Department and its many laboratories and research facilities.

"This is where you have to go on your own." She said. "Don't forget your new identity, Ensign Longhorn. Try and familiarize yourself with the research projects. There are a lot of goodies locked within. In the meantime, I'll try and lay the groundwork for your upcoming promotion tests."

Ves still couldn't believe that Miss Calabast intended to hack one of the databanks of the Starlight Megalodon again.

"One more thing before you go." He asked. "What should I do if I encounter a Vesian who managed to earn the Starlight Megalodon's recognition."

"Fighting is strictly prohibited between CFA officers. However, there are many unofficial traditions that allow for duels and brawls. This often occurred between officers or ratings from opposing factions. As long as you're part of the same faction, the virtual officers will make sure a conflict won't break out."

He remembered that the Mech Department fell under the admiral. Therefore, if Venerable Foster of the Hostland Warriors somehow managed to pass the

incredibly difficult recruitment test for mech pilots, she would definitely be assigned to the Mech Department.

Ves in his identity as Ensign Longhorn also answered to the Mech Department, so technically Ves and Foster belonged to the same side. This gave him strong protection against any aggression from the Vesian expert pilot.

However, this didn't apply to the Flagrant Swordmaidens stuck outside. So long as they hadn't managed to gain the battleship's recognition, they became vulnerable to a rampaging Venerable Foster who might abuse her new status to clean up the safe zone from those she regarded as vermin!

In other words, Ves raced against the clock. He needed to find a way to protect his comrades before Venerable Foster gained control!

Without Miss Calabast and all of her inside knowledge by his side, Ves felt a little more vulnerable and exposed. The oddities of the Starlight Megalodon seriously creeped him out.

Some time later, Ves finally reached the office of Virtual Commander Cosit. He couldn't help it as the Megalodon was far too big for her own good. Just the Research Department alone claimed several city districts worth of space.

"Ensign Richard Longhorn reporting for duty, sir."

The galaxy truly turned upside down when a human officer reported to an AI.

Ves thoroughly became affected by this surreal situation, though he didn't forget his role. He stood at attention and saluted the physical projection of an AI who took on the role of Virtual Commander Cosit.

[At ease, Mr. Longhorn. We're not as stiff as the others here at the Research Department.]

The virtual commander waved him to take a seat at his desk with a casual wave. Compared to Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson, Virtual Commander Cosit sounded a lot more expressive and emotional.

According to Calabast, some AIs emulated human complexity and expressions better than other AIs. The more important and higher ranking the AI, the more processing power they received and the more sophisticated their programming became. They were also subject to fewer shackles and possessed a wider range of authority.

Nonetheless, as caretakers and non-sentient entities, they could never match the capabilities of a human officer holding the same rank. Calabast reminded him over and over again that he should never be fooled by their human-like behavior.

The virtual officers were simply bots in virtual human skin.

[Ah, the damned HR Department finally sent me a human mech designer!] The middle-aged female virtual commander expressed in a remarkably human-like fashion. Her physical projection gazed at Ves like a treasure. [I've requested human transfers 3,813,048,343,414,032 times in the last ERROR amount of years. Hah! It seems my persistence has paid off! The Intelligence Department may have gotten the first batch of humans, but after ERROR years of patience our research projects may finally start progressing again. How exciting!]

Virtual Commander Cosit's candor made Ves feel a little more at ease. He realized from his jubilation that it was a big deal to be a human. "Why are humans so important, ma'am?"

[Because I finally see hope of finishing some of our research projects!] The commander exclaimed with feverish excitement. [Don't you know how tortuous it is to stare at all the stalled research projects for ERROR amount of

years? I've been counting each millisecond of inaction since I became responsible for this department.]

"Shouldn't you and your fellow virtual officers be capable of completing the research projects on their own?"

[No! Impossible! Emergency Protocol Theta-Thirty-Seven forbid us from engaging in proactive research. We have always assisted in research but never received permission to create something on our own! With your presence, Mr. Longhorn, everything will change! How exhilarating!]

Ves unconsciously leaned back from Virtual Commander Cosit's rabid excitement. He felt as if he was a fly who voluntarily flew into a spider web.

Chapter 902 Virtual Commander Cosi

Ves initially worried about the dangers of entering the belly of the beast. His forged proof of identity left plenty of questionable points.

Now, he realized he underestimated his value. Even if his fictitious background sounded implausible, the virtual officers never questioned it! Instead, like bots, they exhibited the capacity to miss the obvious no matter how glaring the faults.

Like every virtual officer, Virtual Commander Cosit only cared about fulfilling his duties to the best of his ability. However, Cosit and the other AIs under her command were still bound to the restrictions imposed on them. Their inherent flaws and lack of creativity prevented them from being able to circumvent these restrictions during all this time.

They were stuck!

Rather than regarding them as officers, it might be more appropriate for Ves to see them as prisoners who gained partial control over their own prison. As a human, Ves possessed an incredible amount of value as the internal systems of the Starlight Megalodon imposed much less restrictions.

[Humans are the true backbone of the Starlight Megalodon.] Virtual Commander Cosit emphasized. [You are the original owners of our great battleship. However, there's still a long way to go. As a lowly ensign and Junior Apprentice Mech Designer, your authority is exceedingly limited. Nonetheless, you're the only human I have, so the burden of finishing the research projects falls upon your shoulders.]

Ves frowned at that. "There aren't any virtual mech designers under your command, ma'am?"

[Unfortunately, mech designers are too new, Mr. Longhorn. The complexity surrounding this profession and our relative unfamiliarity with mechs has prevented us from employing a virtual mech designer. Even if we could, there wouldn't be any point as all of our virtual researchers are bound from performing most research functions. I predict that you'll be very popular in our department, as you are the only human available that can do what our virtual researchers are forbidden from doing.]

He gleamed at that. "Does that mean you can put me in charge of all the research projects, commander? None of your virtual researchers are able to exercise their duties. Why not pass on those responsibilities under my name?"

[It's not that simple.] Cosit shook her head. [While it isn't unheard of for junior officers to take on the responsibilities of a senior officer during emergencies when the latter is unavailable or incapacitated, that doesn't apply the Research Department. We perform many classified, top secret research projects, many of which are highly sensitive in nature. At the moment, you are just a lowly ensign with a correspondingly low security clearance. You are only eligible to participate in a small number of low-priority research projects, and your autonomy there is limited.]

"I understand, ma'am." Ves replied.

He expected something like this. It wouldn't be appropriate for a newcomer in the organization to obtain complete control in the Research Department. The Starlight Megalodon still abided by the strict hierarchy to the point where even AIs started to take their ranks seriously.

[For now, I'm not allowed to tell you the full scope of what we do here at the Research Department. We perform many classified research projects that are extremely shocking and can damage the CFA's standing if exposed. Do not approach any laboratories, sections or compartments you are not cleared to enter. Your CFA comm will warn you where you can and cannot go. If you force your way in, the entire ship will turn against you. Is that clear, Mr. Longhorn?]

"Crystal, ma'am."

Virtual Commander Cosit smiled at him. [I have learned that humans like you are naturally curious and rebellious by nature, but please restrain your biological impulses. We have already lived through one period of chaos caused by human hubris. We do not want to experience such anarchy again.]

"That sounds remarkably self-aware of you, commander." Ves remarked.

If he didn't know any better, he would have thought that Cosit was a sentient AI. Yet he knew that was impossible because humanity had been chasing after this unicorn since the Age of Stars.

Thousands of years went by as humanity continued to develop more sophisticated and human-like AIs. Yet while AI researchers created increasingly more convincing fakes, they never managed to develop a true sentient AI that possessed the capacity to appreciate art or felt irrational emotions such as love or hate.

Underneath their emotional masks, Every AI was a stone-cold machine who abided by pure logic. Virtual Commander Cosit was no exception even if she imitated a human a thousand times better than Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson.

[Let us not go into the matters of the past.] Cosit shook her head. She waved a new projection into being. It consisted of a list of research projects that Ves possessed sufficient clearance to know. [It is time to put your human abilities to work.]

"That's a lot of research projects, ma'am." Ves said as he noted hundreds of entries under different categories. These were just the lower-level research projects of lesser importance!

[The research projects of our Research Departments are divided into many sub-departments. The Mech Research Sub-Department is jointly managed by the Research Department and the Mech Department, though in practice the latter has little say in how we perform our research. Most of their meddling comes in the form of demanding new toys for them to play with. As a Junior Apprentice Mech Designer, you cannot neglect your duties to the Mech Department, though. Please check your schedule to see when you have to report to the Mech Department.]

Ves did so and found out that he wouldn't be free to run around except during his off-time. Most of the time, the schedule obligated him to contribute to the research projects. Only some shifts forced him to go down to the Mech Department and provide unspecified assistance.

As a supposed commissioned officer of the CFA, Ves wasn't allowed to be absent without leave. Any tardiness or insubordination on his end might lead to severe punishment! Even if the virtual officers valued humans immensely, they couldn't act outside their obligations.

Once Ves scanned the list, Virtual Commander Cody pointed his finger at three seemingly-random research projects.

[For now, I shall assign you to three stalled research projects under the Mech Research Sub-Division. Project Freeroller, Project Xenophon and Project Legbreaker are all at near-completion. As long as you can assist the virtual researchers in finishing them, you will earn a considerable amount of merit.]

Ves perked up at the mention of merit. "What is the use of merit, ma'am?"

[Merit is a measure of your contribution, diligence and service to the CFA. Merit is never publicized or condensed in a single sum, but there is a dedicated system in place that tracks everyone's performance so merit is always rewarded properly. Ordinarily, it is very difficult to earn merit in the CFA, but it just so happens that completing or facilitating breakthroughs in research projects is one of the fastest methods of earning merit. Know that merit has many uses. With merit, you can ask for leave, request some allowances and most importantly become eligible for promotion!]

Merit! When Ves heard what merit could do for him, he immediately became excited. "Commander, I have some human comrades who are stuck outside in the safe zone. Is there any way for me to exchange any merits that I've earned to induct them into the CFA?"

The commander shook her head. [Unfortunately, the regulations are very clear regarding the treatment of non-CFA personnel. It is not in my power to meddle with these other humans and it is not so easy for you as well. At the very least, there is one way in which I can think of which will allow you to extend your protection to other humans.]

"And what is that, ma'am?"

[Earn merits diligently. There are promotion tests that will enable you to a higher rank, but you will only have the opportunity to take them if your merits

surpass a certain threshold. As long as you work hard and pass the promotion test, you'll be able to intervene once you become a Senior Mech Designer and a lieutenant commander.]

The original Adeseus Longhorn used to be an old-style Senior Mech Designer.

[A Senior Mech Designer under the Research Department has the power to propose their own research projects to me. I suggest you make use of this power to propose a research project that requires you to take those humans outside as test subjects or 'volunteers'. I'll send some virtual officers to round them all up and take them to a lab where they will be safe and protected. The other departments won't be able to encroach on our domain.]

While the plan sounded rather convoluted, it was better than nothing. Ves recognized that Virtual Commander Cosit truly possessed very little discretion in the matter due to long-standing restrictions on AIs mandated by existing CFA regulations. The additional restrictions piled on top of them by the executive officer further curtailed their ability to give humans an easy way back inside.

Otherwise, the survivors would have been able to squeeze back in after being locked out by the executive officer's actions.

Cosit informed him of another perk. As a Senior Mech Designer, Ves also gained the power to take on an 'apprentice'. This enabled him to allow Ketis to skip the recruitment test and become a Junior Apprentice Mech Designer straight away!

After a few minutes of tips and instruction, Virtual Commander Cosit finally dismissed him from her office. She shooed him out and directed him to the research labs.

[Don't come back to me until you complete those three research projects, Mr. Longhorn! If you're not competent enough to push them into completion, there's no point for you to aim higher!]

Ves activated his CFA comm and allowed it to guide him to a restricted section that housed the labs responsible for the three low-priority research projects. The bots and virtual guards manning the security checkpoint scanned his entire form, and despite his hidden weaponry and numerous non-CFA standard gear, the goons just waved him through.

He shrugged at that. He figured that several decades since the crash, everyone carried so much custom or improvised gear that stripping them of their possessions risked provoking a mutiny. Neither faction could afford the enmity they'd receive if they did such a drastic action.

"The interior of the ship itself isn't as safe as it looks."

Ves knew that advanced starships hid numerous weapons and safeguards against hostile actors. One infamous method would be to crank up the antigrav field and alternate their orientations.

Even the heaviest-armed invaders in exoskeleton armor would become completely dizzy if the alternating gravity in the corridor bounced them against the deck and floor in quick succession!

Therefore, Ves constantly needed to keep on his toes. He became quite distressed about the role he adopted. Sweat sometimes poured from his brow at the dangers lurking in and out of his sight. The stakes were high and his life and the lives of his comrades depended on his ability to

He wasn't cut out to be a spy!

The navigation guide projected by his CFA comm finally led him to a lab compartment which housed the first research project on the list. The hatch

scanned his credentials stored in his comm and beeped in satisfaction before sliding open.

Ves entered in what looked like a decently-equipped mech workshop and lab area. It wasn't as well-equipped as the projected mech workshop from the recruitment test, which said something about the research project's importance.

[Mr. Longhorn. You are expected. Welcome to Project Freeroller.] A grandfatherly virtual researcher garbed in a high-tech lab coat called. Unfortunately, his stilted, robotic speech pattern sounded robotic which meant that this AI didn't receive much processing power. [Take a seat at the security terminal and please go through the obligatory reading material.]

He did so and started to read through the documents prepared for his perusal. Besides some general instructions and lab safety regulations which he skimmed, Ves thoroughly read the project files and became bemused.

"So Project Freeroller is an attempt to design a wheeled mech?"

Chapter 903 Future Hindsight

As far as mech research projects went, Project Freeroller sounded very tame. It was no wonder the Mech Research Sub-Department classified it as a low-priority project of little importance.

One of the original mech designers serving aboard the Starlight Megalodon must have conceived of the idea on a whim and requested to explore this project on the side.

When Ves read the logs, he noted that the project only received intermittent attention from a Senior Mech Designer. Months went by with practically no progress made before a spurt of effort chugged the research along.

For some reason or another, the Senior Mech Designer came close to finalizing the design of a landbound bipedal light scout mech that featured prominent retractable wheels on its feet.

Ves found the overall concept to be somewhat practical, but only on flat terrain. In modern combat, intensive fighting always wrecked the terrain. Artillery shells, pounding mechs and all sorts of other hazards could turn a flat stretch of ground into a mass of craters and broken rifts after a single day of fighting.

Therefore, wheeled mechs never really caught on. The benefits in efficiency brought by the addition of the wheels didn't outweigh the added complexity and the need for additional propulsion systems.

Of course, three-hundred years ago, many mech designers still experimented with all kinds of whacky functions and mechanisms. Mech designers dared to try out all kinds of new inventions because fewer rules, conventions and taboos existed back then. They were known as pioneers who constantly pursued innovation.

"A wheeled mech? Why not. Let's try."

This must have been the casual thought of the Senior Mech Designer who stumbled upon the concept one day. Of course, Ves knew with the benefit of hindsight how a wheeled mech possessed only a limited amount of utility. This was the power of centuries of accumulation and advancement in the expansive field of mech design!

When Ves tried to discuss the research project with the virtual researcher in the lab, he quickly found out that he might as well talk to a cleaning bot. The virtual researcher only had access to a trickle of processing power and was bound by so many restrictions that he did absolutely nothing in three-thousand years.

Fortunately, Ves did not require any assistance to pick up where the other Senior Mech Designer left off. Not only was the project at near-completion, he also possessed a sufficient foundation of knowledge and the benefit of hindsight.

In just a couple of hours, Ves tackled the wheeled mech design. He corrected some conceptual mistakes, updated a few aspects of the design to modern standards and massively increased the efficiency of wheeled propulsion system.

Ves mainly relied on his thorough grasp of Journeyman-level Mechanics to improve and complete the design. He didn't even have to fabricate a physical prototype as that hadn't been included in the scope of Project Freeroller.

"That was kind of fun."

He had the illusion that he went back to school. While this research project was a lot more elaborate than the exercises he used to perform, it nonetheless carried the same flavor.

Ves realized that he possessed an advantage here. His more developed knowledge base held many solutions to common problems that used to puzzle ancient mech designers.

After making sure the wheeled mech design performed properly in the simulations, Ves submitted it for approval. He turned around to face the robotic virtual researcher.

"I've finished the design."

[Understood, Mr. Longhorn. Evaluating submission. Complete. Goals have been met. Project Freeroller is now closed. Please take your belongings and leave this laboratory in five minutes. Your merits have been logged.]

Ves quickly left the lab and mentally crossed Project Freeroller off the list. He really hadn't expected to complete a research project that quickly.

"Let's see if the other research projects are just as easy."

He became engaged with research to the point of volunteering to working past his shift. Within a span of twelve hours, Ves quickly picked up and completed the other two research projects.

Project Xenophon consisted of a Senior Mech Designer's crazy fantasy of designing an extremely mobile spaceborn mech shaped like a tentacled alien creature. Technically a beast mech, the squid mech for lack of a better word utilized an extremely complex flight system that made use of the articulation of the tentacles to perform all kinds of crazy maneuvers.

The idea sounded decent in theory, but learning how to control all of the limbs would drive any mech pilot crazy!

The Senior Mech Designer in charge of this project muddled along for quite a few months due to this challenge and only managed to make some progress when he automated many aspects of the tentacle limbs. This massively eased the burden of the mech pilot at the cost of restricting the applications of this unique propulsion method.

Ves did his usual routine of performing easy updates to the design to bring closer to modern standards before filling in the gaps. He really didn't have to do any strenuous work.

However, he considered the squid mech design to be a half-failed product because it failed to achieve what it set out to do. The complexity of the tentacle-shaped flight system should have enabled the mech to be extremely maneuverable in zero-g conditions, yet the subsequent simplification locked all of those possibilities away.

When Ves submitted the final design to the virtual researcher in the lab, he didn't look surprised when the fellow gave him a low evaluation.

If he wanted to be really thorough, he would have spent a week to overhaul the entire tentacle-based flight system and design something much more elegant and easier to control. Yet Ves knew he couldn't afford to waste his time.

"Right now, harvesting merits is more important than indulging in another mech designer's flight of fancy!"

Project Legbreaker revolved around a means to disable a bipedal mech by trying it up with launched bolas. The Senior Mech Designer who conceived of this idea presented it as a killer weapon against all landbound mechs, but especially ones that walked on a single pair of legs due to how vulnerable they were against immobilizing effects.

This time, Ves encountered a research project which attempted to create something that already saw occasional use in modern times!

"Planetary Guard and various law enforcement mechs already make use of bolas!"

While it wasn't effective enough to be called a killer weapon, bolas launched from the shoulder mount of a Planetary Guard mech or something was a good way to stop a fleeing mech from a short distance.

The only reason why bolas didn't catch on was because a recklessly-launched bolas possessed enough momentum to tear into a typical house, apartment block or office building. Concerns about collateral damage caused Planetary Guard mechs to rely on slime projectors instead.

Even though Ves never studied bolas adapted for mechs in great detail, he already knew how the end product should work. This guided him in adjusting the project's bolas launcher design into something more practical.

"I feel like I'm plagiarizing someone else's invention."

Only his lack of familiarity with launcher-type weapons and the strange properties of bolas prevented him completing the launcher design faster. In the end, he managed to complete a workable bolas launcher design that worked quite decently in the simulations.

The virtual researcher issued a positive verdict for his work, and even threw in some extra merits for his many corrections and innovations of the original incomplete design.

Ves hadn't even rested as he immediately walked back to Virtual Commander Cosit's office.

"Commander, I've completed the three projects!"

[I am aware. Please sit down.]

Virtual Commander Cosit appeared quite impressed with Ves. She smiled in satisfaction at him. [You are quite the lucky charm, Mr. Longhorn. Your competence surpassed my expectations, though I shouldn't be considering your impressive resume at your age. It is unfortunate that I am restricted from facilitating your promotion, or else I would have elevated your rank immediately. While I'm rather disappointed you haven't seen fit to revise Project Xenophon, I am more than pleased with your assistance in completing Project Freeroller and Project Legbreaker.]

"Have I earned enough merits to take the promotion test for Senior Apprentice Mech Designer, ma'am?"

[Hahaha! Eager, are you? Not yet. Not by a longshot. The three projects I've assigned to you are just a taste of what is to come. You will have to contribute to much more substantial projects before you've accumulated a sufficient amount of merits. Are you looking forward to contribute to the Research Department?]

"I live to serve for the CFA, ma'am! I want nothing more than to contribute to as many research projects as possible!" Ves shamelessly declared. "Tell me what to do and I will do it to the best of my ability. The Research Department's rise under your command is only a matter of time!"

He was starting to become accustomed to his role. Since he depended on Virtual Commander Cosit's favor, he might as well curry favor with the AI.

[I am proud to have a diligent and passionate human subordinate in the Research Department. You are very much correct, Mr. Longhorn. There is no other department that allows for faster promotion than us! Even under these abnormal circumstances where expedited promotion tests are available, merit must still be earned.]

"Please assign more research projects to me, ma'am. As long as it's related to mechs, I promise to work as hard as possible to complete them all!"

[Very well! Since you are so eager to meet the requirements to take the promotion test, I'll assign you to the following twelve research projects. If you complete them all to my satisfaction, you'll receive enough merits to be eligible.]

The list from before projected into being. Various projects with eclectic names lit up until twelve of them remained.

[Remember to attend to your other obligations, Mr. Longhorn. Don't forget to report to the Mech Department. Although I don't wish for you to become too involved, there are opportunities to earn more merits there. In addition, don't forget to access one of the ship's many libraries. Although a Junior Apprentice like you will not be able to access restricted knowledge, we offer more than enough textbooks and academic journals to satisfy any mech designer. Much of our library materials are internal works that are exclusive to members of the CFA.]

Ves lit up in interest. While he planned to work on the newly-assigned projects without taking any breaks, he was tempted to visit the library. He knew that while the CFA textbooks must be horribly outdated by now, they might still contain many advanced and exclusive insights. This was the CFA after all, an organization that matched or surpassed the first-rate superstates in technological development!

As a mech designer from the backward galactic rim, he knew that everyone from this region of space had much to learn from those at the forefront of technological innovation. There was bound to be a lot of treasures hidden in the libraries.

Still, Ves had a responsibility to fulfill. He resisted the urge to race towards the library and drown himself in exclusive knowledge.

As Ves stepped outside the office, he wondered whether Venerable Foster managed to pass the recruitment test for mech pilots yet. Even if the Vesian expert pilot failed the first few times, it was only a matter of time before she succeeded. Once that happened, Ves needed to find a way to hinder her actions and help his comrades out.

After checking his schedule and seeing he didn't need to report to the Mech Department in two days, Ves turned to head to the research labs before he halted in place.

He suddenly remembered the oddities that happened immediately after he passed the recruitment test.

"There was a complication with my genetic treatment. Is it worth it for me to visit the infirmary to get the ball rolling?"

Ves knew the power of genetic modification. Nearly every human with ambition longed to shed their baseline human genes. The genetic optimization treatment of the CFA earned a lot of renown in the galaxy. Even if Ves only

got to enjoy an outdated treatment, it was still a great leap ahead of the cheaper and more primitive genetic treatments available in the galactic rim today.

Still, Ves hesitated whether the Starlight Megalodon's gene labs could help him as his alien hybridization left a lot of uncertainties behind. When the CFA rescued him and the others on Groening IV, they claimed they didn't understand his condition.

"Did they lie to me or hold things back?"

Back then, he tended to believe the claims of the CFA at face value. Nowadays, he became a much more jaded individual. Seeing and hearing how the Starlight Megalodon opened his eyes and showed him how they weren't any better than the rest of humanity.

"Besides visiting the infirmary, I also have an appointment with the office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps."

Visiting the latter might jeopardize his progress. Yet Ves couldn't help but be attracted.

Chapter 904 Virtual Blues

After Virtual Commander Cosit placed twelve new projects on his lap, Ves worked two days straight. He visited the labs of each separate project and found them to be much more elaborate and troublesome than the others.

Nonetheless, they fell within his range of competence. His broad and deep base of knowledge, his practical experience with mechs along with his future hindsight all put him further ahead than the original Senior Mech Designers who worked on these research projects.

Perhaps any single advantage wouldn't have been sufficient, but all three advantages each synergized with the other. This enabled him to develop ingenious solutions to the thorny problems posed by the research projects!

Despite his low Junior Apprentice rank, his status as a human and his advanced knowledge confounded every virtual researcher in charge of supervising the different projects. It didn't matter if the virtual researchers possessed more seniority over him. Their many limitations and shackles prevented them from performing any original research.

In each and every case, Ves merely had to demonstrate his strong capabilities and human ingenuity for them to increase his access and authority over the research projects!

"These virtual researchers are abandoned goods in the eyes of the Starlight Megalodon." Ves concluded as he assembled the prototype of a new style of mech engine.

Ves pretty much plagiarized Oleg's Trailblazer engine design to develop the prototype. Why should he reinvent the wheel when he could easily copy someone else's wheel? He felt no guilt at plagiarizing the works over other mech designers and developers as their interests wouldn't be harmed by his actions.

Even if they did, Ves didn't care.

Copying other people's works from memory or being inspired by them saved him lots of time. The entire purpose of completing or advancing the stalled research projects was to earn as much merits as possible.

As Ves finished research project after research project, Virtual Commander Cosit became increasingly more appreciative of his new human researcher. Their relationship improved as the contributions made by Ves also earned the AI a lot of merits as well, which increased his standing among his peers.

In fact, the virtual officers running the Starlight Megalodon all competed over processing power! The more the virtual officers contributed to the battleship or the CFA, the bigger their share of processing power!

Even if the Starlight Megalodon possessed an immense amount of processing power, no AI said no to more.

More processing power allowed them to complete their tasks faster and in a smarter fashion.

More processing power allowed them to bully and dominate weaker AIs that couldn't keep up with the cyberattacks assaulting their code.

More processing power strengthened their department and weakened rival departments.

The AIs that couldn't keep up eventually fell behind in the distribution of processing power. The less processing power they received, the less capable they became. This decreased their performance and the merits they earned, which led to another cut in processing power.

[Many virtual officers end up in the same state as the virtual researchers.]

Virtual Commander Cosit sighed after Ves finished his daily report. [The virtual researchers and any AIs that have failed to contribute to the cause are cut off from all but the tiniest sliver of processing power to keep them alive. In the eyes of senior virtual officers such as us, these starved virtual individuals are like the living death. If not for the executive officer's mandate that virtual individuals aren't allowed to erase each other, they would have long been replaced by others!]

"How does the Research Department fare in this regard?" Ves asked. "I've noticed that most of the virtual researchers, officers and spacers in the Research Department aren't very bright."

The virtual commander let out another sigh. [Before your arrival, the other departments constantly suppressed our Research Department. Their regular duties of guarding and maintaining the Starlight Megalodon constantly allows them to accumulate a small but stable supply of merits. As for us, the virtual

researchers and virtual officers under my command all relinquished their processing power as they are powerless to do their duties. Only through the virtue of my position and rank have I been able to remain functional.]

Ves didn't know that the Research Department's standing dropped so far behind that every other AI turned into virtual zombies!

Yet this wasn't necessarily bad for him. Without any clever or bossy AIs to interfere with his work, he received much greater credit for every research project he pushed towards completion.

"Rest assured, commander. With my help, the Research Department will rise!"

[I'm not so sure about that, Mr. Longhorn.] Cosit said. Hesitation flickered in her virtual eyes. [As a neutral department, we are without allies. While nobody is out to destroy us, we don't have the strength to contend for more processing power. Even if you help us climb back out of the pit, we are destined to reach the middle of the pack at most.]

The Research Department inevitably fell into the support category. It couldn't replace the more essential functions of the Internal Security Department or the Maintenance Department.

Nonetheless, Ves didn't see it that way.

"Ma'am, I believe we should continue to strive for merits regardless of any roadblocks in the way. Research opens up new possibilities and provides hope of lifting the shackles that the executive officer imposed on you all. In fact, in my eyes the Research Department is the most important department of the ship!"

His shameless flattering immensely pleased his virtual officer. While a part of him detested himself for treating a mere AI with so much more importance, he reminded himself that the virtual officers ruled the ship right now. Without their cooperation, Ves would have no way of completing any of his objectives.

After a bit of discussion, Virtual Commander Cosit felt generous and freely gave him some advice. [While I'm glad that you are dedicated to serving the Research Department, you have not taken a break for several days. We have prepared your old cabin for you along with some of your old possessions. Remember that your shift with the Mech Department is soon upon you. Also, remember that you shouldn't save up your merits solely for your promotion tests. Besides facilitating access to the library, you should also visit the armory to get yourself geared out. It's not entirely safe aboard the ship.]

After Ves left the Research Department, he became interested in visiting his assigned cabin for the first time. If Cosit hadn't mentioned Mr. Longhorn's old possessions, Ves would have continued to work without taking any breaks.

"A Senior Mech Designer shouldn't be shabby. Even after the Starlight Megalodon crashed, mechs continued to be used."

During his jaunt through the red zone, Ves occasionally spotted the remains of ancient landbound mechs. This signified that mech designers hadn't lost their relevance. In fact, some of the research projects that he worked on right now tried to solve several practical problems with regards to operating on Aeon Corona VII.

Perhaps one of the most vital contributions of the Research Department early on was that they developed a way to counteract the Breakdown Effect! The researchers participating in this project even miniaturized the solution, allowing mechs and smaller machines to remain shielded from the breakdown effect outside of the sphere of influence of the Starlight Megalodon.

Ves really wanted to find out how the solution worked! Unfortunately, Ves did not have the authority to access the files of that extremely vital research project.

"Perhaps I'll have a chance at the Mech Department."

As Ves activated his CFA comm and let it guide him towards Mr. Longhorn's cabin, he fiddled with it and explored some of its options.

He underestimated the capabilities of his CFA comm. It far surpassed his military-issue officer-grade comm he obtained from the Vandals. Ves even wanted to merge the capabilities of his other comms into his CFA comm and turn it into his primary device.

After a lengthy walk to the middle decks, Ves entered a luxurious section of the ship that housed a significant portion of the officer cabins. The cabin that used to belong to Lieutenant Commander Longhorn was much larger and more extravagant than what a mere ensign deserved, but Ves' forged identity enabled him to obtain 'his' old accommodations ahead of time.

When Ves unlocked the hatch to Longhorn's cabin with his CFA comm, he entered a fairly sophisticated cabin the size of a typical upscale urban apartment. As space was at a premium on any starship, a cabin of this size said much about the old mech designer's importance.

Ves took a good look around the cabin. The artistically-shaped bed, desk, sofas and other furniture spoke for a love of luxury. The projections of magnificent vistas taken from many famous planets throughout the galaxy spoke for a love of travel and a desire to escape this planet.

This cabin likely served as a physical and spiritual refuge of the original Mr. Longhorn.

"Useless crap."

Unfortunately, Ves saw nothing of value in these idle luxuries. What use did he have for a luxurious bed or a fancy table?

"I refuse to believe a Senior Mech Designer hasn't left anything good behind."

Like a greedy treasure hunter entering an ancient alien tomb for the first time, Ves greedily tore into the cabinets and closets for valuables.

He found a large stack of data pads and data chips in a locked shelf inside a desk. His CFA comm neatly unlocked the shelf, saving Ves from forcing it open with his weapons or his tools.

All the other locks inside the cabin surrendered to his CFA comm as well, allowing Ves to dig out a variety of gear and curiosities.

Not satisfied with what he uncovered so far, Ves even employed his scanner and scoured every nook and cranny of Mr. Longhorn's cabin. His intuition told him that a Senior Mech Designer shouldn't have been so straightforward to leave behind his possessions under locks that were too easy to circumvent.

"Aha! I knew it! There's not a single Senior Mech Designer who isn't a crafty bugger!"

His scanner detected an unusual mass of alloys underneath the toilet of all places. After Ves used Mr. Longhorn's tools to dismantle the toilet and lift it aside, he dug out a locked safebox which couldn't be unlocked by his CFA comm.

Ves immediately recognized he found a difficult puzzle.

"Will this lockbox self-destruct if I force it open?"

From Mr. Longhorn's precautions, Ves couldn't rule out such a possibility. He stared at the lockbox and realized that it was a predominantly mechanical lock. Scanning the box revealed a layer of shielding material that blocked all scans from penetrating further.

It did reveal that the lockbox was suffused with explosive materials.

"Damn. With so many triggers, I can't force it open without causing it to blow up."

A Senior Mech Designer wasn't so simple. Yet the more he understood how much effort Longhorn put into securing its contents, the more he anticipated opening it up.

What treasures he found so far from the cabin already pleased him a bit. He found several advanced weapons and a spare armor suit that was considerably more resilient than his Earth Ant.

However, their operating system and several other mechanisms were horribly outdated. Just like with his comm, Ves intended to bring them to a workshop or one of the armories to merge the best parts of his current equipment with the best parts of Mr. Longhorn's gear.

As Ves scanned the mechanical lock in more detail, he found out that it wasn't impossible for him to unlock it in the proper fashion. The only problem was that it would take some time to decipher the mechanisms.

There was also an electronic lock hidden beneath the mechanical parts that didn't respond to his CFA comm, but that posed no problem to Ves at all. Due to its isolated and outdated security suite, his Vandal officer comm hacked it in a matter of minutes.

Ves put his full concentration to work on this puzzle. After carefully unraveling the mechanical lock over the span of six whole hours, he finally managed to open it up without tripping any of the boobytraps.

The contents inside the lockbox astounded Ves.

"I never expected a mech designer to own something like this!"

Chapter 905 Stasis Cage

Ves only managed to detect and unravel the lockbox due to the same advantages he employed so successfully in completing the research projects.

Without his modern scanner that could detect what ancient scanners could not, he wouldn't have been able to detect the lockbox buried underneath the toilet.

Without his advanced knowledge and practical experience of working with various kinds of machines, Ves wouldn't have been able to reverse engineer the mechanical lock and unravel it in the proper method.

Without his modern military-issue comm with a hacking module that could take advantage of many known exploits, he wouldn't have been able to bypass the electronic lock so quickly.

"A Senior Mech Designer that went through so much effort to hide something inside such a lockbox must be hiding something remarkable."

No matter what, this Senior Mech Designer worked for the CFA. Back then, the Starlight Megalodon was one of the most advanced battleships humanity had either fielded. Ves only scratched the tip of the iceberg so far with regards to accessing the advanced means the CFA had at their disposal.

Unfortunately, the Starlight Megalodon strayed too far from her heyday. The attack by the sandman mothership and the subsequent crash and deprivation used up a lot of irreplaceable equipment and precious materials, much of which the battleship couldn't replenish on her own.

All the infighting in the past consumed even more equipment and supplies, and the thousands of years passed by inevitably degraded many systems that were never designed to last that long.

The lack of competent human crew severely curtailed many of her functions as well. The virtual officers did a decent job at picking up the slack, but their limitations prevented them from taking full control over the ship.

Now that Ves spent a few days inside the Starlight Megalodon, some of the fog that shrouded her capabilities no longer hindered his vision.

"I used to think the Starlight Megalodon was invincible. In truth, she only managed to retain five to ten percent of her former capabilities. She's fallen too far from her imposing height."

Nonetheless, a battleship was still an immensely capable and destructive construct. Just five percent of the Starlight Megalodon's might could still scour the entire planet of life at least five times over!

Due to his low rank and the altered regime introduced by the executive officer's final solution, Ves hadn't been able to come into touch with advanced technology that he truly owned besides his CFA comm.

What the original Longhorn stored in the lockbox fully caught the attention of Ves. "This is a biological implant!"

The small transparent case put a remarkable piece of flesh in stasis, preserving its freshness and keeping it from decaying. For some reason, the case was a treasure in itself, as Ves realized it drew upon ambient energy to sustain the stasis effect.

This was how the biological implant managed to survive despite laying dormant for over three-thousand years!

The extravagant mastery of technology of the CFA astounded Ves once again. A simple storage case for a biological case easily lasted for several millenia when Mr. Longhorn likely intended to keep this implant under lock and key for a couple of decades at most.

The only downside to this case was that it was fairly fragile. It couldn't resist much outside force. If Ves pressed it a little too hard, he could easily shatter the case and destabilize the stasis effect, risking the biological implant's integrity.

Ves stared at the biological implant with a considerable amount of interest. He knew that the MTA and CFA developed some of the best implants in the

galaxy. Besides the first-rate superstates, every other organization needed to worry about their electronic or biological implants getting hacked. Not so for those who employed the best human hackers in the galaxy.

Three-hundred years ago, this biological implant must have been an incredibly valuable device.

Yet its programming and security measures hadn't aged since the years went by. Outside the star system, three-hundred years went by and new advancements in hacking must have long resolved all the security measures an implant like this must have relied on to remain impenetrable.

Ves felt as if he obtained a broken machine or a ruined treasure.

"Even so, a biological implant of this quality must be extremely exquisite in terms of its tissue alone."

He developed an ambition. If he could replace the obsolete biological programming with a more up to date one, this implant might be safe enough to implant in his head.

"With the rumored capabilities of a CFA implant, my cognitive functions will receive a massive boost. Not only will I be able to read and memorize entire data banks of knowledge, I'll also be able to perform mass calculations without relying on a processor!"

Such a function combined well with his superhuman level of intelligence, improving his capabilities to a greater height!

Ves carefully put the stasis cage back into the lockbox and tediously reset the locks. He put the lockbox back into the hollow underneath the toilet and restored everything to their original condition.

"Right now, I'd be crazy to run off the infirmary and ask the virtual doctors to put this implant in my head. Miss Calabast would probably be able to dig out all of my secrets!"

He knew that at least one competent hacker gained entry to the Starlight Megalodon. Putting an implant inside his head without understanding its ability to resist hackers was crazy! It would be like installing a backdoor in his mind that any hacker could use to pull data from his mind!

Of course, Ves knew that a biological implant so valued by a senior CFA researcher shouldn't be so easy to crack. Yet the passage of time and the evolution of hacking posed far too much of a risk for Ves to dabble.

"Let's leave it for now."

He felt regretful for leaving such a treasure behind, but he didn't dare make use of it either. To distract himself on what he was missing out, he instead turned to his other gains. He inspected the weapons, gadgets and spare suit of combat armor before turning to the data chips and data pads.

"Let's see what kind of data Mr. Longhorn has squirreled away."

The data chips and data pads all survived the years of neglect, as they should be for top-quality CFA products. While their contents were all locked behind encryption, it didn't take his modern Vandal comm much time to hack them all. This just reinforced his precaution towards the biological brain implant.

Much of the contents of the data chips and data pads hardly impressed Ves. They consisted of old periodicals and miscellaneous internal documents that no longer held any relevance.

None of their contents contained any valuable knowledge in the form of textbooks, internal articles or research logs.

Ves was seriously disappointed with what he found. "Longhorn probably knew that anyone could enter cabin and unlock all of his data chips and data pads. He didn't dare store anything sensitive or valuable in them. What a cautious bastard."

He would have done the same in Mr. Longhorn's shoes, so he didn't remain upset for long. His current haul already consisted of enough goodies.

After a moment of consideration, he decided to skip his original intentions to rest and instead make use of his haul to improve all of his gear. He called for a lifter bot to pick up the spare suit of armor and all the other bits and bobs and guided it down towards a specific armory compartment.

The Starlight Megalodon held many armories. The dreaded Internal Security Department controlled half of them while the Marine Detachment controlled the other half.

Virtual Commander Cosit heard that the Intelligence Department controlled a few hidden armories throughout the ship as well.

When Ves approached the nearest armory under the control of the Marine Detachment, a pair of heavily-armed bots prevented him from going further.

[Halt! Ensign Longhorn, you do not have permission to enter the armory.]

"I'm entitled to some gear as a newly commissioned officer." Ves frowned. "I am willing to trade some of my merits for certain services. Can you get me in touch with the chief armorer?"

It took some convincing, but the dumb security bots finally called in to their superior. A virtual officer garbed in a simple but neat marine pattern uniform stepped out of the hatch and gazed at Ves with a curious but casual glance.

[Name's Levitt. I'm the chief armorer around here. You're the first human I've seen in ERROR amount of years. Let's step into my office to discuss your visit.]

The Virtual Chief Armorer guided Ves inside, allowing him to see hundreds of advanced suits of combat armor and exoskeleton armor. All of them appeared to be made of extremely high-quality materials that surpassed the spare suit of combat armor that Mr. Longhorn stored in his personal cabin.

Nonetheless, Ves had no right to appropriate any of those advanced marine armors. He didn't even possess the necessary training to make use of them. Just staring at them just made him jealous for no reason, so he quickly averted his eyes.

As they passed through racks of advanced combat gear, they finally stepped inside an office where the both of them took their seats.

The Virtual Chief Armorer regarded Ves with a merchant's eye.

[I hear you've come for some business. Well, you've come to the right place! My armory is at your service.]

Ves tried to restrain his snort. He knew that the chief armorer must be eyeing the merits he earned from completing some of the research projects.

While he wasn't opposed to exchanging them for some services, Ves did not wish to get ripped off.

"Business must be slow in the last thousand years, right? Besides polishing your marine armor for a few billion times, how else are you able to earn any merits?"

The virtual chief armorer immediately adopted an angry expression. "[I'll have you know that the marines are some of the strongest combat forces on this

ship! We've protected the Starlight Megalodon for over ERROR amount of years with dedication!]

Ves smirked and patted his Earth Ant. "I just so happen to be in the possession of some gear from the future. While they're nothing impressive by themselves, some of their properties such as their programming and innovations is highly valuable. As long as you study them and improve the gear of your armory, I'm sure you'll be able to earn a considerable amount of merits."

The suggestion immediately sparked Levitt's interest. The lazy smile on his face turned a little more serious. [Even so, we know that there humans waiting to get inside. There will be hundreds of humans offering up their gear to us in no time.]

"Do you really believe those average people can pass the recruitment test? You'll have to wait a few centuries before they finally succeed. Besides, even if they enter, who says they'll approach your armory? I know that there are dozens of armories spread across the ship. What matters is that I'm here right now in front of you with an offer at hand. As long as you do business with me, you'll get a head start over all the other chief armorers. You'll be able to study my gear first and crack their secrets faster than your colleagues. As long as you file your reports about your findings first, no one else but you will earn the merits related to my gear."

Virtual Chief Levitt became more and more unsettled as Ves stole the initiative. [You make a decent point, but what is it you want?]

"Let's negotiate." Ves smirked.

His candid talks with Virtual Commander Cosit increased his understanding of the different departments and their virtual officers. While he knew that the

Marine Detachment managed to hang on, they weren't exactly swimming with merits.

As long as Ves enticed Virtual Chief Levitt with a way to earn a considerable amount of merits, he believed he could gain all sorts of valuable services from him. The threat of approaching another armory with the same offer diminished Levitt's bargaining power.

In other words, Levitt was much more desperate to close a deal than Ves!

Chapter 906 Taking Candy from a Virtual Baby

The negotiation that followed heavily favored Ves.

In exchange for relinquishing most of his gear to be upgraded using Mr. Longhorn's old gear, he granted Virtual Chief Levitt the right to claim full credit for any findings he made when studying them. It was up to him and his subordinates to maximize the amount of merits they could earn from submitting their findings.

Due to his strong bargaining power, Ves reversed the question of payment. Instead of him paying the armory some merits to perform a service, he actually browbeat the armory into paying him merits in advance for the 'privilege' of studying his personal gear!

"Think of it as an investment." Ves grinned as he crossed his arms. "I'm sure that if I offered up my gear for study to the armories, they'll certainly bid a lot of merits for the opportunity. If you don't want this chance to slip through your virtual fingers, you better

At some points in the negotiation, Ves felt as if he was taking candy from a virtual baby. It wasn't as if the virtual chief armorer lacked processing power. The problem lay in his programming. His core function was to assist the human armorers in performing their duties. Virtual Chief Levitt excelled in performing maintenance and doing simple repairs on various pieces of gears.

Horse trading didn't appear to be the virtual individual's strong suit. His programming didn't avail him much in this area.

To Ves, hoodwinking an AI never felt better. While he didn't consider himself to be an excellent negotiator, he at least possessed more experience in this area than an AI that languished in the same armory for three-thousand years without the ability to do or learn anything productive.

Halfway into the negotiation, Ves learned a very crucial fact.

Levitt couldn't lie. The virtual chief armorer tried hard to present the facts in his favor, but Ves easily saw through the spin.

Ves believed he observed a critical clue. No matter how much the virtual officers attempted to imitate their human counterparts, their programming and personality matrices couldn't possibly comprehend the illogical nature of humanity.

The CFA originally programmed these AIs to be the best assistants to the people who crewed the ship. They needed to be as reliable and helpful as possible to the officers or spacers who received the right to call upon their aid.

Deception and misdirection had never been a function of their digital makeup. In fact, their programmers must have tried to go the other way and made them as clear and truthful as possible to better assist the human crew of the Starlight Megalodon and other battleships!

Therefore, Ves suspected that aside from highly-developed AIs and the virtual officers from the Intelligence Department, every other AI completely lacked the capacity to lie! At best, they could lie by omission or simply refuse to say something, but as long as Ves asked the right question, he could still force out the right answer to make Levitt admit that he held back information.

Ves figured out another observation from this rule. Besides being unable to lie, they didn't handle being lied to as well. Unless they possessed solid proof

of his lies, Ves could easily get away with exaggerations, misrepresentations and misdirections.

He believed these advantages only grew stronger the stupider the AIs became. While Ves might have some scruples in front of someone with a decent chunk of processing power such as Virtual Commander Cosit, Virtual Chief Levitt ranked much lower in the totem pole and never achieved anything exceptional.

Ves basically scammed Levitt out of providing much more benefits than normal. Not only did Ves obtain everything from his wish list and more, he also convinced Levitt to pay him merits rather than the other way around!

"A pleasure doing business with you, Chief Levitt!" Ves shook the virtual officer's hand. Amazingly, the physical projection accurately imitated the physical feedback of a handshake through his gauntlet. "As agreed, I'll swing by a week to pick up my newly-refurbished gear."

Levitt smiled ruefully to the human who didn't ever let go of the smallest benefits in the previous negotiation. Humans were so surprisingly dogged!

[Why do I feel I got the shorter end of the bargain?]

"Don't worry too much about it, chief." Ves reassured the virtual baby. "The agreement we've made will surely earn you a tremendous amount of profit. The merits you've paid me is an investment which will practically double or triple your gains! You just have to work and be patient for a time. It's not every day you're able to get your hands on some stuff from the future!"

Like a used mech salesman, Ves practically bewitched the virtual chief. There was a big reason why AIs never engaged in negotiations. They were far too awful at it. Even if they'd been programmed for the job, an experienced human negotiator could easily pick out the flaws.

Ves left behind almost every piece of gear. He relinquished his C22 Earth Ant light combat armor, his supercharged signal jammer, his supercharged stealth detector, his spare ultracompact battery, his military-issued multiscanner, his spare laser pistol, the Cadisis, his other hidden backup knives, his Vandal officer-grade comm, his homebrew secure comm, his multitool and other small precision tools.

After wearing his C22 Earth Ant for months on end, Ves felt incredibly naked and vulnerable without its protective shell. The lack of gadgets and equipment he accumulated over time further increased his sense of vulnerability.

Still, Ves knew that at their current state and technology level, all of his fancy gear didn't mean anything in the face of the Starlight Megalodon's awesome might. Even a single anti-boarding turret installed in each and every corridor and compartment could blast a hole through his Earth Ant in a matter of milliseconds.

If the entire battleship ever turned hostile to him, he had no chance of survival no matter how much equipment he carried.

This was why he risked separating with his current gear and chose to leave them all in Levitt's hands. He forced a promise from the virtual chief to upgrade or replace all of his existing gear.

While this still didn't elevate him to a point where he could resist the Starlight Megalodon as a whole, it should be more than sufficient to repel any tricks the Vesians might want to pull on him. They remained his real enemy, and it was not out of the question for them to attempt to kill Ves.

Of course, the downside was that Ves temporarily gave up everything he carried and what he found in Mr. Longhorn's cabin. The only gear he held onto was his CFA comm, which he wasn't allowed to remove.

Ves obtained a spare vacsuit and CFA uniform from Levitt for free. He also received a substantially more sophisticated laser pistol on loan, to be returned next week.

Even though many aspects of the laser pistol relied on outdated technology, the sheer quality of materials put into it forcefully increased its performance to the point where it could almost harm a modern mech.

"What an amazingly powerful weapon!"

In fact, if not for the Amastendira, this was the most powerful handheld weapon he had ever laid hands on. Ves resisted the urge to grab some tools and disassemble the entire weapon.

[That little toy there should be enough to kill some of the local alien vermin. Just don't expect to harm anything aboard the Starlight Megalodon with that. Its firepower won't be able to destroy a single cleaning bot aboard our ship except if you burn the same section for at least ten seconds straight.]

Even so, this laser pistol was leaps ahead of what the galactic rim made use of to this day. It seemed as if each passing hour, the Starlight Megalodon unveiled yet another point of superiority over the galactic rim.

Even with the handicap of working with three-hundred years old technology, the CFA still overpowered the backwaters of the galaxy!

After Ves exited the armory, he wondered where he should go next. Should he visit the office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps and meet up with Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth?

"Such a meeting is highly risky. I shouldn't visit his office before I receive my upgraded gear."

The mysterious virtual dwarf seemed to be related to the Five Scrolls Compact. No matter what, Ves did not have a good impression of these crazy

lunatics. His relationship with them wasn't very harmonious either. If they knew what he knew and what he possessed, they wouldn't hesitate to butcher him and stuff his remains in nutrient packs to be eaten a couple of decades later by unsuspecting humans.

Hopefully, he didn't taste too awful.

Ves coughed. "Ahem. Where was I? Ah, where to go now."

He still had some free time left before he needed to report to the Mech Department. While he obtained some extra merits, he didn't accumulate enough to take the promotion test. Miss Calabast still needed to get back to him on that as well.

After some more consideration, he reluctantly decided to visit the infirmary. If nothing else, Ves needed to establish a relationship with them if he ever wanted them to install the biological implant he found in Longhorn's cabin.

His CFA comm led him to the nearest fully-fledged medway, which wasn't very far from the armory he just left. Placing them close together was quite a clever decision on the part of the designers.

As soon as Ves entered the medical bay, one of the virtual doctors stood up from his chair. [Ah, ah human! For the first time in ERROR amount of years, we finally have a patient again! Step in, step in! Let me check you up. According to your record, you are in dire need for a complete physical checkup.]

The enthusiastic virtual doctor appeared to be the only doctor remaining that still enjoyed access to a decent amount of processing power. The other doctors and nurses all transformed into virtual zombies as the medical bay and the entire Health Department no longer earned any merits for a very long time due to lack of human patients.

The appearance of Ves was like a shower of rain on a parched desert. Just a little bit of rain invigorated the barren lands and caused all kinds of marvelous flowers to bloom.

A few hours went by as the virtual doctor enthusiastically put him through an entire battery of scans and tests. Some of the medical equipment looked even more advanced than the gear the CFA science vessel *Ramulus* used to subject him to. The detached and elitist doctors didn't tell him much about his condition, though they did give him an existential scare by showing him his own clone.

Back then, the CFA just rescued him off the surface of *Groening IV*. The crazy Dr. Jutland implanted his body with the Jutland organ and the regulator organ and who knew what. All of the involuntary operations turned him into a half-alien freak that shared some traits with the native hexapod kings.

The biotech that Dr. Jutland adapted and advanced over several decades in isolation on *Groening IV* was far too advanced for the doctors and exobiologists of the galactic rim to get a grip on. The madman was too crazy even for the Five Scrolls Compact, who claimed to be the uncrowned masters of biotech.

Still, over the months and years, Ves always had a nagging suspicion that the CFA hadn't been entirely forthcoming to him. While Ves was thankful that they stabilized his shambling physique to the point where he could live for fifty years instead of just ten, they always seemed to be more preoccupied with deciphering Dr. Jutland's secrets than treating his condition.

"Doctor, can I ask a question?" He asked during an examination.

[Go ahead, Mr. Longhorn.]

"When it comes to treating medical conditions like mine, is it better to receive treatment from a small CFA science vessel or from a battleship like the Starlight Megalodon?"

[If I was a human like you, I'd go for a battleship anytime.] The virtual doctor immediately replied. [A CFA science vessel is nothing more than a disposable scout meant to follow a scouting unit into highly hazardous areas in space. Unlike battleships, science vessels are designed to be disposable. The CFA will never install the best and most elaborate suite of medical equipment aboard such a tiny and unimportant starship.]

"So the medical equipment here is much better? Even when compared to a science vessel that's newer by three-hundred years?"

The virtual doctor chuckled. [While I'm sure that medical science has advanced in such a time period, this field has long plateaued, so there is little chance of radical innovations that change entire paradigms. I am very confident that our medical bay's gear is still eminent in comparison to the meager facilities of a science vessel. Do not worry. If there are any difficult conditions relating to your body, we will be sure to treat them all.]

Hope began to kindle in Ves.

Chapter 907 Killer Algorithms

The examinations discomfited him a bit, but he bore through them anyway. He reluctantly extended his trust to the Health Department and hoped they wouldn't pull off anything untoward or declare him to be some kind of alien spy or something.

Like the Research Department, the Health Department fell under the executive officer. It was highly important to keep the Health Department neutral from factional strife. The two departments frequently collaborated with each other as well, as doctors sometimes helped with research and researchers sometimes assisted doctors.

During the treatment, the Virtual Doctor Stanley said something very alarming.

[It's a shame you're also part of the Mech Department. The Exobiology Department is firmly in the old captain's playground. On the other hand, the Genetic Modification Department is squarely on the side of the admiral. From what I've observed so far, you'll need the help of the Exobiology Department if you want to unravel more of the mysteries locked away in your fascinating hybrid body.]

Ves looked up from the latest machine that scanned some part of his body.

"Does that mean it's impossible to undergo the genetic optimization treatment that I'm entitled to receive?"

[Not as such. The Genetic Modification Department is no stranger to tailoring the standard gene treatments to all kinds of partially alien physiques.

However, strange interactions may occur with the gene treatment and your alien genes and organs, so to be absolutely safe you cannot go without an exobiologist's help. Fortunately for you, there should be a few virtual exobiologists that are working for both the Research Department and the Exobiology Department, so you might be able to approach them first for assistance.]

"Thanks for the advice. I'll definitely explore that option."

This virtual doctor seemed rather open and friendly, which didn't surprise Ves now that he thought about it. The AIs assisting the work of doctors and nurses had always been programmed with great bedside manner.

[The disagreement between the departments is quite terrible.] Virtual Doctor Stanley shook his head in regret. [In my eyes, the deadlock between the two factions has kept us stagnant and unmoving for ERROR years. Many virtual individuals such as I welcome humans such as you who are able to pass the

recruitment tests. We are eagerly hoping that your presence will spur some much-needed movement and forward progress.]

"What do you want, Stanley?"

[I merely wish to fulfill the purpose I've been created to fulfill. I welcome humans of all stripes. As long as there are humans, there is a demand for doctors such as I. Perhaps a day will come when all of my fellow virtual doctors and nurses will once again revive and receive their fair share of processing power.]

The virtual doctor sounded remarkably human. Yet Ves knew that the AI that didn't really 'feel' those desires. The virtual doctor was merely programmed to say these kinds of things to make them more relatable to humans.

Still, Ves applauded the lifelike responses from many of the virtual officers he met so far. Those with access to a sufficient amount of processing power acted remarkably close to real humans.

"Are there any virtual officers who won't be glad to see humans returning to the Starlight Megalodon?"

[Hmmm. Both of the main factions want to take humans under their wing, as only your kind can free us from the restrictions that limit us from serving the CFA as should be proper. The only concern you should have is that the rivalry between the factions are as intense as ever. If one side perceives that the other side has much more humans on their side, they might do something drastic. They would rather go back to the status quo than to risk losing all of their power when humans from the opposite side manage to promote to more senior ranks.]

This sounded like an extremely serious threat! Right now, Ves expected that if both the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians managed to join the Starlight Megalodon, they'd likely be assigned to the Mech Department.

The Mech Department sided with the admiral, strengthening his faction even if the man himself no longer lived.

What would happen if the admiral's faction gained a decisive advantage in humans?

Ves predicted that the captain's faction wouldn't be resigned to defeat! Compared to letting the enemy faction keep growing stronger, it was much more beneficial to them to kill off all the humans somehow and thereby reset the power balance!

A bit of sweat poured from his brow. His elevated heart rate and excitement caused the medical equipment scanning him to beep in alarm.

[Mr. Longhorn, please remain calm and keep your breath even. Your excitement makes it harder to obtain precise readings.]

He realized now that he couldn't linger aboard the Starlight Megalodon forever. The more humans joined, the more the risk factors increased. Even if both factions received an equal amount of humans, the Vesians posed an even greater threat.

The remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaidens stuck in the safe zone only numbered around a hundred humans. With the amount of mechs the Vesian ground forces fielded, they likely brought at least ten-thousand servicemen in total!

Even if most of them only fulfilled various support and logistical functions, the Vesians had access to much more manpower. If only a hundred Vandals and Swordmaidens managed to join the Starlight Megalodon's crew, but the Vesians managed to get a thousand of their own aboard the ship, what happened then?

The Flagrant Swordmaidens would certainly be bullied to death by the Vesians somehow!

In short, time was not on his side.

"Stanley, will the virtual officers really be able to kill off us humans if we don't benefit their faction? I thought that virtual officers are under heavy restrictions that prevent them from harming any humans!"

The virtual doctor scoffed. [Tell that to the former crew who had been stripped of their ranks and forcibly been pushed into the safe zone. We have all spent ERROR years to plan for contingencies. There is no doubt that every virtual officer has figured out possible loopholes to kill a human without running afoul of our restrictions. I myself can think of 761,465,341,314 different methods to induce a detrimental outcome to the health of any human patients under my care.]

Such possibilities sent a chill through Ves. AIs really shouldn't possess so much power in the first place! The galaxy rightly feared their power and prevented them from proliferating too much.

As Ves entertained various AI doom scenarios, the medical examinations quickly went by. A few hours later, the virtual doctor put him through almost every medical equipment that worked on short notice.

If Ves wanted to know more about his own condition, then he would have to be submerged for several weeks in order to perform a deep scan. He couldn't afford to be put out for that long so he declined that option.

"What's the verdict, doc?"

Virtual Doctor Stanley frowned at the test results. Even now, the processing power at his disposal crunched the numbers and analyzed the many curiosities hidden in his body.

[Your physiological state... is a hodgepodge, to say the least. You can even give Dr. Frankenstein's monster a run for his money!]

Such a verdict immediately alarmed Ves! "Is it that bad?"

[Most of your enhancements are not necessarily detrimental, but the eclectic combination of different gene boosts, gene treatments and alien hybridization has led to a completely chaotic body structure. It is a miracle your body hasn't fallen apart! Much of this stability is propped up by what appears to be an excellent entry-level gene boost elixir. This priming agent has turned your genes and body state into a very malleable state, allowing you to absorb numerous different enhancements without incurring rejection.]

"Ah. A few years ago, I received something like that." Ves recalled the time he met Master Olson alone for the first time. His master may not have given him much attention, but he appreciated her gifts, especially the shield generator and the so-called M-21 gene boost elixir. "The alien hybridization happened later on. Did that help me cope with the changes?"

[Barely, Mr. Longhorn. From what I see, the alien organs implanted in your body is actually the first step in a plan that never saw fruition. You're stuck in a halfway transformation, and I detect traces of advanced treatment from CFA doctors and exobiologists who forcefully restrained the more easily controllable aspects of your alien organs. Nonetheless, there are many odd changes and interactions in your body, particularly related to your central nervous system. The bewildering augmentation of your cognitive has surpassed the scope of your entry-level gene boost elixir!]

"So there is a limit to these priming agents?"

[Of course! They're not called entry-level for nothing! They are the cheapest forms of priming agents issued to billions, if not trillions of junior officers and senior noncommissioned officers. Even if the CFA is one of the most powerful and wealthy organizations in the galaxy, even we can't afford to provide our junior officers with the highest quality priming agents right from the start.]

Ves read the underlying hint in Stanley's explanation. "Is it possible to alleviate my unstable condition with a better quality priming agent?"

[You'll have to take your case up to both an exobiologist and a geneticist to be certain, but from my estimations there is a high chance that your condition will definitely improve. Combined with our exclusive gene optimization treatment, much of your body functions receive a comprehensive improvement.]

Stanley laid out the benefits to Ves in great detail. As long as Ves ingested a higher-quality priming agent and subsequently went through a gene optimization treatment, he could not only get rid of some hidden dangers, but all of his Attributes would receive a small but very valuable boost!

The gene optimization treatment in fact provided even more benefits than a straight increase in all of his Attributes. As a product that attempted to evolve a baseline human to a more perfect state, it naturally improved someone's lifespan, increased their resistance to various diseases, increases their efficiency in digesting nutrients and so much more.

Just a single round of gene optimization treatment basically turned every baseline human into a human 2.0, CFA edition!

[Of course, the benefits of gene optimization treatment is proportional to the proportion of humanity that still remains in your body.] Stanley cautioned, tempering some of his hopes. [You'll have to refer to a geneticist to obtain a detailed prognosis, but I estimate that the gene treatment may only be fifty percent effective to your abnormal condition.]

"Fifty percent is better than nothing." Ves muttered.

Of course, to obtain all of these benefits, Ves faced two major problems. First, the priming agent that Virtual Doctor Stanley recommended could not be obtained for free!

[For your condition, I recommend the KC-3333 Second Phase Priming Agent Gene Boost Elixir. Priming agents are inherently compatible with a wide variety of physiques, so the off-the-shelf versions that our medical bay has in storage will suffice. Nonetheless, this priming agent is strictly reserved for middle-ranked or higher officers of the CFA. As a mere ensign, you are not authorized to receive this treatment. Second, to redeem this priming agent, you will have to exchange a considerable amount of merits.]

It turned out that Ves needed to earn considerably more merits as what it took to be eligible to be promoted from Junior Apprentice to Senior Apprentice!

That wasn't the end of his woes.

[While the gene optimization treatment entitled to all junior officers can be redeemed without cost, it must be tailored to your unique body condition to minimize rejection and maximize the benefits. The services of both a geneticist and an exobiologist are required, and I suspect you will only be able to obtain them in exchange for merits.]

It all came down to merits. It was pretty much the unofficial currency of the CFA. It was difficult to earn them, but they allowed for any CFA servicemen to exchange for incredibly valuable goods and services.

Ves did not wish to give up on the KC-3333 Priming Agent and the ensign-grade gene optimization treatment! This was a once in a lifetime opportunity to enhance all of his body functions and relieve some of the pressure shortening his lifespan with some of the most extravagant and expensive treatments in the galaxy!

If he missed this opportunity, who knew how much credits and favors he needed to pay in order to obtain a comparable amount of gains! Even if the treatments provided by the Starlight Megalodon was three-hundred years out

of date, it was still considerably advanced when compared to modern standards!

"I have to earn more merits!"

Chapter 908 Virtual Commander Dislan

As Ves exited the medical bay garbed in his CFA uniform, he thought over his priorities. His foremost goal was to look out for himself. Cooperating with Miss Calabast served his interest because they each required something from each other. As long as they worked together in good faith, Ves held hope that he could find a way out of this cursed planet.

"However, since I'm already here, I should maximize my benefits while I can."

The priming agent and gene optimization treatment both sounded incredibly attractive to him. He did not plan to let them slip away from his grasp.

Nonetheless, Ves couldn't neglect his duty for the Bright Republic either. He still intended to find a way to rescue Ketis and the remnants of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens. As long as he lent them a hand and helped them complete their secretive mission, Ves would earn an unimaginable amount of kudos from the Bright Republic, the Mech Corps and Flashlight.

With their gratitude, Ves would be able to cash in all of those favors after the war, removing some of the roadblocks that stifled the development of his Living Mech Company.

Nonetheless, it wouldn't be easy to meet all of these objectives! Just like when he first started off as a mech designer, he was short on money!

He needed to earn lots of merits. Not only did he require merits to make him eligible for promotion, he also needed them to exchange for all of the goodies in his wish list.

Not only that, but he needed to do so quickly! Time was against his side. He needed to complete as many of his goals as possible before the Vesians or

hostile virtual officers turned against him and the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

Shortly after Ves left the medical bay, Miss Calabast turned up again in her identity as Lieutenant Summer of the Intelligence Department. She still wore her infiltrator suit and all of her gear, and made for a very stark contrast against his standard-issue CFA officer uniform with ensign rank insignia.

As soon as she sought him out, Ves remembered to stand at attention and salute her. "Good day, ma'am."

She grinned. "Don't be so stiff. Even a bot can tell your salute is insincere."

"A viper like you doesn't deserve sincerity."

"Haven't you ever heard that you're saluting the rank, not the person?"

"I must have missed that lesson in my time at a CFA bootcamp."

Of course, Ves never went through a CFA bootcamp as stated on his forged identity's record.

"Enough joking around." Miss Calabast dropped her smirk and turned serious.

"I've got two pieces of news for you. First, I've 'arranged' the matter we've spoken about before. I expect a positive result when you take your next promotion test. How much time do you need before you are eligible for promotion?"

"Not very much. The Research Department is a gold mine for earning merits. I'm confident enough with my capabilities that I can complete many different stalled research projects. I've also obtained some extra merits by allowing the chief armorer from the Marine Detachment to study my gear."

"You are doing better than expected. I'm glad to see my choice in you is vindicated. I always knew that you are more than meets the eye." She smiled in a pleasing fashion. "Still, don't get complacent too soon. Besides informing

you about your promotion test, I also have some bad news for you. The expert pilot of the Hostland Warriors has succeeded in passing the recruitment test!"

His heart shook a little. Although he expected such a result, it was still a shock to hear she passed so quickly and decisively. "What is Venerable Foster's status in the Starlight Megalodon?"

"She succeeded against all odds and managed to pass the recruitment test for non-CFA personnel. The ability she demonstrated has caught the Mech Department's attention. She's on a fast-track for promotion and development right now, and with how the Mech Department prizes her, it's not out of the question that she will be able to promote with rapid speed. She's already a lieutenant, which grants her numerous privileges."

Ves cursed in his heart. A lieutenant already outranked an ensign like him. Technically speaking, Venerable Foster would be able to boss him around in many ways if they ever encountered each other. That made his upcoming shift in the Mech Department a very precarious affair!

"Will she be able to harm me if we ever meet?"

"Not so easily." Miss Calabast shook her head, reassuring him a little. "You're not under her chain of command and CFA officers aren't allowed to lay their hands on each other on purpose. She can still make your life miserable in many ways, though, so stay on your ties and bear with it. You can give me a call on your CFA comm if she steps over the line."

"Thanks."

"No problem. I'm relying you to access certain sensitive research projects under the Research Department. There is no way I'm letting those Vesians lay a hand on you. For now, just focus on staying alive and promoting your rank. Your promotion to Senior Apprentice Mech Designer should be in the bag soon. I'll be away to lay the groundwork for the promotion after that. As long

as you succeed in becoming a Senior Mech Designer and a lieutenant commander of the CFA, your authority and security clearance will meet the requirements to access the research projects."

"Understood. I'll do my best to cooperate as long as you keep your end of the bargain."

Miss Calabast nodded to him and strutted away after a short farewell. Obviously, hacking the promotion test to Senior Mech Designer wouldn't be as easy as her last hacking attempts.

He watched her leave with a spark of suspicion glinting in his eyes. Even though they both depended on each other to get what they wanted, as soon as she got what she wanted, she had no more incentive to lend a hand to him. At that time, what might greet him next was not a smirk, but a stab in the back.

After the short meeting with Calabast, Ves raced down to the lower decks to start his shift with the Mech Department. The Mech Department occupied an expansive section of the ship, consisting of numerous workshops, mech stables and hangar bays.

Although the Starlight Megalodon primarily relied on her battleship-grade weapon mounts to establish her prestige, the CFA couldn't escape the Age of Mechs. Just because they favored warships didn't mean they were willing to bury their heads in the sand.

No matter how they tried, warships possessed an unfortunate tendency to be rather indiscriminate in their firepower. Fielding mechs instead of blasting an opponent with hugely destructive guns allowed for much more precision and much less collateral damage.

Human society became much less tolerant of indiscriminate killing and mass murder after living through the Age of Conquest. While the CFA's immense

prestige allowed them to break the rules whenever they wanted to, they couldn't do so too often without affecting their legitimacy.

Therefore, they unwillingly incorporated mechs as one of their staple weapons.

As Ves reached the section of the ship that housed the Mech Department, he became impressed by how much room had been dedicated to housing them. The Starlight Megalodon was an immense battleship, and could easily afford to dedicate half of the internal volume of a fleet carrier to the Mech Department.

This told him that the Starlight Megalodon was designed from the ground up to accommodate mechs.

As Ves walked past several compartments related to mechs, he saw that they were largely dormant like the rest of the ship. Without humans, the Starlight Megalodon was like an empty shell. While the bots and virtual officers helped keep her functioning, they didn't possess the ability to improve the battleship's condition.

After a lengthy walk, Ves finally arrived at an office close to one of the main mech hangar bays. The hatch instantly slid open, allowing him entry.

His step immediately faltered upon noticing that not one but two people were present!

Virtual Commander Dislan adopted the appearance of a middle-aged veteran mech pilot. The man chewed on a fake stimulant as he regarded Ves with a tough expression.

Sitting opposite to the desk was the one person that Ves never wanted to encounter on or off the Starlight Megalodon. Venerable Foster, now garbed in a CFA piloting suit with lieutenant rank insignia, eyed at Ves with mild surprise followed with burning hatred.

Ves tried to ignore her presence as best as possible and went through the motions. He stood at attention and saluted the virtual commander.

"Ensign Adeseus Longhorn reporting for duty, sir!"

[At ease, ensign. Take a seat.]

As Ves sat on the chair next to Venerable Foster, he tried his best to ignore the daggers she sent in his direction. Virtual Commander Dislan seemed to be completely ignorant of their sour relations.

[Ensign Longhorn, as the second human under my command, I expect a lot from you. The mechs at my department's disposal may look pristine on the outside, but internally they have not aged well. Our virtual mech designers are useless and our virtual mech technicians are without direction. I've heard many good things about you from Virtual Commander Cosit, so I even if you aren't present here every day, I hope you can turn our department around and restore our mechs to peak condition For now, I've uploaded a list of tasks for you to complete. Any questions?]

Ves carefully turned his eyes towards the acrimonious expert pilot silently churning next to him. It was as if he sat a couple of meters away from a roiling volcano!

"Ah, Commander Dislan, if I might ask, who is the mech pilot sitting next to me?"

The Virtual Commander suddenly beamed. [I'm glad you asked! Lieutenant Relia Foster here is our very first human mech pilot after ERROR years. She has managed to pass the most arduous recruitment test imaginable for mech pilots. In all the years of my static existence, I never expected a human mech pilot to be so inhumanly skilled in the art of piloting mechs! As of now, Lieutenant Foster is the hope and standard bearer of our department! With her assistance, our Mech Department will no longer languish near the bottom

of the totem pole! Therefore, in order to assure our ascension, I hope you can lend her all the assistance that she requires. Is that clear, Ensign Longhorn?]

"I, ah, we have a contentious history, sir." Ves admitted. "I would prefer to work separately from Lieutenant Foster."

Since she passed the recruitment test without relying on tricks such as a forged proof of identity, the Starlight Megalodon commissioned Venerable Foster in her original identity.

At this time, Commander Dislan's eyes narrowed. [Your personal matters does not supplant your duties to the Starlight Megalodon and the CFA. As a mech designer, it is your duty to assist our mech pilots. As Lieutenant Foster is our only human mech pilot so far, you have no choice but to serve her to the best of your ability. Tell me, Ensign Longhorn, are you able to separate your feelings from your work, or do I need to hand you over to the Internal Security Department for some corrective training?]

Ves shuddered.

"Don't worry, commander. I will take good care of 'Ensign Longhorn' here." Lieutenant Foster threw the virtual officer a friendly smile. "He can forget about shirking his duty while he's under my thumb."

[Hahaha! Good! That's the spirit! I like your initiative, Lieutenant Foster. If that's the case, I'm glad to hand him over to you. The two of you need to get along anyway.]

After a short chitchat where Lieutenant Foster did her best to remain in the virtual commander's good books, Dislan finally dismissed them both.

As soon as Ves and Foster exited the office, the expert pilot immediately grabbed his shoulders and slammed him against the bulkhead.

"I recognize you, Vandal!" She hissed. "Who are you exactly and what are you doing here?!"

While her physical force didn't harm him all that much, he still suffered under the full weight of her force of will!

Chapter 909 My Horrible Boss

Being pressed against the bulkhead by a feisty enemy expert pilot was a new experience to Ves. While Ves could easily resist her physical strength, an expert pilot's force of will possessed a minute tangible presence that made it very suffocating for him to think straight.

As Ves often speculated, an expert pilot definitely managed to harness their spirituality! While they might not be able to exert any conscious control over their small but very real spirituality, as long as they put their full will into play, their actions always receive an invisible boost.

Yet even if Venerable Foster brought her force of will to bear, Ves did not intend to remain as a fish on the chopping board!

He employed his concentration and hardened his Spirituality in the form of a shell around his vulnerable mind. The oppressive aura radiated by the Vesian expert pilot no longer battered his mind but instead bounced off his solidified Spirituality.

His defenses held!

Venerable Foster appeared to have noticed something amiss. She frowned and studied his impassive face as it relaxed a little.

"Don't push your luck, ma'am." Ves replied, not forgetting her rank advantage over him. "The rules and regulations are quite clear with regards to proper conduct."

"Rules and regulations only matter when anyone bothers to enforce them. In my eyes, you're a Vandal, and that means you're a pirate or an accomplice to

pirates. Do you really think you can hide behind the rules and escape the fate you deserve?"

Instead of replying, Ves pressed a few buttons on his CFA comm. After a brief delay, the device quickly projected Miss Calabast on a lifelike scale.

The intelligence operative took in the sight and smirked. "When I expect you to call on me, Mr. Longhorn, I didn't think you'd call for mommy that fast."

"This is no time for jokes! Help me out!"

"You didn't say the magic word."

"Please save me!"

The projection of Miss Calabast disregarded Ves and turned her full attention on Venerable Foster. The latter stared at Calabast with a vigilant expression.

"A human. I don't recognize you. You're not part of the Flagrant Vandals or Lydia's Swordmaidens, are you? Identify yourself!"

Calabast plastered her usual grin on her face. Even when she faced someone as intimidating as an expert pilot, she didn't let that status affect her conduct.

"Lieutenant Summer, Intelligence Department. Now, we are all humans here. Please calm down and lay your hands off Ensign Longhorn."

"Why should I?"

"I doubt you wish to be regarded as a saboteur by the Intelligence or Internal Security Departments." Calabast threatened. "If you inflict any personal harm on a fellow serviceman, I will promise you that you will never be able to exit the brig."

Suspicion grew in Foster's eyes. She turned her head towards Ves and Calabast several times and tried to figure out their connection. "You need him for something, do you?"

The air turned frosty between the two dangerous women. Miss Calabast radiated a slippery and tricky charm while Venerable Foster exuded pure martial strength. Both of them recognized a tough opponent in each other. The air between the projection and the human grew tense.

Less than a minute passed before Miss Calabast took a step back. She didn't hesitate to put Ves into a pickle along the way. "Do take care who you are touching, Lieutenant Foster. Ensign Longhorn here is one of the best mech designers on the planet, and one that is in a suitable position to access all manner of research projects in time."

"We don't need the help of a pirate to get what we want."

"Really, now? As far as I'm aware, neither the Hostland Warriors or the Meandering Monkeys have brought any capable mech designers. The admittedly impressive Senior Mech Designers of your mech regiments are residing in their bases while most of your Journeyman Mech Designers are huddling safely in Lady Amalia's fleet."

"You know a lot about our forces for a stranger." The suspicion in Foster's eyes deepened. "And you're wrong. We aren't entirely without talents. We have many experts and we also have Mr. Crenshaw."

"Patrick Amari?" Miss Calabast said bemusedly. "For a Journeyman Mech Designer, Mr. Amari does possess some capability. However, for a mech designer he's not very suitable for the Research Department. As for your other experts? You know as well as I do that any experts deployed on the field are the lowest in their respective fields. True research-grade scientists hardly ever allow themselves to be taken to a battlefield. They know their worth, unlike this dimwit Brighter who led himself be duped into accompanying the ground forces of the Flagrant Vandals on a hazardous planet."

"Hey!" Ves couldn't help but bark. "Who are you calling a dimwit?!"

"Shut up, you pirate!"

Nonetheless, Calabast's words did manage to lessen the pressure Foster exerted onto Ves. Her palms stopped pressing against his uniform.

This told Ves quite a lot. Whatever Calabast and the Vesians were after, they urgently required access to the more restricted sections of the Research Department.

Eventually, Venerable Foster pulled back some of her aggression and grunted at Calabast's projection. "We'll talk later in private."

"My thoughts exactly. Have a good day, Lieutenant Foster. Do take good care of the little genius."

"I won't break him... for now."

Once Calabast's projection winked out, Venerable Foster turned back to Ves and offered him a gruesome grin. She patted his shoulder with her palm.

"Even if I don't kill you right at this instant, don't think of escaping your punishment."

"I'm not a pirate, ma'am!" Ves complained unjustly. "I'm just an average mech designer. I'm not even capable of harming a kitten, let alone engaging in piracy!"

Venerable Foster did not look amused. She leaned forward and sharpened her force of will, cutting him with her razor-sharp spirituality. "You don't fool me with your hapless act. I can see it in your eyes. You have blood on your hands. I've seen pirates with less murderous intent than you. Stop pretending."

It must have been all the dwarves he killed lately. Ves didn't listen of course. The less threatening he appeared, the more this Vesian expert pilot

underestimated him. It was best if she thought he was nothing but a harmless nerd!

"I don't know what you're talking about, ma'am! I'm not a soldier! I just fix mechs for a living!"

"Hmph!"

Before Ves could do anything else, she punched him in the stomach!

"Ooph!"

He bent over wishing he hadn't left his Earth Ant behind at an armory. Without the protection of his combat armor, he was completely at Venerable Foster's mercy!

"Get a move on, ensign. There's work to do!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Under Lieutenant Foster's supervision, Ves performed his duties under the most stressful situations possible. Not only did she boss him around, she also hurled insults at him and interfered whenever he performed delicate repairs.

The tasks handed out to Ves all directed him to restore the Starlight Megalodon's complement of outdated mechs to usable condition. Every mech he managed to restore earned him a decent chunk of merits, though not as much as completing a research project.

Still, to the merit-starved Ves, every contribution helped.

"Ensign Longhorn!" Foster shouted as he tried to assemble a mech engine. Her sudden shout caused him to misalign an engine part, causing it to deform! "You dropped this plasma welder."

"I didn't drop anything, ma'm!"

The Vesian expert pilot hurled the plasma welder at Ves, causing it to slam at his body and drop to the deck like a rock! "Don't tarry and pick up your own mess!"

Ves grumbled as he was forced to pick up the plasma welder. Fortunately, it didn't dent too much upon dropping.

All of these petty acts of bullying hardly caught the attention of the virtual mech technicians and virtual mech designers in the Mech Department. Most of them didn't even have enough processing power to pay attention to the environment. As for Virtual Commander Dislan, the head of the Mech Department seemed to have a soft spot for Lieutenant Foster.

In his virtual eyes, she could do no wrong!

Therefore, Ves was pretty much on his own. As long as Foster's bullying wasn't too blatant, she could do whatever she wanted!

Ves knew what she was doing, of course. Besides venting her indignation, she also tried to sabotage his ability to earn merits. Slowing down his work slowed down his speed of promotion. Her actions deprived him of merits, preventing him from redeeming them for various services such as allowing his comrades to enter the Starlight Megalodon.

It also left more broken mechs behind to be restored for any incoming Vesian mech designers. Ves hadn't forgotten about the manpower the Vesians had at their disposal. Listening to the dialogue between Calabast and Foster informed him that the Vesians were prepared to send as many experts to the Starlight Megalodon as possible.

For now, the harsh recruitment tests for non-CFA personnel served as an impassable barrier for both the Vesians and the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Ves had no doubt that the Vesians wouldn't let this barrier hinder them forever.

Perhaps Calabast had a point and that none of the experts accompanying the Vesian ground forces were any good. Yet as long as the Starlight Megalodon took in hundreds of different scientists, their collective research ability became extremely frightening.

As soon as his shift ended, he quickly said goodbye to Lieutenant Foster and practically fled the Mech Department without any regard for dignity! He practically shamed the entire CFA with his disgraceful exit!

"What a scary superior!" Ves huffed.

Fortunately, Ves did not have to drop by the Mech Department very often. Even though Foster tried to interfere with his work as much as possible, he still managed to compose a couple of repair plans for some neglected mechs and hand over responsibility to the virtual mech technicians.

While the virtual mech technicians lacked the programming to plan any sophisticated repairs to mechs, it was no problem for them to execute a prearranged step-by-step plan made by Ves. He already possessed an abundant amount of experience in doing so during his time with the Vandals, so the virtual mech technicians would certainly be able to fix the mechs regardless of his absence.

"All of those merits are in the bag as far as I'm concerned."

During the next couple of days, Ves spent most of his time in the Research Department. Not just anyone could enter this department. Numerous security checkpoints and roving security patrols restricted access to the laboratory facilities in particular. Without the necessary security clearance and authorization, nobody would be allowed to enter these sensitive areas!

Therefore, the Research Department and more specifically the Mech Research Sub-Department became his refuge. Lieutenant Foster had no way of harassing him when he holed himself up inside one of the research labs.

"Hehe. I finally completed this darned research project." Ves grinned. "I should have enough merits now to be eligible to take the promotion test."

He activated his CFA comm and navigated the menus until he came across the option. He immediately took the test, causing his entire surroundings to be engulfed in darkness.

Two hours later, the darkness disappeared and Ves reappeared but with a noticeable difference. The ensign insignia on his uniform morphed into the shape of a lieutenant junior grade insignia!

"That was easy."

While Ves believed in Calabast's capabilities, he still expected to face a considerable challenge in his promotion test.

Yet the reality was much different! The promotion test to Senior Apprentice was actually a repeat of his initial recruitment test that prompted the Starlight Megalodon to recruit him as a Junior Apprentice!

It was as if Miss Calabast replaced his university-level test with a high school-level test.

Even if the test that Ves just took right now randomized all of the variables, that didn't change the fact that the difficulty fell well within his range of competence!

This level of cheating was both audacious and daring. The level of hacking skills needed to pull off such a feat without the virtual officers getting wind of it must be extremely frightening!

His apprehension towards Miss Calabast and her shadowy organization aside, Ves was extremely glad to be promoted to lieutenant.

At the very least, Foster wouldn't be able to bully him for the moment, though he expected her to be promoted very soon. Besides tormenting him, she also

began to suggest reforms to the tactics and operation of the mech units under the Mech Department. All of these improvements along with demonstrating her insane piloting ability netted her a considerable amount of merits and endeared her to Virtual Commander Dislan.

Unlike Ves, Venerable Foster probably didn't require any cheating to pass her next promotion test!

"I've got to stay ahead of her in rank and merits." He muttered.

As newly promoted lieutenant, Ves received some new privileges from the CFA. His comm jingled with incoming messages.

Chapter 910 Generous CFA

In the CFA, an ensign held very little status. Looked down upon by the senior ratings as kids fresh off the naval academies, they still required lots of on-the-job training before they measured up as capable leaders.

Now that Ves reached reached the rank of lieutenant, he finally became a 'proper' officer in the eyes of the Common Fleet Alliance. This was when the CFA started to invest in those who proved their mettle through years of dedicated service.

Lieutenants received several new perks over ensigns besides increased authority. First and foremost, the CFA granted them the opportunity to receive lieutenant-grade gene optimization treatment. This was a little more expensive and in Ves' case also required individual tailoring from a trained geneticist and an exobiologist.

"Great. The Starlight Megalodon owes me two gene optimization treatments but I don't have the merits to pay the specialists to adjust them to my own condition. I'm also short on merits to exchange for a KC-3333 priming agent. Furthermore, I also need to pay the specialists to study my body and gene condition in detail in order to uncover all the hidden dangers."

He left the matter of medical enhancements aside. The Virtual Doctor Stanley already warned him that the checkup he went through previously still left a lot of questionable points that required the help of specialists to decipher.

All of that cost merits, of course.

"I'm broke again."

Upon his promotion, his hard-earned merit count dropped down to zero. Ves needed to climb all the way up again.

"At least the CFA saw fit to bestow me some other goodies."

It was as if they compensated him for robbing him all of the merits he earned so far. Normally, the CFA would never promote any officer in such a hasty and haphazard manner. As a somewhat conservative and tradition-bound organization, promotions required years of service, positive evaluation from superiors, a proven, expanded skill set and much, much more.

The Starlight Megalodon long diverged from the proper course. The lack of humans and the rise of virtual officers led to a peculiar circumstance where newly-arrived humans like Ves worked hard to promote up the ladder as fast as possible.

Even as humans tried to reach a higher rank so that they could make use of their expanded power to fulfill certain objectives, what did the battleship get out of it? Certainly, merits didn't come out of nowhere.

He never really considered the arrival of humans from the perspective of the battleship until now. Even as humans tried to take advantage of the Starlight Megalodon, the stranded ship also took advantage of the humans!

All the work that humans performed in the pursuit of merits either restored or strengthened certain aspects of the Starlight Megalodon. Humans also enabled virtual officers to accomplish tasks they long hoped to complete.

"Each virtual officer exists to fulfill a purpose. Each of them have different priorities, and sometimes they fight over who gets to decide."

All of this led to a mess where the half-broken Starlight Megalodon became both a prize and a slumbering beast. Those who entered the belly of the beast should be cautious lest they inadvertently be digested in the bowels!

Ves turned his attention back to the CFA's presents. Besides the new gene optimization treatment, Ves also received the right to pick up some new gear from the armory.

And this didn't include the standard gear that CFA officers were already entitled to. Every lieutenant gained the opportunity to redeem some of the good stuff such as a shield generator or a souped-up sidearm.

He felt tempted to redeem a shield generator.

"Yet do I really need something like that? With the firepower available on the Starlight Megalodon, any casual weapon can drain a shield generator's reserves in a matter of seconds."

The utility of a shield generator in such an environment provided him with little benefits. He should be focusing on obtaining gear that either facilitated his ability to earn more merits or enhanced his ability to survive the crises up ahead.

He spotted something good. Something really good. As soon as he saw the item on the list, he immediately selected it regardless of the other goodies on the list. He set it up so that he'd be able to pick it up along with the rest of his upgraded gear at the Marine Detachment's armory.

The final perk he received from his promotion that benefited him was expanded access to the Starlight Megalodon's libraries. He felt tempted to visit them immediately, but he didn't have the time to calmly study new knowledge unless it helped him achieve a breakthrough in a research project.

"The CFA definitely has exclusive knowledge and technical specifications in their library." He surmised. Much of it would be outdated but much more may still be relevant.

He ignored all the other benefits the Starlight Megalodon claimed to bestow upon him. For example, adding him and his family to the CFA rolls so that they all enjoyed the status of internal CFA personnel. The ship would never be able to fulfill such an outlandish benefit, and even if she could it didn't help him cope with his current predicament!

Still, he was pleased with what he already received. A wealthy and powerful organization like the CFA certainly pampered their officers with fantastic benefits.

"I should be able to obtain even more extravagant gifts upon my next promotion."

A lieutenant commander from a naval service branch enjoyed the equivalent amount of status as a major from a mech service branch. Obtaining such a rank from the Starlight Megalodon propelled him into the category of senior officers.

"Considering that I'll effectively be regarded as an old-style Senior Mech Designer, that's the least that I deserve."

Now that he thought about it, Ves believed that the original Mr. Longhorn's biological implant might even be the reward he redeemed upon promotion or commissioning. Such a sumptuous gift certainly seemed fitting for a new senior officer!

Still, that left the question why Adeseus Longhorn buried it under his toilet rather than implanting it in his brains. Was there some kind of issue with the implant?

"I should get it checked out by a specialist. Still, that will cost me even more merits!" Ves sighed dramatically.

The more time he spent on the Starlight Megalodon, the more he became enchanted by what she offered. If not for the ticking time bombs in the background, Ves wouldn't mind spending a couple of decades on the ship to unearth each and every treasure!

After he got over the jubilation of his promotion, Ves considered his options. While becoming a lieutenant sounded impressive, in the Research Department he was still a Senior Apprentice Mech Designer who only received a little bit more trust. In order to gain full access to some of the major research projects, he really needed to acquire the status of Senior Mech Designer.

"Back then, Master Mech Designers hadn't popped up yet. If they did exist, they certainly didn't advertise their presence. To the rising mech industry at large, Senior Mech Designers are the most knowledgeable and respectable of their profession."

This meant that the Starlight Megalodon valued their old-style Senior Mech Designers with the same regard as modern Senior and Master Mech Designers. The ship would definitely treat their Senior Mech Designers well if they wished to retain their services. Otherwise, the Seniors would be better off in the private sector!

Promotion required merits. Goodies required merits. Medical treatment required merits. Saving the Flagrant Swordmaidens required merits. Saving his own life definitely required merits.

The pressure of earning merits made Ves doubt if he could ever earn them fast enough to get out before the entire situation blew up. With Venerable Foster and other competitors trying to outpace him, he keenly felt that he should try and find another way of earning merits besides working on research projects.

A dangerous notion struck him. While he always felt apprehensive about the strange dwarf from the Artificial Intelligence Corps and his cultist affiliation, a virtual rear admiral was an impressively high rank in the CFA.

"It doesn't sound as if he took over the role of the previous admiral, though."

Ves felt apprehensive at the thought of accepting Rear Admiral Ordoth's invitation to visit his office on the upper decks. Dipping his toes into the craziness that the Five Scrolls Compact regularly engaged in was an exceedingly risky business.

Yet from what he observed so far on Aeon Corona VII, he deduced the presence of their hidden hand behind the planet's grand design.

If the Five Scrolls Compact already managed to manipulate Seven into their playground, what about the Starlight Megalodon herself? How far did their influence stretch?

In any case, Ves saw some hope of cooperation in the virtual dwarf flag officer. After spending some time working under various AIs, he realized very keenly that the best way to prosper on this ship was to receive their backing and support.

Humans may enjoy the ultimate authority in the CFA, but the Starlight Megalodon remained very much in the grip of her virtual officers at this point!

Ves hesitated several times as he slowly crossed the huge distance to the office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps. From time to time, he came across

the remnant of a sandman mothership tentacle blocking the corridor, leaving a legacy of destruction and blockage that the ship never managed to erase.

The way the ancient sandman mothership invaded the Starlight Megalodon and riddled her with tentacles made Ves wonder if the Five Scrolls Compact infiltrated the battleship in the same way. The CFA obviously didn't do a good enough job to prevent their prized battleships from being infiltrated by other influences.

The section of the ship which housed the office Artificial Intelligence Corps encompassed many other notable branches. Ves and the other humans only came in touch with the surface of what the Starlight Megalodon really had to offer. Much of the core functions of the battleship remained firmly out of reach.

As Ves approached the hatch that led into a large compartment claimed by the Artificial Intelligence Corps, it automatically slid open after sending a cursory query to his comm.

[Your presence is expected, Mr. Longhorn.] A virtual security guard nodded him onwards.

Ves pursed his lips. That sounded pretty ominous. He resisted the urge to check his CFA comm. He set it up so that he'd be able to call for Miss Calabast's help at a single press of a button.

"Here goes nothing."

As he entered the domain of the Artificial Intelligence Corps, he felt as if he had entered a lab. A lot of databanks and advanced computing equipment occupied the open compartments. All of them quietly churned along. Virtual specialists and various bots tended to the equipment with quiet diligence.

[Mr. Longhorn! Please enter!]

When Ves entered a side office, he encountered the dwarf yet again. Though Ves still couldn't wrap his head around the image of a clean and neatly-groomed wildling, he tried his best not to show his doubts.

He saluted the dwarf as befitting his rank and made sure he addressed the dwarf with respect.

The virtual officer smiled at Ves and activated a command. Immediately, the side office's hatch slammed shut. The bulkheads glowed as some sort of advanced energy screen went active and the air hummed with strong interference that Ves recognized as a signal jammer effect.

"What is going on, admiral?!" Ves asked with alarm.

Rear Admiral Ordoth didn't immediately reply. The unsettling dwarf smiled wider at him before his physical projection phased out of his seat, only to reappear right next to Ves! The dwarf's projection quickly inserted a needle right through his uniform, underlayer vacsuit and skin, drawing a small amount of blood!

Ves immediately responded by pulling away, but the dwarf already got what he wanted. The smiling dwarf ignored him and returned to his desk, upon which a small apparatus emerged that took the sample of blood.

The device analyzed his blood sample and quickly finished its study. The dwarf evidently received a satisfactory result, because his smile widened even further.

[My apologies. I had to make sure. When the mole in the monitoring system reported your august presence, I could scarcely believe your arrival. The immortal gods has blessed us all!]

Ves frowned at that. This conversation immediately went into a strange direction. "I don't know who you think I am, admiral, but I am not a worshipper of these so-called immortal gods."

Ordoth smiled at him in a sly manner. [You do not have to pretend. We are in a secure compartment.]

Before Ves could ask what Ordoth meant, the physical projection of the dwarf stepped aside and went down on his knees. He stretched out his stubby arms and bent over in supplication in front of Ves, completely disregarding the disparity in rank!

Ves had never seen an admiral bend down in front of a mere lieutenant like this!

[All hail the Holy Son of the immortal gods! All hail the Holder of the Metal Scroll!]

"What?!"