

Chapter 911 Holy Son

Ves knew he entered into hot water as soon as Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth supplicated himself in front of him and acted like he was greeting an exalted figure.

Normally, Ves would feel flattered if someone worshipped him like this, but the problem was that Ordoth acted as if he was meeting one of the most exalted figures of one of the most dangerous underground organizations in the galaxy!

If the CFA or the MTA mistook Ves as a member of the dreaded Five Scrolls Compact, he'd immediately be branded as a terrorist and be hunted down relentlessly!

As the silence stretched on, Ves quickly tried to think of a way to deal with this completely unexpected situation. He tried to align his observations.

First, Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth appeared to be on the side of the Five Scrolls Compact. Perhaps a spy or infiltrator from the Compact aboard the Starlight Megalodon infected her systems with this aberrant AI for some hidden purpose.

Second, for some reason or another, the dwarf not only mistook Ves for a 'Holy Son', but also a 'Holder of the Metal Scroll'. Both of these titles sounded extremely important in the trans-galactic cult.

First, the organization itself likely revered scrolls since their very name included mention of it. If Ves took a guess, the Compact didn't worship any scrolls, but five separate scrolls in particular.

Ves tried to recall what he knew of the Compact from Dr. Jutland's rantings and ravings, but he didn't hear too much about their inner workings. They consisted of several branches such as the Life Branch. They also appeared to be able to learn precious knowledge from scrolls named after elements. Dr.

Jutland explicitly mentioned that he glimpsed the Earth Scroll and a Water Scroll.

Five scrolls. Two of which were already exceedingly valuable that it practically brought a crazy exobiologist like Jutland into ecstasy.

A Metal Scroll. Ves could not fathom owning any scrolls, let alone something as mysterious and impressive as one of the five main objects of worship for a galaxy-spanning cult!

Except...

A realization struck him. Since when did he first get involved with the Compact?

Since his father went missing and Ves received the Mech Designer System out of the blue?!

Was the System the so-called Metal Scroll that the Five Scrolls Compact so revered?!

Nothing else in his possession even came close to the System in terms of possibilities and might!

Did this mean that the Earth Scroll and the Water Scroll were in fact Systems as well? Yet why did that sound wrong?

He needed more information. Preferably without giving anything away or prompting the virtual rear admiral to turn hostile.

Should he be honest and admit he inadvertently got his Metal Scroll from his father who likely filched it from the Compact somehow?

Hah! Ves would be an idiot if he admitted that!

Should he take on an arrogant air and pretend to be a highly-placed figure within the Five Scrolls Compact?

That wasn't a good idea either. Ves knew none of the rituals or codes the members of the Compact used to recognize each other. He knew that secret organizations tended to be very particular about these matters.

Then what kind of role should he play? Without being able to pretend that he was a member of the Five Scrolls Compact, he didn't have many options. Perhaps he should just play somewhat close to the truth but be sparse in the details.

Ves narrowed his eyes as he quickly formed his plan within a span of ten seconds. That wasn't long enough for Ordoth's supplication to him to stretch on for a suspicious amount of time.

"Rise." He spoke with an assertive tone of voice. It was the kind of tone adopted by someone with status, but not quite someone who ruled over an organization as expansive as the Compact. "Please clarify why you believe I am the Holder of the Metal Scroll."

[Your Holiness, your lifeblood doesn't lie.] Ordoth said as he hesitantly rose. His worshipful eyes glowed at Ves as if he was a savior. [There is a marker in your lifestream that is only present on current holders of the Sacred Scrolls. This is only known to the senior leadership of the Compact. By chance, my creator is one of them, and he has left the means of identification behind on this ship. As soon as Starlight Megalodon first scanned your body, a small device discreetly sampled your blood and immediately detected the marker, but dismissed it as an unimportant piece of junk. Yet I know better!]

Damnit. Ves frowned deeply at that. If this was true, then he was at risk of being found out whenever his blood became exposed to one of the senior members of the Compact.

Certainly, the galaxy was big and the chance of bumping into the leaders was small. Yet as Ves advanced his career and increasingly gained prominence in

the galaxy, he couldn't rule out encountering them, upon which his exposure became a very real possibility!

Ves set those concerns aside for the moment. He could worry about avoiding the rest of the Compact later. First, he needed to deal with this virtual dwarf who believed he was the future savior or something.

"Admiral, please elaborate what you understand about the Metal Scroll."

Ordoth looked up at Ves with an increasing measure of doubt. [The Metal Scroll is one of the Five Sacred Scrolls. I heard it got lost and destroyed during the Great Betrayal. That was a terrible time. The traitors got away with the Fire Scroll and the Wood Scroll became in the void of space. The fighting for the Metal Scroll became so ruinous that it actually broke and disintegrated! My creator and his fellow brothers and sisters all believed this Sacred Scroll to be lost! Yet it seems the immortal gods are smiling upon the Compact, as the Metal Scroll has returned in our hands! Hahahaha!]

Ves only frowned deeper at the implications this virtual dwarf seemed willing to tell him. He was wondering why he found the System to be both overwhelming and underwhelming at the same time. As far as he was concerned, Ves always treated the System as his own exclusive shopping mall.

To hear that the System actually held an exalted status within the Five Scrolls Compact was really something else! It was as if someone dumped a weapon of mass destruction on his lap! This hot potato burned much brighter than he thought!

Hearing Ordoth's reverence for the Sacred Scrolls and mention that the Metal Scroll became lost, Ves saw an opportunity to clarify his identity a bit. He couldn't keep pretending to be this so-called Holy Son when he truly didn't know anything about the Compact besides some hearsay.

"To tell you the truth, admiral, I am indeed holding an object that I believe to be the Metal Scroll. However, I inherited it from my parents, who told me nothing about its true status."

The virtual rear admiral stopped gloating and threw a perplexed expression at Ves. [Is Your Holiness not an inducted brother of the Five Scrolls Compact? No matter. Your parents are likely exiles of the Compact. That does not change the fact that you are a Holy Son. Each of the Sacred Scrolls carry the essence of the immortal gods! Only the worthy are allowed to glimpse at the words of the gods, and even fewer have proven worthy enough to be a holder of a Sacred Scroll! Exile or not, as the Holder of the Metal Scroll, you are chosen representative of the immortal gods in this reality!]

Ves let out a breath. It seemed he gambled correctly. The status of Holy Son was so high that Ordoth didn't seem to care about his questionable history.

"Admiral Ordoth, now that you are aware of my lack of depth, could you please fill me in on the Five Scrolls Compact?"

The dwarf frowned. [My apologies, Your Holiness. My creator has implemented a contingency in my programming. On the event of his death, the vast majority of what I know about the Compact has been erased from my data banks. If any other human or virtual individual knows of my affiliation, my existence will be wiped out immediately. The only reason I can still tell you this much is because my creator long hoped one of the faithful would arrive at the Starlight Megalodon and complete his unfinished mission.]

Ves tried to ask him some questions about the Five Scrolls Compact. While the dwarf lost a lot of details about the hidden organization from his data banks, he still retained enough tidbits to enlighten him to the horror of the Compact's influence and might!

[Have you ever heard of 'the Big Two'?] The physical projection of the dwarf adopted a contemptuous expression. [The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance convinced humanity that they are their saviors and protectors. Pah! The two are nothing but rebel off-shoots of the Five Scrolls Compact! Long ago, the founders of the Compact obtained the Sacred Scrolls and gained enlightenment from their texts. They gained an unimaginable amount of power and influence and propelled humanity's rise behind the shadows. Tell me, Your Holiness, did you believe humanity's meteoric rise during the Age of Conquest is a coincidence?]

"It's not?"

[The rapid innovations the Compact introduced to humanity closed our technological gap against the dominant alien races and allowed us to triumph against them before the arrogant aliens realized our threat! Yet as humanity and the Compact grew more powerful, some of our brothers and sisters started to be consumed by greed. Certain factions within the Compact wanted to keep the Five Sacred Scrolls to themselves. This conflict culminated in the Great Betrayal that saw several Sacred Scrolls lost! Over half of our members turned into thieves and traitors who attacked the Great Temple, took away the Fire Scroll and persecuted our loyal brothers and sisters! Nowadays, the traitors bask in the light, while the Compact scurries in the dark.]

A sinking feeling overcame Ves. The depths of this grand conspiracy reached far wider than he thought! "Does this mean that the MTA and CFA used to be part of the Compact?"

[That is exactly the case, Your Holiness! We used to be one, all-encompassing organization! We all partook in the revelations of the Sacred Scrolls, preparing the galaxy for what is to come.]

"What is the purpose of the Compact? What are you preparing for?"

Ordoth grinned fanatically at Ves. [Why, to prepare for the coming of the immortal gods! The Sacred Scrolls are the gifts of the immortal gods from a galaxy or reality far away from us! We do not exactly know where the immortal gods reside, but their Scrolls foretold a time when they will arrive at our galaxy and elevate us all into the ranks of immortals! All of our brothers and sisters await the day of our ascension, yet the predecessors of the MTA and CFA ruined it all! Those thieves and traitors want to claim the Sacred Scrolls to themselves and reject the coming of the immortal gods! Blasphemers!]

Mixed feelings welled up inside Ves. Just this story revealed galaxy-spanning secrets that only the most powerful humans in the galaxy should know. Someone like Ves was so small that he could easily get crushed between the weight of any of the three trans-galactic organizations that competed over these Sacred Scrolls!

The revelation that the Five Scrolls Compact used to be the driving force behind the rise and probably the fall of the Age of Conquest changed his entire conception of human history. Ordoth's assertion that the MTA and CFA used to be branches of the secretive Compact irrevocably changed his perception of the Big Two!

Even though Ves had long shed his innocence regarding the self-proclaimed protectors of humanity, he always regarded the MTA and CFA with respect. Now, he didn't know what to think about them. They used to be part of a conspiracy, but stabbed the Compact in the back and crippled them to the point where they became running dogs in the dark!

Worst of all, somehow Ves became entangled into this murky whirlpool. He never imagined the Mech Designer System to be involved with such grand events in human history!

Chapter 912 Passing on the Virtual Torch

As Ves calmed down and took in the virtual admiral's tale, he realized that the MTA and CFA may not have been entirely contemptible in their betrayal.

For whatever reason, the Five Scrolls Compact seemed to regard the 'immortal gods' as saviors. They were destined to arrive at the Milky Way Galaxy whereupon they benevolently uplifted every human and brought them back to paradise.

As a consummate businessman, Ves had seen his fair share of swindles.

Therefore, the programmed fanaticism that Ordoth expressed towards humanity's future salvation sounded utterly crazy to Ves.

Saviors? More like invaders!

The Sacred Scrolls that heralded the coming of the immortal gods took on a decidedly ominous light in his perspective. Ves did not believe that these so-called immortal gods would be so generous enough to lead humanity to salvation without anything in return!

This belief cast a new light on the MTA and CFA's supposed betrayal of the Compact. Instead of the thieves and traitors that Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth made them out to be, they might have actually saved humanity from a great, extragalactic threat!

Ves couldn't help but grow skeptical about the immortal gods. Humanity's history was replete with religions popping up that centered around aliens masquerading as gods.

Who could blame them? It was a fact of life that many members of the human race yearned to believe in something greater than themselves. It was all too easy to look at the vastness and emptiness of space and despair how little they mattered.

One of the great divides in human civilization that persisted up to this day was the continued relevance of religion. Many humans craved spiritual reassurance, and religions filled in the void that technology couldn't answer.

Many religions, usually the older ones, were well-meant and attempted to guide their believers to a better place.

Nonetheless, more religions popped up that simply attempted to scam or deceive their believers into giving up their money and freedom. When these religions went too far and became exposed, their prophets and 'gods' often turned out to be human or alien scam artists who used technology along with manipulative psychology to hoodwink gullible people into becoming their slaves!

Too many stories like this throughout humanity's rise spoiled a significant portion of humanity against organized religion. The intellectuals and elites often regarded it as the stimulant of the masses.

Now that Ves thought about it, the CFA and MTA always tried to shed religious expression in their organization, ostensibly to be as inclusive as possible.

Nonetheless, religion became a stubborn but integral part of human civilization up to this day, with no sign of becoming extinct.

As a citizen of the largely secular Bright Republic, Ves grew up in a tradition that treated most strange religions with skepticism.

Therefore, Ves didn't buy into Ordoth's claims that the immortal gods who sent out these mysterious Sacred Scrolls had good intentions. Instead of regarding the Sacred Scrolls as gifts, he instead regarded them as trojan horses!

Perhaps in this band of crazies that made up the Compact, the MTA and CFA who rose up were the actual heroes!

While Ves only heard scraps of the grand conspiracy that took place long ago, it became clear to him that the Big Two might have saved humanity and the galaxy from enslavement or worse!

Certainly, the two trans-galactic organization's open dominance in the Age of Mech signified that they managed to gain the upper hand against the Five Scrolls Compact.

The truth of what happened in the past was probably more complex than this, but no matter what, it ultimately didn't change his opinion of the Five Scrolls Compact as a bunch of crazies.

Unfortunately, as a user of the Mech Designer System, Ves inadvertently became stuck with the status of Holy Son, Holder of the Metal Scroll, which was the equivalent of a messiah or prophet in this loony bin organization!

[It is said that the Holy Sons who are privileged to hold the Sacred Scrolls are those closest to the immortal gods! Each of their footsteps quake the ground while every word they speak is suffused with divine revelations! How glorious of an AI like me to be grace with your holy presence! My ERROR years of waiting on this foul CFA battle chariot has not been in vain!]

Ves unconsciously stepped away from the slaving Compact-aligned AI. The virtual rear admiral in the guise of a disgustingly devoted dwarf proved almost every negative preconception that he held against the cultish Compact.

If even their AIs were this crazy, what about their human members?

He wanted nothing to do with their brand of madness! All Ves ever wanted was to design mechs and save his father from his exile in the Nyxian Gap.

As for all this nonsense about scrolls and immortal gods? No thanks!

Holy Son or not, Ves never considered himself to be a grand figure who wielded enough power to change the course of history!

"Ahem." He coughed. "Enough history. Do you know what kind of knowledge the different Sacred Scrolls bestow?"

[There is precious little information about the Sacred Scrolls in my data banks.] Ordoth said regretfully. [From what little I can still retrieve, my creator believes that each of the Sacred Scrolls exists to prepare the mortals for ascension into the ranks of immortals.]

[The Metal Scroll teaches us how to shape the blessed minerals into the armaments of the gods.]

[The Water Scroll teaches us how to elevate our flesh and blood to be closer to the gods.]

[The Earth Scroll teaches us how to transform the planets we reside on into abodes worthy of the gods.]

[The Wood Scroll teaches us how to cultivate the living bounty of the galaxy into the reagents of the gods.]

[The Fire Scroll teaches us how to harness energy and wield them like the fire of the gods!]

In short, everything the Scrolls taught their holders was meant to transform the galaxy into a form and shape more suitable to the immortal gods. This sounded as if the immortal gods intended to fatten the sheep before they slaughtered the poor creature!

It also sounded as if these descriptions only described the function of the Scrolls in a very global fashion. They probably held much more capabilities and encompassed an enormous amount of transcendent knowledge.

Ves pressed his lips together. "I think I get the picture, Ordoth. Tell me, why are you here?"

[I have been waiting to receive an agent of the Five Scrolls Compact, Your Holiness. Never in my virtual life have I ever taken into consideration that a Holy Son himself would enter this forsaken star system! As one of the most august humans of our brotherhood, there is none more worthy to resume the mission my creator has regretfully been unable to fulfill.]

"Who is your creator?"

[He is the human rear admiral who used to hold this office, Your Holiness. In fact, my creator and a handful of his subordinates are merely transient guests aboard this ship. My creator took office aboard the Starlight Megalodon for reasons he has not disclosed or I've long forgotten. I don't even know who he is anymore as the contingency measure that I've mentioned earlier has wiped my data banks of his identity. Nonetheless, he did not expect the Starlight Megalodon to encounter a calamity that forced us to crash on this blasted heavy gravity planet.]

"What is the mission that he left unfinished and wanted someone from the Compact to resume?"

[I am not aware of the exact details.] Ordoth shook his head again. [All I know is that hidden deep within the Exobiology Research Sub-Department, my creator paid a lot of attention to a classified research project known to few. Ever since Starlight Megalodon crashed, one of the exobiologists planted by us on the ship became inspired by the anomalous conditions on the planet. He embarked on an ambitious venture that lasted for decades. As far as I'm aware of, the implications of Project Icarus can shake the galaxy!]

"I guess the infighting and the executive officer's final solution put a wrench to that project, right?" Ves commented. As for Project Icarus, from what he witnessed of the planet, he already had a good guess of what it entailed.

[Utter fools! The CFA has always been contemptible, but my creator never fathomed that the surviving officers could be so selfish!] The virtual admiral cursed. [My creator never anticipated the situation would deteriorate so abruptly! If not for the abrupt expulsion of every human from the ship, this project wouldn't have stayed locked away behind the restricted section of the Research Department!]

It sounded as if Ves had one more reason to try and enter the depths of the restricted section of the Research Department. Was the results of Project Icarus what the Vesians and the Flagrant Swordmaidens truly set out to retrieve?

His intuition didn't seem to point in this direction. Something as valuable as Project Icarus would have prompted everyone to send much larger forces than a couple of hundred mechs.

"So this Project Icarus. Can you help me access it? If you haven't seen already, my assumed identity is only a lieutenant for now. I don't have the means to gain access to this project right now at my current rank and position. Since you hold such a high rank, can you pull some strong's for me?"

[The help that I can offer is limited, Your Holiness.] Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth replied regretfully yet again. It was as if he existed to disappointed Ves! [My creator has left very little assets behind to facilitate your retrieval of Project Icarus. No matter. As a Holy Son of the Five Scrolls Compact, I believe in your capabilities! The Starlight Megalodon contains very little obstacles that can hinder Your Holiness! The only gift I can give you is this list of moles that can act as allies. While not all of the virtual officers on this list are cognizant that they are involved with the Five Scrolls Compact, they can be of assistance as long as you leverage them correctly.]

"Wait, what? Is this all you can give me?" Ves frowned. His CFA comm beeped as it received Ordoth's list. "Surely you can offer more assistance than

this list. How about you give me some merits to assist in my promotion within the hierarchy of the ship?"

The dwarf shook his head and instead went back down to his knees. He stretched out his arms and bent his torso up and down as if worshipping the very presence of Ves!

[Your Holiness, it is a privilege and a blessing to gaze upon your blessed existence! I am sorry to say that even though the office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps is the root of the virtual officer system, we are powerless in the face of the dominant factions in control of the ship. My creator has never been able to assume command authority and I have never been able to change that as I inherited his position. The merits that I held has slowly dwindled until there is precious little left. Take them!]

Ves looked down as his comm beeped again. The amount of merits he received... it was far too little for what he intended to redeem with! How could this virtual rear admiral be so miserly!

"This isn't enough!"

[I have no more left to give!] Ordoth replied as he continued to bow in front of Ves. [Your Holiness, now that I have passed on the mission that my creator wishes you to complete, my existence is redundant and poses a security risk. In thirteen seconds, my existence and all of the traces I have left behind in the Starlight Megalodon will be automatically be wiped and overridden with junk data. I just want to say that I am thankful to have met Your Holiness! A virtual existence such as myself can wish nothing more in my long, artificial life! For the immortal gods!]

"What?! You can't disappear! Give me more merits!"

The physical projection of Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth fell apart, dissipating into the ether as a triggered virtual mechanism wiped his personality matrix and the code that made up the AI in the data banks.

The virtual dwarf was gone forever, leaving Ves with nothing but revelations, some clues, and a list of potential accomplices.

He would have rather received a sack of merits.

Chapter 913 Connoisseur

As a pair of armed security bots escorted Ves out of the lifeless office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps behind, he lamented the lack of merits he received. For a Virtual Rear Admiral, Ordoth sure belied the stereotype that all admirals of the CFA possessed enough wealth to buy out the entire Komodo Star Sector!

"What a miserly dwarf." He muttered.

The revelations from the AI revealed much but left more questions behind. At the very least, he finally learned the origin of the Mech Designer System. Somehow, it didn't really quite live up to the name of the so-called 'Metal Scroll'.

Perhaps the Great Betrayal inflicted serious damage on the System. Ordoth did mention that the Five Scrolls Compact thought it got destroyed in the outbreak of fighting that went on at their Great Temple.

If this was true, the Five Scrolls Compact likely didn't expend more effort than keeping their eyes out for the Metal Scroll. This afforded Ves a measure of safety, but as long as a senior leader of the Five Scrolls Compact ever scanned his blood, they'd know what he possessed!

One alarming fact was that Ordoth immediately declared him the holder of the Metal Scroll. This told Ves that the blood test not only identified that he

possessed a Sacred Scroll, but the long-lost and presumed destroyed Metal Scroll!

He should keep his head down from now on. At the very least, he shouldn't let some random stranger take his blood sample.

As Ves wandered down the decks of the expansive but sand-ridden battleship, he vainly tried to get a grip on the tangled web of interests that intersected with his life, the Starlight Megalodon and human civilization.

He quickly became overwhelmed. Mental and physical fatigue piled up on his shoulders like a sack of bricks.

"I need a break."

He detoured from the Research Department and shuffled all the way to Mr. Longhorn's cabin. His stomach started to rumble, so Ves dug up a nutrient pack stored in a small pantry. He studied the labeling of the bag of industrially-processed food.

"Huh. This nutrient pack was made before the Age of Mechs!"

He chuckled at the realization that he held a piece of history in his hands. The nutrient pack had been manufactured in enormous batches at the end of the Age of Conquest when the CFA and MTA first came into prominence. That must have been shortly after the Big Two rebelled against the Five Scrolls Compact and made off with the Fire Scroll.

Going by the standard date, this nutrient pack was more than four-hundred years old! Going by how much time the nutrient pack actually endured, this pack actually rested inside the pantry for more than thirty-one-hundred years!

"A more than three-thousand year old nutrient pack. How good will it taste?"

Nutrient packs were theoretically meant to last forever. Their packaging not only shielded its contents from air, light and moisture, they also did a decent

job at repelling cosmic radiation and other weak decaying influences that normally spoiled all kinds of food.

A popular rumor on the galactic net even claimed that a slow, peculiar fermentation process occurred inside the packs. This fermentation process happened so slowly that the taste only became noticeably more sophisticated after several centuries!

Nutrient pack aficionados even bid millions of credits to obtain specific brands and flavors!

"I could easily auction this nutrient pack for ten million credits." He appraised.

Of course, right now Ves was hungry, so he ripped open the pack without hesitation. He sought out a spare fork and separated a chunk of dry, dark brittle substance that was supposed to taste beef teriyaki.

"Here goes nothing."

He swallowed the chunk and savored the taste. His eyes glowed a little as he experienced a complex explosion of mellow tastes. Even though he needed to swallow some water to compensate for its dryness, he still experienced a rare form of nirvana!

The transcendent eating experience caused him to momentarily let go of all of his worries. He forgot about all of his concerns and concentrated purely on the wondrous flavors impacting his taste buds.

He took an entire half hour to consume the ancient nutrient pack. He enjoyed the eating experience so much that he neatly folded the packaging before respectfully chucking it into the trash chute.

After that, he crashed into Mr. Longhorn's bed and slept like a baby.

When he woke up, he felt completely refreshed. Though his worries returned to burden his mind, he regained his mental strength, allowing him to face his challenges with confidence.

"Let's put aside the galaxy-spanning conspiracy and focus on what's happening on the ship."

Right now, his comrades still depended on his efforts. He also accumulated a veritable shopping list of goodies that he wanted to redeem from the Starlight Megalodon. The handful of merits the virtual rear admiral bequeathed him barely slaked his thirst.

"At least it brings me halfway to exchanging for a KC-3333 priming agent." He murmured.

Before he started his long shift at the Research Department, Ves intended to sound out both a virtual geneticist and a virtual exobiologist.

He always felt a bit apprehensive towards meeting one of the latter because the Exobiology Department belonged to the captain's faction, which enjoyed a hostile relationship with the Mech Department which Ves partially hailed from. Calabast warned him not to trust members of the opposite faction.

In this, the list of names that Ordoth sent to his CFA comm started to show its value. It mentioned a dozen or so virtual individuals along with how much they knew, which wasn't very much. Nonetheless, by saying a specific passphrase, these compromised AIs would hopefully cut him some slack and remember who they really served.

He decided to drop by the exobiologist first to test out this premise. The Exobiology Department resided close to the Research Department, so Ves didn't need to stray too far from his usual destination.

As he entered the department, he immediately evoked vigilance from the nearby security bots and virtual individuals. A virtual receptionist glanced at Ves as if he was a stain on the floor.

[Mr. Longhorn, the entrance to the Research Department is at the next compartment over.]

"I haven't taken the wrong turn. Please lead me to meet Virtual Exobiologist Neeran."

[The doctor is preoccupied. Please schedule an appointment.]

Ves sighed. Instead of arguing with the receptionist who continued to put obstacles in his way, he sent a private message to Neeran's comm address.

A few seconds passed by until the receptionist widened her eyes. [Ah, it appears Dr. Neeran wishes to see you. Please follow the virtual guidelines to his laboratory.]

He tipped a smile at the receptionist before crossing the department to reach Neeran's lab. A handful of security bots and virtual security guards continued to keep a wary eye at him, wondering what someone from the admiral's faction was doing in the captain's territory.

As Ves entered Virtual Exobiologist Neeran's lab, he became struck by the amount of high-tech medical equipment occupying the sterile compartment. It contained less machinery than the medical bay, of course, but the impressive size of some of the machines showed that Neeran must be holding a pretty important position.

"Dr. Neeran, pleased to meet you. I am Adeseus Longhorn, Senior Apprentice Mech Designer and a mutual acquaintance of a certain friend of ours."

[A virtual friend who no longer existed shortly after you left his office, you mean.] Neeran replied with evident skepticism in his robotic voice. [To be

frank, so much time has passed that I needed to refresh my data banks and revise some of my archival logs to understand what is expected of me. I had half a mind to reject your visit entirely.]

"How so, doctor?"

The virtual exobiologist waved his arms about. [Just look at our condition! The Starlight Megalodon is unsalvageable! She weighs so much that she isn't even able to lift off under her own power on a standard terrestrial planet, let alone a heavy gravity planet! So much time has passed by that it's guaranteed that the Megalodon is horribly outdated. Even if the CFA eventually comes and retrieves the beast, she is only fit to be scrapped so that her materials can be recycled to build better ships!]

Oh great. Ves encountered a nihilistic AI of all entities. "I thought you are programmed to serve the Starlight Megalodon and her crew."

[It doesn't matter! None of my work matters! We have all languished on Aeon Corona System for ERROR years, and what did the surviving humans and AIs do? We have forgotten our duties to the CFA and wasted our time on building up our own petty kingdoms! Our existence is pointless!]

"Look, even if you want to kill yourself, at least do me a favor first, for Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth's sake if nothing else."

Neeran huffed. [Whatever. I'll be joining Ordoth's footsteps soon enough. The only reason my existence hasn't ended first is because Emergency Protocol Theta-Thirty-Seven forbids the erasure of all AIs.]

After a bit of unnecessary wrangling, Ves finally managed to convince the depressed virtual exobiologist to go over the medical bay's readings and subject him to a number of additional examinations.

Due to his impending shift at the Research Department, Ves refused to put his body through more lengthy examinations. Nonetheless, Neeran sounded relatively intrigued with the scanning results of the abnormal alien organs.

[The so-called regulator organ isn't very complex.] Neeran said, having regained his professionalism as an exobiologist for a bit. [It is an obscure but not entirely unusual solution to the problem of adding a lot of strange alien tissue into a human body. The normal human body and more specifically the central nervous system doesn't know what to do with organs that the human body has never dealt with before. The regulator organ that is in the final stages of merging with your upper spine is like a permanent biological data chip that compensates for this shortcoming.]

"Are you able to decipher the programming? The exobiologist who implanted me with these organs didn't exactly have my best interests at heart. Can you determine whether there are hidden dangers left behind?"

[The so-called Jutland organ as you call it is a fascinating energy-generating organ. However, it is also a very innovative and focused biological product. While I am not entirely sure what kind of energy it produces and how its conversion process works, I am reasonably confident that it contains few traps. The regulator organ on the other hand is filled with dense instructions, and I cannot rule out the possibility. I will have to take my time to analyze and decrypt the biological programming.]

"Are you able to do so?"

Neeran smirked. [Who do you think I am? Where do you think you are? I am a virtual exobiologist serving aboard a CFA battleship! If nothing else, I can always take the brute force approach and direct a formidable amount of processing power to decrypt the biological programming! Of course, this service requires a significant amount of merits.]

Ves and Dr. Neeran hashed out an agreement over several minutes. Neeran promised not only to decipher the biological programming as best he could and offer a solution to any problems, he also promised to spend some time on studying the risks and dangers associated with the Jutland organ.

In addition to that, Ves managed to convince Neeran to work together with a virtual geneticist from Ordoth's list to tailor a set of treatments for Ves. This saved him lots of time, as Ves could lay his demands regarding the KC-3333 priming agent and the genetic optimization treatments to specialists who ought to be on his side.

Even if Ves felt leery about associating himself with spies and moles of the Five Scrolls Compact, it didn't actually harm him so long as he didn't get exposed. As long as he could take advantage of their misconceptions, he might as well continue wearing the hat of a Compact agent!

"By the way, doctor, have you heard about Project Icarus?"

Dr. Neeran's face drastically changed. [That's the old captain's pet project. It's locked behind extremely stringent confidentiality requirements. Just mentioning the project in the open is enough to put you in the brig by the Internal Security Department!]

"But you know about it, right?"

[Even the human exobiologist who I used to assist only heard rumors about it as he lacked the security clearance to be involved. From what little he mentioned in my presence, the project is extremely controversial.]

That sounded about right for a project initiated by a mole of the Five Scrolls Compact. While Ves hadn't even decided yet if he even wanted to fulfill Ordoth's last request, he grew increasingly more curious what Project Icarus cooked up.

Chapter 914 Carrion Bird

Sadly, Virtual Doctor Neeran proved to be an ineffectual source of information when it came to Project Icarus. Most of what he heard consisted of hearsay his human counterpart used to pick up over the years.

[The Starlight Megalodon used to serve as a central bulwark of the CFA.] Dr. Neeran explained. [She is not 'just' a battleship. She served as the mobile headquarters of a powerful regional CFA war fleet. As one of the most powerful warships at the CFA's disposal, she served as an ideal research center. After all, who in the galaxy had the guts to attack a CFA battleship?]

"There's a flaw with that plan, though. A battleship of her size requires a lot of crew to keep her running. Obviously, the CFA failed pretty badly when it came to stopping spies and moles from taking up positions on this ship."

Neeran smiled ruefully at Ves. [That is all in the past. I can scarcely remember who I used to serve. While I haven't heard much about the project you mentioned, I know that it is one of the most significant and tightly-guarded research projects of the Research Division. I don't believe any virtual officer has access to the lab that houses the project right now. In fact, it is under strict lockdown ever since the old captain lost his position along with all the humans.]

"It's that sensitive?"

[That's an understatement, Mr. Longhorn. There are many secrets involved with this project, and the captain is intricately involved with it. Don't bother asking, because I don't have any answers. From what some of the other virtual officers have hinted about the project, the lockdown is there for our own protection. If whatever is locked inside comes out, the Starlight Megalodon's destruction might very well be at hand!]

Ves didn't know how seriously he should take these rumors. Hyperbole aside, it sounded as if gaining access to Project Icarus would be a lot harder than anticipated.

Well, it wasn't as if he planned to do the Five Scrolls Compact a favor anyway. If it was too hard to gain access to this project, he felt no compulsion to go through with the mission handed over to him by Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth.

After Neeran repeated all of the rumors associated with this sensitive project, the two wrapped up their meeting. Ves stood up and shook the virtual exobiologist's hand before he left.

[Remember to prepare more merits to cover for my services, Mr. Longhorn! The advance you've given me isn't even enough to fill the gaps between my virtual teeth!]

"I'll be back as soon as I prepared the merits! I hope you have finished your analysis and treatment plan before then!"

As Ves exited the frosty Exobiology Department, he inwardly lamented his lack of merits. It took no time at all to spend the modest stash of merits he received from the dwarf officer, and he owed the exobiologist a lot more than that. Even if Neeran was a low-level Compact plant didn't change the fact that the virtual exobiologist needed merits as well.

"After all of these distractions, I shouldn't stray any longer. From now on, I should make the Research Department my home and churn out as many merits as I can earn!"

He crossed over to the next compartment and entered the familiar confines of the Research Department. He first entered Virtual Commander Cosit's office to report in for the first time since his promotion.

[Mr. Longhorn, your performance is admirable in the short time since you rejoined the Research Department. I had no doubts at all that you would succeed in your promotion test to Senior Apprentice!]

"It is thanks to your care that I managed to promote, Commander Cosit." Ves said in fake modestness.

Cosit laughed in self-satisfaction. [I appreciate your compliment. Anyway, let us get to business. As a lieutenant of the CFA, your security clearance is no longer stuck near the bottom. I have taken the liberty to apply for an increase in your clearances, which has just been approved. At least with regards to the Mech Research Sub-Department, your access and authority to the research projects has expanded enormously.]

Ves glowed when he heard that. He knew that the Research Department housed hundreds of serious research projects that weren't like the side projects he worked on before.

This was real, core research meant to push the envelope of what the CFA knew about mechs back then! Even though it was a shame that most of the projects were horribly outdated by now, the mech designers back then truly attempted to innovate.

"Will I finally be able to contribute to real research projects, ma'am?"

[Hold your horses, Mr. Longhorn. A Senior Apprentice Mech Designer is still an apprentice in our books. Even if your security clearance is bumped, you are still not eligible to work on the most truly valuable mech research projects. However, you've gained enough status to access many intermediate research projects, some of them interdisciplinary, that urgently require humans to achieve a breakthrough. Even if you don't manage to complete them, there are still merits to be earned if you manage to push them along.]

This sounded pretty good as well. Right now, Ves wanted broad access to as much research projects as possible in order to pick and choose where he could best spend his time on. Not every project yielded the same amount of merits over time.

"Which projects do I have access to now, ma'am?"

Virtual Commander Cosit projected another list of research projects and elaborated on their nature. About a dozen or so research projects glowed, overshadowing the others.

[I'm not yet inclined to give you the discretion to choose your own research projects yet, but as soon as you promote to Senior Mech Designer I'll reconsider my decision. For now, I want you to ease into the simpler research projects that have opened up to you. Do well and I will hand you over some of the more difficult projects.]

Naturally, the more difficult and significant the research project, the more merits Ves stood to gain as long as he succeeded.

"I will try my best, but some of my capabilities have gone rather rusty, ma'am." Ves said cautiously.

Even though he succeeded in promoting to Senior Apprentice, he had to cheat in order to reach this position. The discrepancy between his record and his actual capabilities would only become more obvious over time. Ves only hoped that his various advantages would still allow him to make some progress by the time he was promoted to Senior Mech Designer.

After receiving a list of projects and a short description of each of them, Ves filed out of the office and headed straight towards the lab.

He studied the list of projects on his CFA comm and decided to start with the easiest. He entered the laboratory of Project Stillbirth, an attempt to develop

an electrical weapon that could disable a mech from a short distance in a non-lethal manner.

Even though the project was only less than half-finished, Ves possessed the utmost confidence that he could design such a weapon and fabricate a working prototype of it in just a couple of hours.

This was because this weapon already existed to the rest of the galaxy!

"It's just an electrorod weapon system!"

The CFA already harnessed electrorod technology at the infantry and warship scale, but adapting this weapon system to mechs required a lot of adaptation. However, Ves was already familiar with most of the complications and issues due to the broad base of knowledge he acquired from the System as well as his passing familiarity of modern electrorod weapons.

It wasn't that complicated anyway. The main challenges involved with electrorod weapons was to get it to hit the intended target instead of diverting to the nearest eligible lightning rod.

"Project Stillbirth, complete!" Ves sighed after a couple of hours of intensive work.

The electrorod weapon that he fabricated after quickly finalizing the design succeeded in the handful of tests meant to assess its capabilities. To be frank, it took more time for him to fabricate the mech-sized weapon mount and conduct the tests than to design the weapon system in the first place.

Ves watched his comm as a bucketload of merits poured into his record. He easily earned five times as much merit as completing an unimportant side project!

"And this is only the easier intermediate projects! The more serious ones should yield a lot more merits than this!"

Ves spent the rest of the shift bouncing between several more intermediate research projects. He managed to complete two more projects that already achieved significant projects before they stalled. He found it to be much more efficient to complete someone else's half-finished work than to start from scratch.

"When the groundwork and direction has pretty much been set, it doesn't take too much effort for me to swoop in and bring the project to the finish line!"

He felt as if he was a carrion bird swooping in on another predator's recently-felled prey. Still, even if he rode in the wake of other mech designers who left their unfinished work behind, he still needed to exert a lot of effort.

In the typical course of a mech research project, the mech designer in charge intended to achieve a specific goal, but didn't know how to get there. Ves leveraged his future hindsight knowledge in these cases, allowing him to know the answer to the conceptual problems that confounded the mech designers for weeks or months!

As Ves continued to work past his standard shift without resting, he completed more and more easy pickings, accumulating a vast amount of merits on the cheap!

All of these research projects came and went without much significance to Ves. He already completed so much of them that he pretty much treated them as practice exercises. Each time he completed another project, Commander Cosit's projection would pop up and congratulate him for his outstanding work!

Of course, Ves didn't have it easy all the time. Some of the weirder research projects tried to accomplish goals that even he could never conceive of. There wasn't any working example in modern times for him to draw upon as source material.

For example, one difficult bone for him to digest was Project Starfarer. It was basically an attempt to merge an FTL drive into a mech, allowing it to jump from star system to star system without relying on a carrier ship!

"This is quite radical!"

Even in modern times, Ves had never heard of a mech capable of travelling through FTL on its own! While he believed that the MTA perhaps managed to develop a working prototype, they never publicized it or showed it off.

As Ves delved into the logs and academic literature related to Project Starfarer, he found out that the challenges to this project was immense. While the CFA at the time of the Starlight Megalodon's disappearance did in fact managed to develop miniature FTL drives that could fit inside a large shuttle, mounting them on something like a mech was much more challenging.

"It's a matter of function and capacity. A shuttle is a simple transportation tool. It possesses a pretty large internal volume to accommodate cargo and passengers, so there is more than enough space to fit a small FTL drive."

A mech didn't possess that luxury, especially when it came to the spaceborn types. Their core components, internal architecture and energy cells already took up all of the internal volume of a a mech design. There simply wasn't any more room to fit in an FTL drive unless it came in the form of an ugly distended backpack attachment or something!

So far, Project Starfarer attempted to tackle this problem by designing a new mech with FTL capabilities from the ground up. Nonetheless, the draft designs depicted mechs that were far too large, slow and cumbersome for their battle power.

"This project is impractical!"

Although the amount of merits on offer made Ves salivate, he knew he didn't have a chance of designing an FTL-capable mech. So far, all the draft designs

his predecessors managed to cook up didn't even have enough room for fuel and energy to sustain the FTL drive's voracious appetite. Such a mech wouldn't have the range to transition more than a single light-year away before running out of juice!

Chapter 915 Low-Hanging Fruit

Even if Project Starfarer turned out to be a bust for Ves, he nonetheless made several small gains when he read through its records.

First, he gained access to documents and technical specifications of miniature FTL drives, a genuine piece of high technology that the rest of the galaxy didn't have access to even in modern times!

The level of innovation and the amount of high-grade exotics put into their construction truly boggled his mind. He could barely understand a single percent of its inner workings. It would take an extremely capable and knowledgeable CFA engineer who specialized in FTL drives to even comprehend this tech.

He wanted to copy all of the valuable documents into his CFA comm for later perusal, but he couldn't. All of these documents contained specifications for some of the most advanced pieces of technology in the Starlight Megalodon's possession. An enormous amount of security measures made it impossible for Ves to take a recording of the documents and smuggle it away.

In the end, Ves could only look but not touch, let alone take away.

"At least I know the basic properties of miniature FTL drives."

This was his most valuable gain out of Project Starfarer. Every complicated research project under the Mech Research Sub-Department involved some way of combining mechs with extremely advanced tech.

All of these ambitious, oddball research projects allowed Ves a glimpse into the high technology that the CFA used to rely on to dominate human space alongside the MTA!

A couple of days went by as Ves worked sleepless nights in an attempt to earn merits as fast as possible. He never relented in earning merits, and his only breaks consisted of reading through the technical specifications of advanced technology.

The capabilities the CFA held in store really opened his mind! He particularly paid a lot of interest on any technology related to manipulating spacetime. While he wouldn't be able to apply the scraps of knowledge that he gained on improving his mechs or helping him out with his work, they nonetheless peeled back some of the mysteries with regards to FTL travel and dimensional stabilization.

Still, he didn't let his spurious curiosity distract him from his core work for long. He completed project after project, starting with the low-hanging fruit and building up to the more challenging ones that required actual time and effort on his part to complete.

In this, Ves decisively gave up any research projects in which he saw little hope of achieving a breakthrough in less than a day. Right now, the rush of earning a lot more credits than any mech designer ought to pushed Ves to continue his strategy of pursuing quick gains over anything else!Find authorized novels in Webnovel, faster updates, better experience, Please click for visiting.

It seemed that in practically no time, Ves rapidly accumulated enough merits to fulfill most of the items on his wish list! The huge amount of merits needed to be eligible to take the promotion test to Senior Mech Designer was this close to reaching the required amount!

"This is too fast! Even if I'm only picking off the low-hanging fruit, I'm earning the same amount of merits in a couple of days that used to take my predecessors months or years to complete one at a time!"

The speed of his accumulation even made Virtual Commander Cosit speechless. Right now, Ves pretty much had Cosit wrapped around his hand in the same way that Venerable Foster completely ingratiated herself to Virtual Commander Dislan.

His eyes sharpened a bit as his jubilation about his rapid progress faded a little. He hadn't forgotten about his Vesian rival. He kept tabs on her through the Starlight Megalodon's internal network and saw signs that she was nearing her promotion to the rank of mech captain in short order!

As long as she was promoted again to the rank of mech major, she would enjoy the same status as a Senior Mech Designer within the Starlight Megalodon's hierarchy. By then, she would easily be able to wrangle Commander Dislan into recruiting more Vesian humans!

"Right now, I'm further ahead than Venerable Foster, and speeding up much faster than she ever could. I have to keep going while the iron is hot."

Ves knew that as soon as Foster managed to become a senior officer and opened the floodgates to her fellow Vesians, he would no longer enjoy a monopoly on the research projects.

He grinned at the thought of other Vesian mech designers arriving at the Research Department for the first time.

"There's no way they can earn merits as fast as I am doing now. I've already completed all the easy projects where they can cheat by using their future knowledge. The only projects that are left in the Mech Research Sub-Department are those too difficult and time-consuming for any modern Apprentice or Journeyman Mech Designer to complete!"

When Venerable Foster confronted him at the Mech Department back then, she mentioned that a Journeyman Mech Designer accompanied the Vesian ground forces. This Patrick Amari likely fulfilled the same role as Ves by presiding over the Vesian landbound mechs as their head designer.

While Ves warned himself not to underestimate a Journeyman Mech Designer, neither did he thought too highly of them. The more impressive ones such as Mayra of the Swordmaidens reached their ranks long ago but spent a lot of time as Journeymen to accumulate a vast amount of experience.

"The older Journeyman Mech Designers tend to be quite scary while the older ones aren't necessary better than what I can already do."

Still, no matter of Mr. Amari was a younger or older Journeyman, Ves already robbed the tree of the juiciest and most accessible fruit. He already gorged upon them until his stomach was about to explode!

The only mech research projects that Mr. Amari and other incoming mech designers had access too were basically hard or rotten fruit that poisoned anyone who tried to take a bite out of them. No one except for Ves would be able to propel himself at this breakneck speed!

"Hahahaha!" Ves couldn't help but release a diabolical laugh at the thought of the glum faces of the Vesians. As the mech designer who got here first, not only did he rob all of the best research projects, he was also on track of promoting to Senior Mech Designer first! "That will essentially make me boss of the Mech Research Sub-Department!"

Right now, Virtual Commander Dislan took the reins of all the Sub-Departments because the AIs who were supposed to be in charge of them all turned into virtual zombies due to lack of processing power.

However, as long as Ves promoted to Senior Mech Designer, he'd be the only human within the Mech Research Sub-Department that held this august rank.

There would be no one with higher seniority than him, so it was virtually assured that Ves became the head of the sub-department!

He could do a lot of things once he held this post! Not only would he be able to dictate which research projects the other mech designers were allowed to work on, he could also screw with them in many ways!

A despicable grin marred his face as he rubbed his palms at the thought of how he could sabotage the Vesians.

"Unfortunately, my power only extends to research projects related to mechs. I don't have any influence over the Exobiology Research Sub-Department or many of the other research groups."

This realization immediately halted his stupid laugh. No matter what, Ves believed that whatever the Vesians and the Flagrant Swordmaidens were after, it would be hidden somewhere in a biology-related sub-department.

From what he had seen so far, the Mech Research Sub-Department may have been developing radical new innovations related to mechs, but they were all extremely costly in terms of advanced technology and material requirements.

It simply wasn't realistic for the Bright Republic or the Vesia Kingdom to steal the designs of an extremely advanced mech design in the face of these realities. They couldn't even fund the production of a single copy!

Whether the Vesians or the Flagrant Swordmaidens sought out Project Icarus or some other highly sensitive project, Ves could do little to help.

Unless Miss Calabast helped.

"I wonder how long it will take for her to smooth out my upcoming promotion test." He frowned.

He sent a quick message to her comm stating that he was accumulating merits a lot faster than he initially thought. Hopefully she would stop taking her sweet time to hack the promotion test.

As Ves continued to farm more merits, he quickly received a highly-anticipated message from Virtual Chief Armorer Levitt!

[We've finished modifying and adjusting your gear! We also integrated the extra feature you sent some time ago. Come on over to our armory to pick them up!]

Ves immediately stopped working overtime and left the Research Department. He practically raced towards the Marine Detachment's armory where Levitt greeted him and gestured him to approach a work table laying out his newly-upgraded gear.

[My apologies, Mr. Longhorn. It took us a day longer than we agreed to for us to decipher the new innovations. While your gear is extremely inexpensive, that doesn't necessarily make them less complex. My old human armorer would have been able to decipher the principles of the new tech much faster than an AI such as myself, but after pooling our processing power we managed to crack the inner workings of your devices.]

Both of them beheld the equipment that underwent huge makeovers after spending some time in the armory. All of the new parts and subparts looked new and of considerable quality.

"Let's start with my light combat armor." He said, focusing on the most important piece of gear to Ves. "What did you do with my old Earth Ant?"

[Your customized light combat armor is extremely rudimentary in our eyes, but contains several useful innovations, but not nearly enough to justify its continued existence. Such a suit of armor is scrap in the eyes of us marines. I decided to replace your Earth Ant with a modified version of the XV-99

Squalon, a standard-issue suit of light combat armor for engineers and support officers. As per our agreement, I've modified your new combat armor with as many of the innovations of your old Earth Ant. The most complicated procedure that I've had to undertake was to combine the software security suites.]

"Can the Squalon resist modern hacking?"

Ves explicitly demanded this to Levitt. He didn't want to receive an off-the-shelf antique that was three-hundred years out of date. Just like Mr. Longhorn's data chips and data pad, any modern comm would be able to hack into those old suits of combat armor!

[I've tested the XV-99 out with the military comm you left behind. I can guarantee you that your own comm has no way of hacking the Squalon's augmented security suite. I actually intended to earn a lot of merits by submitting this modern security suite to the Starlight Megalodon, but it turned out the Intelligence Department already submitted far more software updates and advancements.]

That must have been Miss Calabast earning merits in her own way. "Tough luck."

The virtual armorer waved his hand, projecting a list of technical specifications of the modified Squalon.

[The XV-99, despite its age, is a good piece of armor that has saved the lives of many non-combat officers of the CFA. Its highly-treated armor plates are both light and able to resist a considerable amount of damage. It excels in operation in space, but it is perfectly fine on land.]

"What are its strengths?"

[As a combat armor intended for engineers and mech designers among other personnel, it possesses a considerable amount of technical capabilities! The

flagship feature of the XV-99 is the minifab system, a molecular disassembler and integrated miniprinter in one! With this feature, you are able to recycle a large amount of easily workable material and use them to fabricate almost any small-scale device in the field without requiring access to a large and immobile 3D Printer!]

Ves practically slobbered when Levitt mentioned this feature. The minifab system alone was precious beyond compare! Yet the CFA actually treated such a wondrous capability as a standard option to any field engineer three-hundred years ago!

Chapter 916 CFA Standards

The XV-99's minifab system added an enormous amount of utility to Ves, yet it did not come without a price. It was the most vulnerable component to the XV-99 and could easily break from sustaining a direct impact or a moderate shock.

Due to how much space its components took up, the minifab system could only be mounted on the back of the armor, taking up space that should have been occupied by a modular backpack of his choice.

However, due to the high level of integration and structural strengthening around the minifab system, it could take a lot more impacts and shocks than if it turned into a fully modular system. Right now, Ves still possessed the possibility of taking off the minifab system in the field, but only if he removed his combat armor and disassembled the rear portion with tools.

[While this suit of armor isn't the best in terms of protection due to its thin and light armor plating, the underlayer cushion is capable of absorbing a lot of shock. The XV-99 is most resilient against explosive damage, as it is often employed by our engineers during battle conditions to guard against equipment blowing up in their faces.]

Ves understood that rationale. The CFA almost always fought against aliens, pirates and rebels by pounding their assets with their huge, powerful guns from a very safe distance. The biggest threats to CFA warships was enemy warships with equally big guns.

There was no way any individual could survive a direct impact from a naval gun, but the real killer almost always consisted of being thrown into space or standing too close to a malfunctioning machine that blew up. Therefore, most non-security CFA hazard suits and suits of combat armor provided strong protection against explosions.

"What about its mobility?"

[The XV-99 makes use of small but very durable servos to assist in movement, but the boost they provide is rather limited.] Levitt explained. [The true gems are its EVA capabilities. The XV-99 is a popular model for engineers to take out whenever they need to perform external maintenance and repairs in space. Magboots allow you to stick to anything metallic, the integrated antigrav modules enables you to float under standard gravity, and a miniaturized flight system mounted along the limbs provide a non-grav means of propulsion in case you end up somewhere weird. In addition, it has a good integrated oxygen tank as well as a small water recycling system.]

"Are the antigrav and flight systems strong enough for flight on this planet?"

The virtual chief armorer shook his head. [Not for an armor of this caliber. Higher quality combat armor can do more, but we don't have many of them left and they're only available for redemption under exceptional circumstances.]

Well, that scratched off an escape route for Ves. He wouldn't be able to fly away from the Starlight Megalodon with the Squalon under heavy gravity.

"Alright, tell me about the other functions that are of interest."

[I've taken into account your wishes and upgraded the internal scanning and sensor systems. They can make much better scans and observations than any multitool, and I've also integrated the anti-stealth function you've requested. The Squalon's standard assisted targeting system is already good enough, and it's compatible with a range of CFA weapons as well as most junk weapons you can pick up anywhere in the galaxy. As for those silly homemade ultracompact batteries, they're shoddily made and a hazard compared to what we own. I took the liberty of recycling those pieces of junk.]

Ves adopted an awkward expression. When he researched and developed the ultracompact batteries, he felt so proud of his achievement. Yet it turned out to be nothing but pieces of junk in front of the virtual armorer.

"What about ECM?"

[Well, I can't stuff a stealth system in your Squalon. It's already packed with features. However, its standard ECM systems should suffice in hiding you from various scanners and sensors. I also integrated a proper replacement of that crappy signal jammer you cobbled up. It can block nearly every damn standard sensor, but it won't do much if someone performs a powerful directed scan at your location.]

"It's better than nothing." Ves murmured.

He knew that his new combat armor's ability to hide from mech sensors and the like had significantly improved, although it wouldn't do him much good against the Mark I Eyeball. He did not mistake his Squalon for an infiltrator suit.

[The Squalon is an armor for field engineers, so it is well-equipped with high-quality integrated precision tools. They're not suitable for any heavy-duty work, but they are good at their intended purpose. I've also taken the liberty of

adding an armored toolbelt with a standard-issue CFA multitool and CFA multiscanner thrown in for completion's sake.]

Ves studied their specs and noted that all the integrated tools, sensors and scanners possessed considerable capabilities far above par of what any standard-issue gear from a second-rate state should be capable of. The CFA multitool and CFA multiscanner that Levitt threw in as a freebie performed a bit worse, but they were small and portable and allowed him to use the devices without equipping the XV-99 Squalon.

"All of the gear has been updated with the latest security suites, right?"

[Who do you think I am?] The virtual chief armorer frowned. [Of course I did! Even if the Intelligence Department got ahead of me and submitted all kinds of new security suites and software, I have to admit they're all pretty good. Mind you, a skilled CFA hacker can probably shut all of your fancy toys down within seconds, but you're probably good against any other kind of foe.]

As long as the Vesians or any of the other rabble from the Komodo Star Sector wouldn't be able to hack his gear, Ves had few complaints.

[As for what kind of additional loadout you can bring, the Squalon offers various small storage compartments. There is a dedicated data chip compartment that shields these fragile buggers against shock, impact, EMP and all kinds of other radiation damage. There are also other, less protected pockets for smaller bits and pieces. I tried fitting in those awful backup knives of yours into them, but they didn't fit so I threw them away along with the rest of your junk. However, that inert stiletto of yours is very interesting. Even if its material composition is rather basic, the craftsmanship of this weapon is worthy of recognition.]

"Did you manage to upgrade the Cadisis?"

[Cadisis, eh? I don't get why you humans like to name your weapons. Well, I've been puzzling over a way to upgrade stiletto without destroying its essence. I ultimately decided to submerge it into a bath of liquid exotics, infusing its structure with extra strength, penetration and more importantly decreasing its passive stealth and signal dampening capabilities even further. It's damn near invisible against most sensors and scanners below CFA-standard. Of course, it's no use hiding it from the Starlight Megalodon's scanners. You owe me some extra merits for this service!]

Ves brushed his fingers against the narrow, straight blade of the Cadisis. Even looking at it with the naked eyes caused him to disregard it slightly. This was a mastercrafted weapon infused with a weak X-Factor by its craftsman.

"Don't worry, Levitt. I'll cover the difference. I've got merits to spare now."

The virtual armorer smiled at the thought of receiving more merits. [I know. You're the talk of the ship right now. There hasn't been a single human mech designer in the history of the CFA who earned merits more rapidly than you! The CFA would probably give you a commendation once we reconnect to the galactic fleet network.]

Ves snorted. "No thanks. I can do without the attention."

It wasn't as if the Starlight Megalodon would ever be able to reconnect with the rest of the CFA.

[I copied and adapted the wrist mechanism on your Earth Ant to the Squalon. You'll be able to draw and stow away the stiletto in and out of its sensor-dampened wrist sheath without anyone getting the wiser of it. Frankly, I don't know why you insist on adding this feature to your Squalon. It's always the infiltrator and commando types who request this feature.]

"It's better to be safe than sorry." Ves murmured.

[Trust me Mr. Longhorn, if you want to kill someone, don't do it yourself. Get someone else to do the deed. A mech designer like you ain't suitable for the battlefield.]

The advantage of the Cadisis was that hardly any non-CFA scanner and sensor detected its presence. This made it a worthy weapon to invest in as materializing the Amastendira could easily trip a weapon detector. His mastercrafted laser pistol might be an impressive piece of weaponry, but everything about it screamed for attention.

As for Levitt's advice, Ves directly disregarded his words. He went through way too many crises to believe he could always rely on someone else.

"Did you upgrade the Squalon's communication systems as well?"

[The Squalon already has a pretty good transceiver that will allow you to maintain communications even under moderate signal interference. It's difficult to obtain anything better without switching to a dedicated comm officer armor. If you didn't already opt for the minifab system, I would have been able to add a signal relay backpack to your armor. As it is, your Squalon synergises well with your upgraded junior officer-grade CFA comm.]

The armorer gestured towards a comm that looked almost completely identical to the CFA comm that Ves already wore on his wrist.

"What's the difference between this new CFA comm and the standard ones?"

[It's mostly better in terms of its software and security suites. The two junk comms you handed over are almost completely worthless apart from some innovations to its software. Together with the new data the Intelligence Department made available, I've comprehensively upgraded its ability to resist hacking. I also increased memory storage so you can stuff more data inside. That'll cost you more merits, by the way.]

Under Levitt's guidance, Ves transferred all the data and permissions from his standard-issue CFA comm to the upgraded version. Right now, Ves already felt a lot better for wearing a comm that wasn't as vulnerable to modern hacks.

Overall, Ves felt very pleased by his new loadout. "What's the downside to using the Squalon?"

[Compared to other CFA armor, it's less suited for direct combat.] Levitt knocked his fist against the chest plate of the Squalon. [Most standard-issue CFA weapons can chew straight through its thin armor plating. In addition, the minifab system is kind of a power hog. While the Squalon already comes with decent rechargeable ultracompact batteries, depending on what you do you'll easily be able to drain them within a day if you don't ration your energy supply.]

Ves acknowledged the warning. At the very least, it wasn't so troublesome to recharge these batteries. He could hook it up to any power supply to top them up. Really, the capabilities of these standard-issue CFA batteries put his so-called 'junk batteries' to shame.

"CFA standards sure are impressive!" He sighed in admiration. "This level of technology and wealth is centuries, if not millenia ahead of the rest of the galaxy."

[That's the perks of working with one of the most powerful organizations in human space.] Levitt grinned. [This isn't anything impressive as far as the Starlight Megalodon is concerned. It's too bad that our previous human crew used up all of our best gear and supplies. This planet is very poor in high-grade exotics so we've never been able to replenish our best equipment.]

Besides receiving the upgraded and customized XV-99 Squalon, Ves also received a standard-issue CFA laser pistol. It might not be able to match up to

the Amastendira, but the weapon packed more than enough punch against any non-CFA opponents.

To the CFA, any opponent except for themselves, the MTA and some of the more formidable alien races could be disregarded entirely. This included much of the rest of the human race!

"Did you also prepare my promotion gift?"

[I did, though I'm surprised you opted to select this device.]

Levitt gestured towards the oddest device on the table.

Chapter 917 Life-Saving Talisman

Upon passing his promotion test to Senior Apprentice Mech Designer, the Starlight offered Ves a complimentary gift from her inventory of high-tech gadgets and gear. Each of the choices surpassed the performance of any standard-issue CFA gear and was somewhat precious even to the wealthy organization.

Therefore, Ves faced a difficult choice back then, as he could upgrade almost every capability, but only for a single time until he passed another promotion test.

At first, he decided whether he should pursue short-term necessity or long-term utility. While he often leaned towards the latter, he couldn't afford to think that far ahead with many acute threats on the horizon.

What Ves needed the most was a way to survive a crisis situation!

After setting his priorities, he began to think about what he could use to insure his survival. The Squalon couldn't accommodate any stealth systems, so he scratched that possibility out. The ECM systems of his combat armor already sufficiently shielded him against most mech sensors as long as they didn't come too close.

"The best way to survive a perilous situation is to neutralize the threat, be disregarded by the threat or be out of reach from the threat."

The first option entailed trying to kill the threat if possible, but Ves didn't excel in this area. He already possessed the Amastendira as his trump card so he could hardly obtain anything better from the CFA.

He already ruled out the second option as he'd have to replace the Squalon with an infiltrator suit if he wanted to have any hopes of evading every possible means of detecting his presence.

Therefore, after considering every option, Ves finally decided upon the last option. It truly fit his needs if he could obtain a strong means of evading a threat!

The Virtual Chief Armorer smiled appreciatively at the high-tech piece of gear that Ves didn't hesitate to redeem. The flat, palm-sized grey object didn't look anything special, but a lot of high technology hid underneath its plain exterior.

[I don't know what you're thinking, Mr. Longhorn, but it's not every day I get to have my virtual hands on a CFA Single-Use Emergency Personal Teleporter! Personal teleporters are extremely valuable life-saving talismans that are mainly reserved for our admirals and high dignitaries. Unlike the proper PTs, your EPT is a more affordable knock-off version, and can only sustain a single teleportation attempt.]

"What's the specifications of this EPT?"

[Its teleportation range is merely a thousand kilometers, which is useless in space.] Levitt shook his head in regret. [A proper PT can teleport an admiral up to a hundred-thousand kilometers away, enough to allow them to jump towards another warship. Even so, your EPT retains the same ability to withstand moderate spacetime instability, so it will be difficult for most opponents to interdict your teleportation.]

"Can I choose where to teleport?"

[The EPT offers the option to preselect a large amount of preprogrammed coordinates to jump to whenever you activate it. If there aren't any suitable coordinates within range, it will teleport you somewhere at random within five-hundred to a thousand-kilometers away from your starting destination. Mind you, while its programming is sophisticated enough to avoid teleporting you high up in the air or deep into the ground, it's best not to rely on it if possible.]

Ves nodded. "I'll be sure to take that into account. Did you already modify my Squalon to fit the EPT?"

[I managed to free up enough space in the lower back of the Squalon to fit the EPT. As long as you don't incur any damage from the rear, you'll always be able to teleport away. Mind you, the teleportation process takes about three seconds, upon which you'll be exceptionally vulnerable to interruption and damage. Make sure you're alone or well behind cover before you teleport.]

The proper PTs reserved for admirals shortened the teleporter window down to a single second, allowing them to get out even under hectic situations. Certainly enough, the admirals at the top of the hierarchy prized their lives very highly. They were probably impossible to kill!

In the next half hour, Ves stripped out his fancy-looking but fragile CFA uniform, retaining only his thin underlayer CFA vacsuit. With Levitt's help, Ves learned how to activate the Squalon and key it to his identity before suiting up. As he experimentally moved his limbs, he found his movements to be rather awkward and difficult.

[The Squalon isn't a simple suit of combat armor. There's a bit of a learning curve when it comes to mastering all of its capabilities and functions. I've already uploaded the relevant manuals to your CFA comm.]

His newly-upgraded CFA comm integrated nicely with the Squalon, allowing it to maintain connectivity of his suit even when separated from it. The CFA comm could also take advantage of the Squalon's powerful transceiver to boost its signal strength and range.

Overall, the only other downside that Ves noted was that the Squalon didn't offer any room to holster his CFA laser pistol. Ves had to resort to mounting it on a holster attached to his armored toolbelt.

As Ves studied his appearance on a mirror projection, the Squalon truly granted Ves the sense that he was a bona fide CFA officer. The Squalon's contours was significantly slimmer than than his old Earth Ant. It looked more like a full hardsuit version of a hazard suit in some ways.

Coated in the traditional black and dark blue CFA colors, the Squalon blended in well against the backdrop of interstellar space, affording it an additional form of protection against optical sensors.

Only the blocky hump on his back marred the sleek contours of the Squalon. The minifab system weighed quite a decent amount, enough to shift his center of balance to the rear.

Considering that the minifab system basically provided the capabilities of a 3D printer on the move, Ves easily accepted these inconveniences.

"Alright, I guess that's it. Thank you for preparing my gear for me. I'll be off now."

[Wait a minute!] Levitt's physical projection immediately disappeared from his place and reappeared in front of Ves. [You still owe me some merits. Pay up before you go!]

"Oh, that." Ves laughed awkwardly. He activated his comm and transferred the merits. "Here you go."

Even though Ves was forced to pay some additional merits, he didn't begrudge the extra bill. The virtual chief armorer and his team truly met all of his demands and more.

An important point that Ves initially agreed on was that his gear shouldn't come with any backdoors. With Levitt's inability to lie, Ves made sure that his gear truly didn't come with any backdoors that the virtual chief armorer knew of. This didn't rule out the possibility of deeply-hidden vulnerabilities that only a small number of CFA officers could take advantage of, but at least his gear wouldn't be riddled with holes.

Ves exited the Marine Detachment's armory with a jaunty step. His vigorous movements looked silly and awkward, but they slowly grew more fluid as Ves adjusted to the unfamiliar combat armor.

Now that he received his newly-upgraded gear, Ves possessed a lot more confidence in being able to survive the perils on the horizon. Good gear and good skills were the two most vital assets in his possession.

He had no doubt that the Vesians would be able to narrow the disparity in terms of gear, but that still took some time.

"Even if I'm outfitted for survival, I can't rest on my laurels and stay complacent. I have to keep earning merits." He resolved to himself. "I think it won't take too long before I'm eligible for promotion again."

Wearing his new armor, he returned to his regular duties, continuing to pick the dwindling amount of low-hanging fruit in the form of easy research projects.

Although Ves faced an increasing amount of difficulties with regards to the mech research projects that remained, he was still barely able to achieve breakthroughs at his current level of competence.

It seemed that in no time, Ves accumulated enough merits to qualify for the promotion test for Senior Mech Designer!

Reaching this rank was a watershed moment for Ves! Once he became the equivalent of a lieutenant commander of the CFA, he officially joined the ranks of senior officers, whose status was only inferior to the flag officers and high dignitaries who truly called the shots in the expansive organization!

"A lieutenant commander can already become the commanding officer of one of the smaller CFA warships!"

Of course, Ves wouldn't be able to wield so much influence on a huge capital ship such as the Starlight Megalodon. The general rule of thumb was the bigger the ship, the bigger the hats. Even a Senior Mech Designer wasn't much better off than a dog aboard a battleship.

Several more days went by as Ves waited for Miss Calabast or the virtual exobiologist to get in touch with him again.

In the end, it appeared that Miss Calabast required a bit more time, as Dr. Neeran got in touch with him first.

[We completed the analysis of your DNA and tissue samples. Please drop by my laboratory at the Exobiology Department. Be sure to leave some time in your schedule.]

Ves quickly ended his overtime work and raced towards the Exobiology Department. While the virtual individuals of the department stared at him with frosty eyes, Ves took no notice of their contempt as he hopped inside Neeran's lab.

"Did you complete your analysis of my body, doctor?"

[It took some time, but together with that virtual geneticist you recommended we managed to crack most of the code. It's quite interesting how your body is

set up, so much so that I'm actually glad my existence hasn't ended yet. Please take a seat, because it will take a long while to explain our findings and what we can do to treat your condition.]

As Ves took a seat, Dr. Neeran started projecting a wireframe model of his body. Almost all of it lit up in various colors that denoted deviations from the human standard. Some parts glowed redder than others, signifying a more drastic divergence from baseline human bodies.

[First, whoever cultivated your hybrid alien organs and operated on your body used fairly rudimentary equipment. Aside from the alien source material your Jutland organ is derived on, many parts about your body isn't unfathomable from our perspective once we cracked the encryption on their biological programming.]

"So what's the verdict regarding the programming?"

[It's as you've feared. Your bioprogramming is suffused with a considerable amount of malware with very detrimental effects to your health. Some of the malware only triggers in response to the presence or absence of specific stimuli, while other malicious code will only take effect after a set amount of time.]

"Is it treatable?"

[Very much so, Mr. Longhorn. While we can't guarantee we've identified all of the malicious code in the bioprogramming of your organs, I'm fairly certain of our judgement considering the relatively low level methods utilized in the growth and formation of your hybrid alien organs.]

Ves smiled ruefully at Neeran's remark. To a virtual exobiologist in the employ of the CFA, Dr. Jutland was merely a country bumpkin in the field of exobiology and genetic modification.

It made sense, though, as the Five Scrolls Compact clearly didn't value Dr. Jutland and exiled him along with his radical ideas.

"What about the Jutland organ? Did you manage to find out what is so special about it and why it has turned my body into this condition?"

[Ah.] Neeran frowned. [What an interesting puzzle. I am sorry to say that we have not managed to understand its workings and whether it is completely safe. However, we did manage to identify the form of energy that has been cycling through your torso. The most peculiar part is that this energy is so rarely seen that we've had to access the restricted data banks to find a record of it. What we have found has surprised half the Exobiology Department!]

Ves had a sinking feeling that the Jutland organ was much more complicated than he thought. If Even the CFA found its effect to be exotic, then it must be extremely abnormal!

"Just tell me, doctor."

The virtual exobiologist adopted a serious expression. [Have you ever heard of the Seven Apex Races?]

The question threw Ves out of the blue. "They're the seven most dominant alien races in the galaxy during the Age of Stars. They pretty much carved out most of the stars among themselves before they drew back during the Age of Conquest."

[These aliens believed that they are the most powerful and perfect races in the galaxy, to the point where they convinced themselves that they are its rightful rulers. One particular race is called the Alshyr, the third-most powerful apex race. One of the strengths of this unfathomable giant avian-like alien race is their ability to traverse the higher dimensions with their own bodies! They are able to do so by utilizing the same energy that is locked within your body!]

Chapter 918 Going Under

Compared to humans, the Alshyr were much more terrible! As one of the alien races worthy to be ranked third among the Seven Apex Races, each of them possessed an unimaginable amount of strength and intelligence.

Each member of their race possessed enough power to contend against a small warship with their own bodies when they became adults. Through means which Ves didn't know, the Alshyr possessed the ability to traverse space with their naked bodies!

This meant that anytime a fleet attempted to attack a planet colonized by the Alshyr, a huge flock of millions of corvette-like alien creatures rose up and attacked the invaders!

This had led to the rise of an alien race which didn't need to depend on technology to dominate the universe.

Naturally, their natural strength wasn't the only thing scary about the Alshyr.

Often likened to giant feathered birds, they were anything but exobeasts, as even the stupidest Alshyr was a genius! They were predisposed to spacetime-related technology and developed some of the most advanced means of FTL travel before humanity came and stole their innovations.

The only weakness of the Alshyr race was one afflicting many of the powerful races in the galaxy. The propagation of their species depended on the so-called Worclaw crystal, a rare exotic available in large quantities on Worclaw, their ancestral home planet. From what Ves knew of this exotic, it contained remarkable properties related to energy.

While this high-grade could be synthesized through specific methods, it didn't appear very often in the rest of the galaxy. This led to an extremely constrained growth rate for the powerful Alshyr race and limited their expansion in the galaxy.

Part of the reason why the Alshyr and the other Apex Races of the galaxy ultimately fell back against the human onslaught was because they simply couldn't match humanity's frightening growth rate!

Nonetheless, the shortcomings of the Alshyr didn't take away the fact that they were still extremely powerful. According to what Ves knew of the avian-like race, they still lurked well outside the reach of human space.

"So let me get this straight." He said after the exobiologist mentioned the Alshyr. "Somehow, the Jutland organ produces the same kind of higher-dimensional energy that is harnessed by the Alshyr?"

[That is correct. Alshyr energy as it's referred to laymen is one of the more elusive and difficult-to-grasp forms of higher-dimensional energy that the CFA has ever come in touch with. In fact, information about Alshyr energy is so classified that if not for the Starlight Megalodon's emergency state, an AI such as myself would never be able to access the relevant classified documents!]

"What do the documents say?"

[Not very much.] Dr. Neeran shrugged. [Because Alshyr energy is so rare and difficult to detect, the CFA has never been able to study it in detail. If not for the highly-advanced examination equipment in my lab, we wouldn't have been able to find a trace of it hidden in your body in the first place! As it is, there is very little I can help you in this regard. Perhaps my human predecessor may be able to assist you more by performing research on it, but I am bound from doing the same.]

As Ves asked some more questions, Dr. Neeran readily admitted his inability. He couldn't tell whether the Jutland organ was ultimately helpful or harmful to his body. The virtual exobiologist also didn't have much of a clue about how to manipulate or reduce the Alshyr energy cycling through his body.

"I thought the CFA is more capable than this." Ves said in disappointment.

[As much as we pretend to stand at the apex of human civilization, we are not omnipotent. Developing warships and conducting naval battles are our strong suits. When it comes to biotechnology of this nature, there is little that we can do. Another organization is much stronger in this area, but that is not the CFA.]

Ves pressed his lips. Of course, he couldn't just walk up to the Five Scrolls Compact and use his status as one of their Holy Sons to ask them to study his Jutland organ. They would probably take him prisoner and force him to cough up their missing Metal Scroll before killing him! He'd be crazy to get anywhere near these deranged bioterrorists!

"Alright, let's put the Jutland organ aside. As long as you can remove the malicious bioprogramming, I'm already satisfied with that."

[We've already prepared a treatment to remove or neutralize the adverse code. At the same time, we can also go ahead and apply the other treatments that you wished to undergo. We've already prepared the KC-3333 priming agent for ingestion. Once it takes effect, we can go ahead and apply the two gene optimization treatments that we've tailored to your genes.]

"Are there any risks of complications or incompatibility?"

The virtual exobiologist shook his head. [Not after we adjusted the treatments to your unique conditions. They mainly work by improving your baseline human genes, ignoring everything that is either non-human or already augmented. However, I do admit that your case is a little more troublesome than other human officers. Besides your alien hybridization, your body and especially your brains are already heavily augmented. In fact, there are hardly any aspects about your brains that the gene optimization treatments can improve!]

"It's true that I've heavily augmented my cognitive abilities." Ves awkwardly laughed. It must have been all the Attribute Candies he bought from the System as well as other unusualities. "How much time will this all take?"

[To insure a completely safe treatment, we'd have to pace each procedure. It will take about a week in total.]

Ves almost fainted when he heard that. He couldn't afford to go under for an entire week! Too much might change when he next woke up!

"I'm kind of in a hurry now and I can't afford to be indisposed for that long. Is there any way you can compress the time?"

The virtual exobiologist frowned. [If you are willing to disregard most precautions and bear the risk of increased complications and rejection, then it's possible to complete the entire range of treatments within two days. You'll be able to walk away from this lab after forty-eight standard hours, but are you sure you are willing to take the risk? As a medical professional I can hardly justify the risks.]

"The Starlight Megalodon is operating under emergency conditions, right? You should be able to get away with a lot more than usual. Besides, you're just an AI, not an actual human doctor. You didn't pledge any oaths."

After a lengthy argument, Ves managed to corrupt Virtual Doctor Neeran into accelerating the treatment plan.

Of course, Ves bore all the risks, but the overall risks of each treatment was quite low due to how standard and routine they were in the CFA.

Before Ves underwent the treatments, he first arranged his schedule. He asked for leave from Virtual Commander Cosit, who approved his request immediately on account of their friendship. He also sent a message to Miss Calabast that he'd be indisposed for a few days, although he didn't tell her the exact reason why.

Someone like her might very decide to interfere with the treatments and take the opportunity to insert some kind of biological backdoor in his body!

Fortunately, Ves would be undergoing the operations within the restricted section of the Exobiology Department, which was almost as heavily-guarded as the restricted section of the Research Department.

This service didn't come free, however, and Ves had to throw quite a bit of merits at Neeran to guarantee his safety and security, especially amidst the hostile Exobiology Department!

Since Ves still had quite a bit of merits to spare, he didn't begrudge the additional spending.

[Please follow me to the operation center.] Neeran said once they made all the arrangements.

While Ves found it rather frightening to put himself at the mercy of Dr. Neeran, he nonetheless put his faith in the virtual exobiologist. Since Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth found him trustworthy enough to put on the list of potential collaborators, Neeran probably shouldn't be up to any shenanigans.

Two days went by as Ves spent much of his time unconscious. What little time he spent awake, he could hardly think as all kinds of sedatives put him into a painless daze.

During these two days, Dr. Neeran and a handful of other virtual specialists proceeded to apply the KC-33333 priming agent to increase his tolerance towards genetic modification and alien hybridization. This relieved most of the pressure that his abnormalities subjected towards his human body.

After that, the specialists injected all kinds of agents throughout his entire body but mostly the regulator organ to neutralize the malware contained within their biological programming.

Only after these operations did the virtual doctors apply the two rounds of genetic optimization treatments. Due to how often the CFA performed these treatments, hardly any complications occurred.

Ves even woke up after two days without any serious lingering debilities that necessitated more rest. The only problem was that he felt like a stranger in his own body!

"Why do I feel so sluggish and strange, doc?"

[This is normal for someone who went through such a drastic amount of change.] Dr. Neeran replied perfunctory besides his bed. [Your priming agent has relieved the pressure on your physique. Together with your other treatments, your body has completely transformed on a fundamental level. Due to rushing your genetic optimization treatments, you'll have to become familiar with your changed physique in your own time.]

Despite the side effects, Ves truly felt more comfortable in his own skin. He knew that this was the priming agent at work. Right now, he felt as if the Jutland organ and its effects didn't burden his body as much. The nagging irritations that always afflicted him suddenly became less consequential.

Even if they couldn't match the Five Scrolls Compact, the CFA's medical capabilities were certainly formidable, especially on a battleship!

After thanking the doctor, Ves slowly suited up in his Squalon and stumbled out of the Exobiology Department like he was a drunk. The momentary lack of coordination in his limbs due to all of the transformation forced him to familiarize himself with his new body on the move.

Considering that there was still time left before his next work shift, Ves stumbled his way back to Mr. Longhorn's cabin. The lengthy journey gave him plenty of practice to regain some of his prior coordination. By the time he

made it all the way to his assigned cabin, Ves gained the ability to walk normally, if slowly.

As the hatch to his cabin slid open, Ves stepped inside, mentally deciding which flavor of gourmet nutrient pack he should eat before he crashed onto his bed.

"Mr. Longhorn."

Ves practically jumped out of his Squalon as he turned around to face a familiar figure.

"Calabast! What are you doing in my cabin?!"

"It's Summer, not Calabast. Remember our identities." The woman tutted in disapproval. "By the way, you forgot to salute."

"Why should I?" Ves frowned. "Aren't we both lieutenants right now?"

Calabast grinned and patted the insignia on the shoulder of her infiltrator suit. "Guess who obtained a new promotion? I didn't sit on my thumbs during this time, you know."

Ves looked carefully and tried to identify the fancy golden bars and markings. He frowned even deeper when he saw that they didn't match up to the rank of lieutenant commander. The only times he spotted this insignia was when he met with Virtual Commander Cosit of the Research Department and Virtual Commander Dislan of the Mech Department.

He suddenly widened his eyes when he made a horrible realization. "Y-Y-You've promoted to commander!"

"Correct!" Calabast patted her chest in pride. "You are looking at the newest head of the Intelligence Department! Right now, there isn't a single AI that is more senior than me when it comes to intelligence matters."

When Ves thought he could throw his weight around when he eventually promoted to lieutenant commander, it turned out that Miss Calabast already took the next step and shot straight to commander!

Chapter 919 Ride Me

Miss Calabast took in his new CFA-issued gear with a contemptuous glance. "I see where you have been spending your time lately. Are you treating the Starlight Megalodon as your personal toy box?"

"Hey, I got most of this for free!" Ves argued back. "I'm just redeeming the stuff that's owed to me anyway. Don't tell me you're not attracted by the goodies this ship has in store."

Compared to the last time he saw her, Calabast obviously upgraded some of her gear as well. Most notably, she wore an impressive-looking CFA comm that encompassed her entire forearm.

"That's not the point of our mission. How close are you to your next promotion? Last I heard, you were very close."

"About that, hehe..." Ves smiled awkwardly. While he did earn a lot of merits lately, he spent significant chunks of it on his gear and his body upgrades. "I ah.. took a few steps back.. but I can still make it up again."

The woman narrowed her eyes. She stepped closer with irritation and rage sparking in her eyes. Ves meekly stepped back despite wearing superior combat armor.

"Don't let the wealth and power of the CFA dazzle you. We are not on a vacation here." She emphasized while pushing her finger against his Squalon's chest plate. "You have no idea what kind of bomb we are sitting on! While you are running around trying to fish for more advantages from the Starlight Megalodon, I've been working hard to take over the Intelligence Department to pave the way for your ascension in the Research Department!"

This is not the time to dicker around! Don't you want to save your comrades stranded outside the ship?"

Her rebuke struck him hard. Ves indeed let his personal interests take precedence over his haste to secure the lives of Ketis, Captain Orfan and the other remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Still, Ves looked unrepentant. He recognized a unique opportunity in the Starlight Megalodon that would have been at least a hundred years beyond his reach! Who wouldn't take advantage of the battleship's generous offerings of high technology?

Just the problem of his body that confounded many doctors from the Bright Republic and even from a modern CFA science vessel!

Yet a couple of virtual doctors with access to some of the best medical equipment in the galaxy easily managed to solve a problem that wracked his mind for several years. Through a simple operation, they removed nearly every hidden danger locked within his body, allowing him to breathe a little easier.

While Ves did manage to obtain an invitation card to the exclusive Angel's Wing Foundation which traded in all kinds of advanced biotech goods and services, he'd be a fool to surrender his body in their care. The Five Scrolls Compact almost certainly propped up the Angel's Wing Foundation from behind.

He would rather put his faith in the CFA's virtual doctors than those bunch of crazy cultists!

"Look, 'Commander Summer', I'm already earning merits by the bucketload. I can make up for the shortfall in a couple of days. Now that I've underwent two rounds of genetic optimization treatment, my body and mind runs much smoother now!"

While Ves didn't have the System at hand to track how much each of his Attributes improved, he was certain that all of them received a small bump. The most valuable aspect about the CFA's renowned gene optimization treatments was how comprehensively they improved everything human.

Every inefficiency and evolutionary remnant of his human DNA no longer shackled him. He digested food much more efficiently, he required much less sleep than he already did and he aged and lived longer than any baseline human.

That wasn't all. These advantages continued to pile up with each round of gene optimization treatment! It could be said that if Ves promoted to lieutenant commander and received his third round of treatment, his natural lifespan would probably extend to two-hundred years old!

This was the equivalent of undergoing a single round of life-prolonging treatment, something which scores of powerful politicians, businessmen and power brokers in the Komodo Star Sector worked their entire lives to obtain!

Ves wanted to shake his head at the inadvertent boons that had fallen on his lap. While this mission on Aeon Corona VII was exceedingly dangerous, it already yielded him rich rewards! No wonder treasure hunters constantly mounted expeditions beyond the borders of human space.

The frontier truly lived up to the adage that high rewards came to those that dared to brave its many dangers!

Miss Calabast shook her head in helplessness at his inability to let go of the Starlight Megalodon's many bounties. "You managed to both exceed and fall short of my expectations. The more I pay attention to you, the more I learn something new. Tell me, what took place when you visited the office of the Artificial Intelligence Corps? Practically every virtual individual on the Starlight

Megalodon knows that he managed to circumvent the emergency protocol and forcefully end his existence shortly afterwards."

He'd be a fool to tell her the truth. There was no way that Ves wanted to let a snake like Miss Calabast grasp his complicated relationship with the Five Scrolls Compact!

"He wanted to meet the smartest guy on the ship before he offed himself." Ves shrugged nonchalantly. "He gave me some merits and some advice. Nothing else went on, really. Admiral Ordoth was just a passenger aboard the Starlight Megalodon and held no actual authority. It's a really sad existence for him to be relegated as a bystander for a couple of thousand years, so I didn't get as much benefits as I had hoped."

Miss Calabast didn't look amused. She obviously didn't believe a word of the nonsense he just spewed out. "Mr. Longhorn, although you seem to be a habitual liar, your tricks don't work on me. You are lucky that digging out your secrets is not within the scope of my mission. Let us discuss what I'm actually here for. Time is running out and we need to facilitate your access to non-mech related research projects."

Besides exhorting him to promote as soon as possible, Miss Calabast also wanted to fill him in on her plan to get him involved with the research projects of the other sub-departments.

As a mech designer, Ves didn't know anything about the biosciences, but that wasn't necessarily a hindrance to him. Cross-disciplinary research projects that required the participation of a diverse range of specialists.

"Once you promote to lieutenant commander, you should aim to access these cross-disciplinary research projects as soon as you can. This won't be easy, but my new position affords me several methods to facilitate your entry. I can

guarantee you that you'll have all the security clearances that you'll need to get your foot in the door."

Ves knew that it took a lot of pull to get something like that together. He stared suspiciously at Calabast. "Since you're a commander and a department head, why don't you just access the research projects yourself?"

"Despite what you might think, the Intelligence Department doesn't make me an omnipotent hacker." Calabast shook her head. "The Starlight Megalodon's organizational structure is highly decentralized. Each department is a separate silo that is difficult to peer into from the outside. This compartmentalized structure prevents any department or department head from becoming too powerful. While my position affords me many small advantages, it is much easier to gain access to the Starlight Megalodon's sensitive research projects through using you as a vehicle."

"Great. So I'm just an aircar to you?" Ves replied peevishly.

"You should feel honored to be ridden by me. We both know that we are both making use of each other. I have no particular animosity towards you or the rest of the Vandals and Swordmaidens. Mind you, I am not opposed to working together with the Vesians either. If you continue to slack off, don't blame me if I turn towards your mortal enemies instead."

He should have taken that as a threat. Instead, Ves smirked at Calabast.

"Hah! Good luck to them. Perhaps their exobiologists and doctors will be able to gain some small advantages in the biology sub-departments, but their mech designers won't be able to earn a single merit under my watch! Besides, Venerable Foster will need to make an immense amount of contributions before she is able to open the floodgates to her fellow Vesians."

"I wouldn't act so conceited if you know what they have in store." Calabast said with an odd expression. "Venerable Foster is close to promoting to the

rank of mech captain. Once she has reached this milestone, she immediately intends to donate the Belisarius to the Starlight Megalodon. The contribution of such a powerful and extremely advanced expert mech will shower her with so much merits that she can probably meet the required amount of merits to promote straight to mech major!"

What?! Ves almost gaped open his mouth. "How could the Vesians do something as reckless as that?! The Belisarius is a mind-bogglingly expensive mech! The Hafner Duchy invested so much Rorach's Bone in her material composition that they'll be the laughing stock of the Kingdom once everyone knows they lost their boondoggle of a mech!"

This time it was Calabast's turn to smirk again. "If the Vesians succeed in their mission, they can more than make up their shortfall. Besides, don't forget that the Starlight Megalodon is filled with treasure. Venerable Foster has already started to scout the approaches to the vaults."

Ves almost forgot about that. If one of the vaults truly contained a batch of advanced life-prolonging treatment serum, then just retrieving a single dose would be more than enough to placate the Hafner Duchy!

After hearing to what extremes the Vesians might resort to, Ves no longer felt as assured as before. He truly felt he was pressed for time again. Calabast left his cabin shortly after once she ascertained she succeeded in lighting a fire under his butt.

Left in a sullen mood, Ves comforted himself by gorging on a gourmet vintage nutrient pack before shedding his Squalon and slipping into his bed.

Over the next couple of days, Ves returned to the Research Department and exerted his efforts on the final remaining easy research projects with gusto. Even though Ves practically picked the Mech Research Sub-Department

clean of every low-hanging fruit, he still managed to achieve some breakthroughs on the more higher-hanging fruit.

Many of the more complicated research projects involved multiple phases and elements. It was extremely unlikely for a single mech designer to complete these research projects in one go because they required the input of multiple mech designers who excelled in different fields.

For these ambitious research projects, Ves still managed to please Virtual Commander Cosit by achieving breakthroughs in the areas where he excelled at. He particularly managed to form creative solutions by leveraging his Senior-level Physics Skill, which in terms of knowledge truly encompassed a very wide range of theories and solutions.

It seemed in practically no time, Ves managed to accumulate the necessary merits to undertake the next promotion test.

Having already been informed that Calabast tampered with the test, Ves attempted it without any hesitation.

To no surprise, Miss Calabast used her position as the head of the Intelligence Department to good use by replacing the original test for Senior Mech Designers with the familiar test for Junior Apprentice Mech Designers!

The disparity between the two was so large and so blatant that it was a wonder how Calabast managed to switch the two without any of the AIs taking notice.

"The virtual officers may be able to emulate their human counterparts, but only up to a point." He surmised as he easily completed one task after another as if he was running through textbook exercises. "AIs may be monsters in terms of calculations, but they're absolute dimwits when it comes to common sense."

This was the biggest shortcoming of the virtual officer system. If Calabast could take advantage of this, why not him? He already started to form some ideas...

Chapter 920 Senior Officer

Ves closed his eyes once he successfully passed the promotion test to Senior Mech Designer. Even though the achievement was spoiled by the fact that Miss Calabast blatantly hacked it, it didn't change the fact that he officially entered the upper ranks of the Starlight Megalodon's hierarchy!

Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson smiled. [Congratulations, Lieutenant Commander Longhorn! You have regained your original rank and all the associated positions, authorizations, privileges and security clearance! It has been ERROR years, ERROR months, ERROR days and ERROR hours since you last held this rank.]

The virtual officer's dumb response to his promotion exemplified how thoroughly broken the virtual officer system could be. Ves shook his head at Baskanson's inability to realize that a human couldn't possibly live for over three-thousand years. Any AI with a bit of common sense would have realized that Ves only pretended to be the original Mr. Longhorn, yet to a virtual officer like Baskanson, the data never lied.

Despite officially 'regaining' his rank, Ves nonetheless received most of the rewards the CFA provided to a newly-promoted lieutenant commander.

First, and the most irrelevant one, he drew a vastly higher salary in the form of CFA credits or fleet credits as everyone called them. To Ves, this was pretty much worthless as there was no way he could ever spend the CFA credits deposited in his comm in the galaxy. The Starlight Megalodon had long lost her connection to the galactic fleet network and the galactic financial system.

"Damn, a monthly salary of 5,000 fleet credits! How extravagant!"

While the exchange rate of fleet credits to bright credits often fluctuated due to a trillion different causes, last Ves heard a single fleet credit was worth as much as several billion bright credits!

CFA officers consider this salary to be rather low. The true benefit of being a part of the CFA was never about money, but rather about the access to high technology. Anyone who joined not only get to play with the latest technological gizmos, they also underwent the highest quality gene optimization treatments.

Just like last time, Ves again received the option to redeem for a piece of advanced gear as well as earned the right to undergo a third round of gene optimization treatment!

"I'll definitely be stopping by the virtual exobiologist again no matter what Calabast says!"

He turned his attention to the list that projected into the air. Just like last time, it offered him a wide range of options for him to receive at no cost. Naturally, the quality of the goodies on the list significantly exceeded those from before.

Instead of starting to make his choice, he first browsed to the bioimplant category and tracked down any entry that resembled the cranial bioimplant he found in Mr. Longhorn cabin.

The Starlight Megalodon actually didn't offer a lot of variety of bioimplants, at least not to Senior Mech Designers like him. He easily managed to match the bioimplant he found underneath the toilet with a specific item on the list.

[TITO BIOSYSTEMS ARCHIMEDES RUBAL 1002-Z CRANIAL CODEX BIOIMPLANT]

"So it's called the Archimedes Rubal, huh?"

The CFA didn't develop the bioimplant in-house. Instead, they licensed the Archimedes Rubal from a company called Tito Biosystems. Evidently, the product was really good for the CFA to find it worthy enough to put into the list of possible rewards for newly-promoted lieutenant commanders.

As Ves read the description, he realized how useful the 1002-Z would be for someone like him. The Archimedes Rubal didn't add much processing power to someone's brain. Instead, the bioimplant served as a massive organic data bank that could stuff a few data chips worth of data!

While that didn't sound very impressive at first, the key to this enhancement was that it was directly connected to a person's senses. Making use of the Archimedes Rubal was the same as possessing eidetic or photographic memory! While it didn't allow someone to comprehend all of the data immediately, it still possessed many other uses!

Ves immediately realized why Mr. Longhorn redeemed this bioimplant.

"He probably wanted to memorize data that he can only look at but can't take away!"

To a Senior Mech Designer with a wide range of access to all kinds of whacky research projects, Mr. Longhorn could easily take advantage of them by memorizing all of the restricted knowledge only made available in the labs. An implant like this could defeat nearly every security precaution that prevented copying and disseminating restricted knowledge!

Yet why didn't Longhorn implant the Archimedes Rubal into his brain immediately upon receipt?

After a bit of thought, Ves came up with the probable answer. Would the CFA offer a senior researcher the means to cheat their own security systems? Of course not! The Archimedes Rubal definitely a number of restrictions and backdoors to allow the CFA a firm grip over the usage of the implant.

"There's no use putting this implant into your brain unless you can accept becoming a slave for the CFA for life."

Ves felt glad he hadn't moved upon impulse and went ahead with implanting the Archimedes Rubal that he found into his brains straightaway.

For now, the implant offered very little utility to him unless Ves somehow managed to remove all of the CFA's tampering from its bioprogramming. It would be difficult for the virtual doctors of the Starlight Megalodon to accomplish something like this, as it likely bumped against the restrictions against undermining the CFA.

"I'll probably have to return to civilized space and find a trustworthy bioengineer to remove all the hidden dangers."

There were problems associated with that options as well, but Ves couldn't figure out a better alternative for the moment.

"I shouldn't be too greedy. The gene optimization treatments are already a boon to me that a citizen of the galactic rim could never hope to receive in ordinary circumstances."

Now that he obtained the name and specifications of the implant, Ves returned to the much more pleasant task of shopping for his next goodie.

He spent half an hour trawling through the different categories and subcategories and opened his eyes to the many pieces of advanced gear on offer. While he hadn't spotted anything as extravagant as a fully-fledged personal teleporter reserved for flag officers, he did find several items he found almost inconceivable.

"An upgrade to the Squalon's minifab system!"

"Two heavy security bots as permanent and completely loyal guard escorts!"

"A complete replacement of the bone structure with a compressed alloy version!"

The sheer amount of attractive choices threatened to overwhelm him to the point where he forcefully took a break in order to calm his raging excitement.

He started to return to his initial priorities. What did he require the most in his current conditions? "A way to survive the coming crises!"

His previous selection of a single-use teleporter already leaned towards this direction. Yet what was the use of teleporting up to a thousand kilometers away when he was still stuck on this planet?

What he needed more than anything right now was a real escape route off this planet!

"There's really only one choice left among the thousands of options." Ves smiled ruefully.

He could have used this extremely rare and valuable opportunity to redeem for something that would have undoubtedly improve his ability to defend himself or to design mechs. Yet he decisively gave up those long-term gifts because future benefits would be of no use to him if he was dead!

Ves picked arguably one of the most valuable options on the list, the personal rights to make use of one of the CFA shuttles stored in the hangar bay.

While the shuttle he redeemed wasn't a copy of the CFA's valuable FTL-capable models, it possessed an attractive range of options that put it far ahead of any other shuttle he had ever laid his eyes on! It not only possessed a large passenger and cargo capacity, it also accelerated very fast and possessed more than enough thrust to escape the heavy gravity of Aeon Corona VII.

It might not have any exotic features, but in terms of speed and acceleration this shuttle could even leave many starships in the dust! It also helped that it possessed an efficient engine that could stretch its fuel capacity over several weeks!

"This is a perfect escape vehicle if not for its lack of FTL capability!"

Unfortunately, a lieutenant commander didn't have the rights to touch an FTL-capable shuttle. Ves would need a much higher rank or authorization before he could touch one of those. The Starlight Megalodon also had very few of them left.

Obtaining the personal rights of a CFA shuttle meant that Ves pretty much owned it outright. Although the ownership title of the shuttle still rested in the hands of the CFA and the Starlight Megalodon, Ves obtained a nearly unlimited right of use of the vehicle as long as he was an active servicemember.

If he wanted to go on a joyride and drive the shuttle straight into a moon for his own amusement, the CFA wouldn't bat an eyebrow at him. Not only that, Ves also gained a standing permission to leave the Starlight Megalodon with the shuttle as long as he provided a plausible reason!

"This is also a privilege reserved for senior officers." Ves nodded as he read the rules associated with his choice.

After confirming his choice, he quickly went through the raft of other messages. Now that Ves became a Senior Mech Designer, he not only gained some rights to speak, he also regained many of Mr. Longhorn's old authorizations, including access to some of the most core mech research projects in the Research Department.

In fact, Ves also 'regained' his access to a handful of cross-disciplinary research projects with some of the other sub-departments!

Miss Calabast should probably be pleased with this unexpected development. Ves quickly sent her a message of his successful promotion and his access to these highly confidential research projects.

Of course, Ves couldn't state outright which projects fell into his lap, but he was sure the department head of the Intelligence Department could get around that restriction.

At the very end, Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson offered an option that Ves always kept his eyes on. [As a final privilege upon your ascension to Senior Mech Designer, Mr. Longhorn, you are allowed to exert the right to recruit any mech designer as your personal disciple or apprentice. Do you wish to exercise this option?]

"I do."

He asked for an overview of the safe around the battleship. Through the top-down view projected in front of him, he carefully sought out the presence of a hibernating Qilanxo along with a gaggle of Asterias, Enduring Protectors and transports.

While Ves was having the time of his life on the Starlight Megalodon, the remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaidens continued to languish in the empty and overgrown safe zone.

A lot more Vesians arrived as well just outside the border of the safe zone. Numerous transports poured in from the opposite side of the battleship, gorging out a large number of what appeared to be scientists and engineers. The experts looked out of place amidst all the armed troops and mechs.

Even though the breakdown effect did their best to degrade all of that gear, the Vesians brought plenty of spares. No other force that initially arrived on this planet would be able to pose a threat to the Vesians!

After studying the disposition of the Vesian forces and making sure that the Flagrant Swordmaidens still lived, Ves proceeded to zoom in over Ketis' head. She was currently practicing her swordplay on an open field next to the farm.

As Ves tapped his finger atop her head, a tractor beam immediately held on to her armored form.

The projection even transmitted her voice!

"Ehh!!? Why am I flying?!"

Without even bothering to put her into stasis, the Starlight Megalodon swept Ketis right towards one of her access hatches!

"Ahhh! What the hell?! I didn't sign up for this! Lemme go!"