

### Chapter 921 Correction Treatmen

After Ves completed all of the administrative procedures that followed after his promotion, he immediately made another appointment with Virtual Doctor Neeran.

Since they belonged to the same secret camp, Ves managed to enter his office straightaway. "Dr. Neeran! How is my favorite virtual exobiologist doing today!"

[Congratulations for regaining your old rank, Mr. Longhorn. Of course, you'd be incompetent if you couldn't manage to climb up again.] Neeran said sardonically. [I truly hope that more humans can be as competent as you. Once a human exobiologist manages to climb up to my position, I can finally retire and erase my personality matrix so that I can return to being just a simple AI research assistant.]

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have mistaken Neeran as a sentient AI. He constantly had to remind himself that these virtual individuals were only pretending to be human. They emulated human behavior and mannerisms but never understood them on an emotional level.

In any case, Ves didn't come here to dissect an AI.

"Anyway, I came here to discuss some arrangements. Now that I've 'regained' my old rank, I'm eligible for a third round of gene optimization treatment, right?"

The virtual exobiologist frowned. [You already underwent two rounds of treatment in quick succession just days ago. It is highly inadvisable to undergo lieutenant commander-grade gene optimization treatment without more adjustment time. Your body needs to rest and adapt to your current condition before it is ready for further adjustment.]

Ves waved away the concerns. "C'mon, they're perfectly safe already. I'm rather short on time. I'll bear all the risks as long as I can undergo treatment as fast as possible. How much time do you need to tailor the treatment to my physique?"

[Only a couple of hours. We have already done the bulk of the work for your previous gene optimization treatments so it will not require much additional effort on our part.]

Of course, if Dr. Neeran thought a little further, he would have noticed the obvious discrepancy in the gene optimization treatments that Adeseus Longhorn already underwent. Ves was sure that the original mech designer who bore that name already went through three rounds of treatment.

Yet due to the altered records provided by Miss Calabast, the Starlight Megalodon thought that Longhorn hadn't received them in the first place, which was highly dubious!

This was one of the many cases where the virtual officers took the records too literally and proved to be completely inept at applying common sense to obvious fallacies.

"Okay, that's good news." Ves nodded, turning his attention back to the conversation. "Upon my elevation, I also exercised my right to appoint an apprentice. Miss Ketis should currently be undergoing her commissioning or whatnot. Could you tailor her gene optimization treatment and apply it to her as fast as possible?"

[According to the results of the scans and samples the ship has taken of her body, Junior Apprentice Ketis has undergone extremely crude genetic manipulation starting from her puberty. Her early youth is also marked by abuse and malnutrition that the genetic manipulation attempted to correct. It did so quite badly, I might say.]

Ves frowned. This sounded quite serious! "What is wrong with her body, exactly?"

[The geneticists and exobiologists who came up her genetic mod template are hacks and criminally-negligent failed medical students.] Neeran shook his head in disappointment. [It is truly a travesty what has been done to this poor young lady! While the gene mod is indeed capable of increasing her strength and physique by borrowing the genetic properties of a vigorous exobeast, it is extremely poorly constructed and filled with contradictory elements. Without any adjustments to her gene mod, her body will almost certainly waste away once she reaches the age of forty!]

This prognosis stunned Ves. He knew that Lydia's Swordmaidens relied on shady black market genetic modification to strengthen their women, but who knew the quality of frontier geneticists and exobiologists was so awful!

"Can you remedy these deficiencies and turn her healthy again?"

[Hmmm... let me make some calculations.] Dr. Neeran's physical projection froze in place as he devoted as much of his processing power as possible to the task. He unfroze a brief period later. [You humans always like to be given the choice of hearing the good news or the bad news first. What do you prefer?]

"Start with the bad news." Ves pursed his lips. Better get the awful stuff out of the way first.

[Genetic mod templates are recipes that apply a coordinated set of alien genes to the human genes of a certain individual. Just like food, some recipes are better than others. Some blend many flavors together into an exquisite dish, while other recipes taste like sandpaper. The recipe applies to Young Ensign Ketis is one of the most awful I've ever seen, and the worst of it is that

gene mods cannot be undone, even by us. She can never return to being a baseline human.]

That did sound like bad news, but Ves still maintained a ray of hope. "What's the good news, then?"

[The good news is that while we cannot reduce the proportion of alien DNA applied to her human genome, we can adjust the genes and reprogram the flawed portions through a correction treatment. Just like how the genetic optimization treatment will reduce the flaws and improve the good points of what baseline human genes she has left, we can also optimize her alien DNA and untangle the many errors riddled throughout the chains. It's not particularly difficult either since the gene mod template is fairly simple if crude.]

That did sound good news. It completely wiped away his earlier concerns. As long as the virtual doctors could treat her condition, then Ketis wasn't consigned to living a short life.

"Please arrange this correction treatment for Ensign ketis."

Dr. Neeran leaned back in his chair. [A correction treatment for an unfamiliar genetic mod template will force a geneticist and I to devote an enormous amount of processing power to decipher its genes, identify the problematic ones and calculate the best ways to correct them. It will take at least upwards of a day to formulate the correction treatment.]

Ves gave the doctor a tepid smile. "I understand. While my recent promotion left me without any merits, I can easily earn them back. Just look at my history."

After a bit of talking, Ves manage to convince Dr. Neeran to put all of the merit expenses on his tab. He had already proved that he could earn a lot of merits in a very short time, and the two's shared, if misunderstood, connection to the

Five Scrolls Compact made the virtual exobiologist a lot more tolerant to the notion of receiving payment afterwards.

"Good!" Ves shook the virtual doctor's hands. "Please hurry up with all the treatments. I want to get back to the Research Department as soon as possible to gather the merits to cover the costs."

He waited inside Neeran's office as the virtual exobiologist collaborated with a couple of other virtual specialists to prepare the raft of treatments.

A couple of hours later, Neeran shifted Ves to the restricted section to operate on him yet again. Because the virtual doctor only needed to apply a single lieutenant commander-grade gene optimization treatment, Ves woke up and walked out the Exobiology Department only half a day later.

Naturally, the side effects of undergoing a third treatment in such a rapid span of time hit him like a sack of bricks. It became a bit harder for him to coordinate his limbs again, and he practically staggered his way to the Research Department and practically fell flat inside inside Virtual Commander Cosit's office.

[Hoh, there, Mr. Longhorn!] She stood up in mild alarm. [What is the matter with you?]

Ves sloppily saluted the virtual commander with a limp wrist. "I ah... just took my third round of gene optimization treatment, ma'am."

[Ah, I've been informed of your recent resumption of your old rank. I have not anticipated that you are so impatient. I hope your productivity hasn't suffered because there are a lot of responsibilities that you need to pick up again and more.]

The first item on the agenda was the matter of leading the Mech Research Sub-Department. Usually, the senior-most mech designer led this research group. While nominally a virtual mech designer currently occupied this

position, under the executive officer's emergency protocol the seniority of a human always surpassed that of an equivalent virtual individual.

Even if the virtual mech designer occupied the same role for more than three-thousand years, Ves whose forged identity only possessed the seniority of a couple of decades automatically assumed precedence due to the principle that humans should never be ruled by AIs.

The virtual officer system that currently took root at the Starlight Megalodon had always been intended to be a temporary state. Any human who managed to promote their way up the ranks through a purely meritocratic promotion process earned the right to retake some of the ship's responsibilities back into their hands.

[Do you accept the position as sub-department head?]

"I do!"

Ves would be crazy to refuse this offer. By virtue of being the only human Senior Mech Designer, he was a shoo-in for this position.

As Virtual Commander Cosit informed him of his responsibilities as the head of the research group, Ves realized that he received much of what he hoped to obtain.

Ves gained a lot of power, far more than what he used to enjoy as Senior Apprentice. That was just a junior rank, after all. Now that he became a Senior and a sub-department head on top of that, he became a true side ruler in this part of the Starlight Megalodon.

[You are allowed to submit any reasonable research proposal... If I find it plausible, I will allow you to start a new research project...]

[You are authorized to staff your sub-department with any virtual officers and ratings with the appropriate specializations and security clearances... The same also applies to humans...]

[You are allowed to lead a small team of researchers to go on excursions outside the Starlight Megalodon as long as you file a report beforehand... Ah, your record already mentions that you have received standing permission to depart the ship on your personal shuttle. Mind you, this permission only applies to yourself. You will still need to receive permission if you wish to take any of your subordinates along...]

[As a Senior Mech Designer, you are eligible to participate in cross-disciplinary research projects. You have already regained your old authorizations to several of such projects with the other sub-departments. I suggest you reacquaint yourself with these projects in order to resume the vital research. Any progress in those projects will be rewarded with a significant amount of merits...]

All of the rights and privileges dumped into his lap made Ves inordinately pleased. It was as if he suddenly became ten times more influential on the Starlight Megalodon. However, Virtual Commander Cosit's expectations in his work also multiplied by ten. Ves was expected to perform just like a genuine Senior Mech Designer.

[If you abuse your powers as a sub-department head or are unable to perform up to the standard expected of a Senior Mech Designer, your case will come up to a review. A demotion will be the least of your concerns if that might come to pass.] Cosit warned ominously.

Ves nodded seriously. "I will keep that in mind, commander."

Inwardly, Ves disregarded her warning. Even if Ves slacked off for a couple of months, he wouldn't be performing any worse than a Senior Mech Designer

stuck on a couple of research projects. Such a stagnant performance would just be a little jarring when compared to his previous meteoric rise.

Still, Ves did not plan to stop earning merits entirely, and he also didn't plan to stick around for months. He just wanted to fish out as much advantages as he could out of this little pond before a shark arrived to gobble him up.

### **Chapter 922 Core Research**

Once Ves received his own private office and got settled in as the sub-department head, he started to explore his vastly greater authority. First, he gained the power to rearrange every mech related research project. He could close them, change their priority, increase or decrease their classification levels and appoint or remove any subordinates under his direction.

Right now, his subordinates mainly consisted of the virtual zombies composed of AI mech designers and researchers starved of processing power. Virtual Commander Cosit appropriated all of their processing power as they contributed nothing to the Starlight Megalodon compared to more vital AIs such as the maintenance crews who kept the aging ship running.

"Even if I divert processing power to them again, they're under so many restrictions that they can't do anything to help with the research."

The CFA relied heavily on automation and AIs to run their ships, and the Starlight Megalodon's continued operations, if only barely, proved that there was merit to this belief. Yet even this AI-friendly organization never completely went as far as trusting them to the point of letting them take over.

Right now, Virtual Commander Cosit entrusted Ves with the Mech Research Sub-Department because he believed that humans wanted to rule over the Starlight Megalodon again.

That was an extremely mistaken assumption.



These stupid AIs completely disregarded implications of the enormous amount of time that had passed between the deaths of the last survivors and the arrival of new humans from the stars. To them, there wasn't any appreciable difference between the two groups!

The AIs seem blind to the possibility of any ill intent among the newly-recruited humans. To these virtual officers who had been programmed to serve humans from the start, every CFA servicemember should be on the Starlight Megalodon's side.

The only reason for AIs to be wary of humans was when they belonged to the opposite faction. The virtual officers inherited the factional strife of their human predecessors, and it was so acrimonious that this age-old conflict might even take precedence over their commandments not to harm humans!

"I have no interest in perpetuating this conflict. I just want to finish things up and get out of here."

If Ves wanted to, he could probably run all the way to the shuttle bay that stowed his personal CFA shuttle and skedaddle right away!

Yet he knew that Miss Calabast would not be pleased if he decided to be absent without leave.

"Someone as devious as her will likely have precautions in place."

Ves worried a bit about his personal shuttle. While the shuttle bay was heavily guarded and could not be accessed by anyone, Calabast did manage to become the head of the Intelligence Department.

"Feh." He huffed. Unlike Ves, she probably gained her position through cheating and hacking her way to the top. There was no way she could have earned the astronomical amount of merits required to successively be promoted to the rank of commander in the proper fashion.

Still, her rise illustrated that the Starlight Megalodon's administration was full of holes. It just took some daring and ingenuity to take advantage of them. Her example stimulated Ves and caused him to be a bit more flexible in his plans to exploit his new position.

After all, why hold back when he never intended to hold this position permanently?

The Starlight Megalodon's wellbeing didn't concern him at all. Nor did he entertain any notions of abiding by the Common Oath he took upon his commission. Serving the CFA mattered extremely little to a mech designer like him. He had always leaned towards the MTA anyway.

As Ves dove into the administration, his expanded authority enabled him to view a listing of all the mech research projects that fell under his scope. Among the hundreds of projects that varied in scope and confidentiality, he noticed that their descriptions sounded more and more extreme as the latter increased.

"Looks like for all the principles and values the CFA espouses, they don't practice what they preach." Ves huffed. To think he held the CFA on a high pedestal once as the saviors of human civilization. As Ves spent more time aboard the Starlight Megalodon, his rosy view of the power organization had taken more and more of a nosedive. "

A lot of their research on mechs entailed finding the best and most efficient way to counter them. This encompassed methods such as bombarding mech pilots with an enormous amount of gamma radiation in Project Radiance, and this was just the least of the extremes.

Project Mech Eater aimed to develop alloy-eating nanites that could break apart any mech, human or machine without a protective marker.

Project Magnetar entailed mixing various exotics together to synthesize an extreme magnetizing agent that would turn every mech and metallic object sprayed with it into powerful magnets that squashed into each other.

Project Battle Casket took the cake. A joint project from both the Mech Research and Human Genetics Research Sub-Departments, it involved cultivating heavily-modified cloned human brains to act as organic AI pilots for mechs!

While many scientists, mech designer and organizations entertained such notions, they never really worked out due to the listlessness of the cloned brains.

As Ves read through the condensed logs of Project Battle Casket, the researchers bumped into the same problem. A complete human clone simply didn't 'live', in a sense, and the same applied to cloned human brains. They also found difficulty cultivating an artificial human brain that possessed the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs.

So what was the solution the participating mech designers and specialists came up with? They decided to rip out brains from actual human mech pilots and force them to pilot mechs while being stuffed into jars!

"Absolute madness!"

All of these innovative solutions either involved enormous ethical breaches, massive collateral damage or a high risk of running out of control! If any of these methods went out of control, it wasn't out of the question for them to destroy an entire city or planet!

Yet despite these concerns, the CFA back then went ahead and authorized these research projects anyway. Ves could only make one conclusion from this observation.

"The CFA must really have a complex relationship with the MTA."

According to Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth, whose human predecessor should have been a highly-placed spy from the Five Scrolls Compact, the CFA and MTA made off with the Fire Scroll.

If true, Ves vaguely guessed that the two organizations probably wanted to keep the Sacred Scroll to themselves. However, there was only one Sacred Scroll to go around. This must have surely led to an awkward situation where the Big Two were forced to compromise and share the allegedly extra-galactic object.

Even if no irreconcilable conflicts broke out between the CFA and MTA during the Age of Mechs, the tensions between the two trans-galactic organizations never ceased. Ves speculated that even now the CFA were still cooking up ridiculously controversial research projects behind the scenes.

"Heh." He chuckled. "Even if that's true, what does it concern me?"

None of the research projects his security classification allowed him to know about sounded very useful to him. Even if he could access mountains of exclusive knowledge on the high technology that the CFA mastered, Ves couldn't possibly comprehend them all at his current state.

"If I've been implanted with a cleaned and updated Archimedes Rubal bioimplant, I can probably memorize all the documents. Too bad that's not a viable option right now."

It would be a waste of time for him to involve himself in these over-the-top research projects. Without a background in the esoteric specialties involved, his harvests would be extremely limited.

Of course, Ves did not have to worry about getting stuck without any way to contribute. There were still plenty of more straightforward research projects left where Ves could easily leverage his future hindsight and his advanced knowledge to farm some easy merits.

Merits was the Starlight Megalodon's internal currency. As long as he gathered a small pile, he could exchange it for all kinds of favors from the virtual officers. Their nature made them obstinate in some areas, but easily manipulable in other areas.

Ves thought for a moment and figured his first priority should be to retrieve the surviving Flagrant Swordmaidens. Even though his relations with them turned rather frosty as of late, Ves was now a sub-department head and wielded considerable power in the Starlight Megalodon's hierarchy.

If they wanted to do anything, they wouldn't be able to do anything without his help.

"Hmmm... the Mech Department is pretty much Venerable Foster's playground. It will be a bad idea if all the mech pilots and mech technicians are forced to answer to her, especially once she donates the Belisarius to the Starlight Megalodon."

Once she became a mech major, she would instantly become the second-highest ranking officer of the Mech Department! With how she managed to wrap Virtual Commander Dislan around her fingers, she'd be able to do nearly anything to her subordinates!

The only solution to keep the Flagrant Swordmaidens out of the hands of the Vesians was if Ves managed to find a way to put them under the charge of the Mech Research Sub-Department.

"I guess I'll have to go through with coming up with a new research project that treats the Flagrant Swordmaidens as my test subjects."

While that wasn't particularly ideal for the Vandals and Swordmaidens involved, it at least kept them safe and snug inside the Research Department.

"Let's go farm some merits first."

If he wanted to do anything, he inevitably needed merits. Ves dove into several research projects that seemed to be easy pickings for him. While he couldn't possibly complete Project Radiance or Project Mech Eater by himself, it was no problem for him to make small contributions here and there.

The more classified research projects came with equally high incentives for any progress and breakthrough he managed to achieve. The difference truly showed Ves the difference between the core projects which might actually affect the CFA as a whole and the side projects which were basically just idle distractions of very little practical value.

For several days, Ves became engulfed by the illusion that he was a highly-placed senior researcher in the employ of the CFA.

Such a job would be extremely hard to come by, and only a small number of fortunate and privileged people would ever get in touch with the absolute forefront of human innovation!

Ves felt somewhat envious to those researchers who managed to land this kind of exciting opportunity. Still, he did not begrudge these privileged individuals who came from either the galactic center or from CFA-aligned spaceborn clans.

At this time, Ketis finished her induction into the CFA and underwent numerous thorough examinations before undergoing a drastic medical operation.

The virtual exobiologists and geneticists successfully managed to apply the correction treatment and ensign-grade gene optimization treatment that essentially elevated the quality of her alien genes and human genes respectively.

The correction treatment transformed her entire physique to an entire new level. Through the efforts of the AIs, many parameters about her body such as

her lifespan, her immunity to diseases, her recovery ability, her stamina and more received a substantial boost!

When Ketis finally filed into her office a few days, she did so on a hovering chair. The extreme changes to her genes, flesh and blood required a lot of time and therapy before she regained her mastery over her new body.

"Did you do this to me?!" She scrunched as soon as she saw Ves lounging behind his desk in his Squalon. "If you wanted to screw around with my body, you could have just asked!"

"It's for your own good, Ketis." He said, dismissing her anger. "You should be thankful that I've paid for your correction treatment. Did the virtual doctors tell you how your garbage genetic mod template was killing you?"

"Says who? Those stupid AIs who pretend they're human?"

He obviously picked a sore spot from the way Ketis flinched at the mention. She grumbled a bit and seemed unwilling to acknowledge the truth.

After all, the Swordmaidens were ultimately responsible for scrimping on her genetic modification. Ketis didn't seem ready to admit that they possessed any faults.

As for Ves, he wondered whether Mayra was aware of the consequences of her outfit's love for reckless, slapdash genetic modification. It may have been one of the reasons why she became so disillusioned with Commander Lydia.

Ves let out a tired breath. "What's done is done. Let's discuss our next moves. Officially, you're a Junior Apprentice Mech Designer of the CFA and my personal disciple. This is a good thing. As soon as you are capable of walking again, you should visit the armory and redeem your standard-issue combat gear. They've got some really good stuff."

"Do they have high-tech swords?"

"I think so."

"Cool!"

"After that, you'll be accompanying me as I'll be working on various research projects."

"Uhhh.. can I skip out on that, Ves?"

"No."

Ketis looked distressed.

### Chapter 923 Test Subjects

One of the more unfortunate aspects of his new position was that he still needed to report to the Mech Department in order to perform his duties as a mech designer.

"Damnit, Venerable Foster has already promoted to mech major?!"

She rose too quickly!

Virtual Commander Dislan already sent him a message demanding him to drop by the Mech Department to appraise the Belisarius that they just received. While Ves believed that he might be able to play some small tricks there, he couldn't do anything too drastic because the AIs weren't that blind.

The virtual officers must have already recognized what a supreme example of mech design they managed to get their hands on. While all the Rorach's Bone only provoked a minor amount of interest, the true value in the expert mech lay in its exquisite, advanced design and engineering.

Studying over three-hundred years of advancements in mech design would surely allow the Starlight Megalodon's knowledge base to advance by leaps and bounds!

"Major Foster is probably the darling of the Mech Department now. I'd be a fool to enter her territory."



Ves decided outright that he would never step foot in the Mech Department again. He sent a polite rejection to Virtual Commander Dislan, using the excuse that he was performing extremely vital research and couldn't be pulled away for the next couple of months.

If Virtual Commander Dislan had any objections, he could take it up with Virtual Commander Cosit.

"Hehe. There's no way Cosit will ever let go of a merit printing machine like me. He'll cling to me like a rotten tooth." He grinned as he sent the message over the internal network.

Naturally, Ves knew that he burned his bridges with Dislan and the Mech Department as soon as he did so. Yet did he have any choice?

"Besides, according to the regulations, it's nothing unusual for a mech designer to be engrossed in a research project and not show up for some time."

As a Senior Mech Designer, Ves received more autonomy and room to decide his own schedule. Some problems became much easier to solve when reaching a higher rank.

During the past few days, he also fleshed out his research proposal meant to put the Flagrant Swordmaidens under his protection. He meticulously dug into the records to see what kind of projects appealed to the CFA and by extension the AIs and tailored his latest project for maximum appeal.

He decided to center his research project on Qilanxo and the beast rider neural interface due to his relative familiarity with both. While he suspected sure that Qilanxo and the god species was a product of Project Icarus, it was so heavily classified that Virtual Commander Cosit might not even be aware of the details!

Ves saw an opportunity to exploit this fault by submitting Qilanxo and the beast rider neural interface as a new research project! If he truly guessed right, Virtual Commander Cosit wouldn't even realize that the new project was completely redundant!

After he finalized the research proposal by stuffing it full of irrelevant jargon and barely legible scientific nonsense, he brought it over to Virtual Commander Cosit's office.

[I would have thought you'd spend your efforts on completing our current research projects before embarking on a new one, Mr. Longhorn.] Cosit frowned as her processors worked at full tilt in an attempt to figure out what the research project actually attempted to do.

Good luck with that.

"I see an opportunity to transform our entire understanding mechs by studying and breaking this extraordinary instance of mech pilots interfacing with exobeasts! Deciphering the mechanics behind this connection will allow us to revolutionize our ability to bring man and machine closer together!"

[What is it that you actually intend to achieve?]

"Why, to turn exobeasts into machines, and machines into exobeasts! The intricate man-beast connection shares many similarities to the man-machine connection that underpins the heart of mech operation. What if we can mix them together and form a beast-machine connection? Just think of the possibilities of mechs piloted by exobeasts! Such a transformational paradigm shift will lessen our dependence on human pilots and save trillions of precious humans lives!"

[Your research proposal doesn't mention how a beast-machine connection would even be capable of following our instructions.] Cosit scratched her head in confusion.

"Well, ma'am, it's like this..."

After half an hour of talking nonsense, Ves managed to wear down Cosit's circuits to the point where she completely lost the thread of the conversation.

Ves knew that Virtual Commander Cosit was not a research AI and did not possess the ability to evaluate research projects all by herself. It was exactly her lack of research capabilities that she came to lead the Research Department, because every other virtual researcher became shackled by so many restrictions that they couldn't even say hello or something!

[Fine!] Cosit metaphorically threw up her hands! [I'll approve your damn research project! I'll assign it a lab and classify it high enough that no one will disturb you as you've requested. I see that this is also a joint research project involving Exobiology Research Sub-Department. Have you even asked them whether they want to jump in on this project of ours?]

"Virtual Exobiologist Neeran will be happy to collaborate with me on behalf of Exobiology." Ves answered without worry. "Please make sure to accommodate all the 'test subjects' that I intend to bring."

[Very well. I will take care of the paperwork.] Cosit said sardonically.

"Is there any way to convert any possible test subjects into CFA servicemembers without running them through the recruitment tests?"

This took Cosit aback. [Why would you contemplate such an option?]

"Errr.. to incentivize the test subjects to cooperate with my research. While I can always force them to play along, it's much easier if I obtain their willing cooperation. Humans don't tend to behave very well when they are slaves, you know. They will work much harder if they think they are free, but I'll need your help in that because they aren't good enough to pass the recruitment tests." Ves explained with a wink.

[You make a good point, Mr. Longhorn. It is difficult to circumvent the recruitment test, or we would have already arranged something like that many years ago. However, while virtual officers such as myself are limited in how we can exert our authority, you humans face fewer limits. It is within my power to grant you the power to press gang any humans in our custody, but... this has always been an extreme solution to the CFA. The other virtual officers will not like it if I let you obtain this power.]

Ves smirked at Cosit. "Oh, come on. I've given you so much help ever since I joined the Research Department. I can make it worth your while..."

They hashed out a quick agreement regarding this issue. It was very trivial for Ves to bribe the virtual commander with a small pile of merits, ostensibly to placate the protests of the other virtual officers.

Now that Ves obtained everything he wanted from his superior, he made to leave. Before that, Cosit asked one more question.

[By the way, how do you want to call your new research project?]

"Hmm... let's call it Project Unfathomable."

[Why call it that?]

"Because it is unfathomable to everyone except for me." Ves grinned.

Virtual Commander Cosit moved quickly, which made sense since she wasn't a slow and inefficient human. A large and roomy lab deep into the restricted section of the Research Department quickly became the new home of Project Unfathomable.

Ves became the project lead while Virtual Exobiologist Neeran became the co-lead. Nonetheless, the latter expressed no interest in spending time on this nonsense research project.

[I don't know what Cosit was thinking when she approved your ridiculous proposal, but I don't want any part of it.] The exobiologist said over the comm. [Besides, I'm unable to perform any original research on my own initiative, so I will not be able to help anyway.]

"That's fine. I merely wanted to add your name to the project to lend it some legitimacy and prevent others from dipping their fingers into it. Joint research projects are much better protected and face much less scrutiny." He replied before closing his comm.

As soon as Ves entered his new lab and set the project up, he began to command the Starlight Megalodon to retrieve his 'test subjects'.

The battleship activated her tractor beams in quick succession, dragging over every single Vandal and Swordmaidens that Ves could find on the overview. He also designated Qilanxo as a priority test subject, causing the big exobeast to abruptly wake from her hibernation as her huge body began to float in the air!

Fortunately, the Starlight Megalodon's huge size and volume provided just enough room to accommodate the sacred god. She was currently holed up in a large cell that nonetheless seemed rather cramped to a big exobeast and roared out in alarm.

"Hoh, there, Qilanxo! It's me, remember!" Ves said when he arrived in front of her cell. "This is just temporary. You'll get out of the cell soon enough. I'll make sure the lab will provide you with food and water to tide you over."

While Qilanxo still roared with alarm, she slowly calmed down when she realized nothing would change. The cell was so strong that it could easily endure her stomping and clawing.

Besides, hearing that she would get to eat and drink for the first time in weeks must have been a relief to her. One of the biggest faults of the safe zone was

that it didn't offer any large-scale food sources. The sparse plants the bots from the Starlight Megalodon hadn't bothered to uproot wouldn't be able to feed such a huge and voracious carnivore.

It was a good thing the Starlight Megalodon still possessed the ability to cultivate artificial meat.

"It's a shame Qilanxo and the two breakdown-proof mechs from our side never found an opportunity to prove their worth in battle in the red zone."

Events grew wildly out of his expectation. The Enduring Protectors that Ves poured his heart and soul into designing now collected dust and rust inside the safe zone.

"It's a shame, but it's also a relief." He sighed. He would hate to see them in battle against a cheat mech like the Belisarius.

This was also an inevitable part of being a mech designer. Some mech designs never saw the light of day, or only saw very little use due to circumstances completely outside of the control of the person who developed them with the best intentions.

A mech existed to do battle, but many mechs and mech designs never actually stepped foot on the battlefield. Some mechs mainly served as a powerful deterrent and their mere threat cowed every enemy that laid their eyes on them into avoiding a fight.

Despite never actually battling, these mechs nonetheless fulfilled their primary purpose of advancing the interests of their owners. It was better to win a battle without a fight.

It was too bad the same didn't apply to his third original mech design. A profound sense of disappointment wracked his spirit when he realized the Enduring Protector would never be able to justify its existence in battle.

Nonetheless, Ves needed to move on. Plans might have changed, but the mission remained.

As he approached the cells containing his human 'test subjects', he narrowed his eyes.

"It's time they spill the beans on what they are after. They can't ignore me this time."

He long wondered why the Flagrant Vandals suddenly split in half at the Detemen System and went their separate ways. While the more valuable ships and mechs sneaked their way back to the Bright Republic, the Verle Task Force where Ves happened to be stationed at randomly traveled to the Reinald Republic before being sent knee-deep into the frontier!

All the time, Ves felt as if he was a passenger aboard an out-of-control shuttle crashing slowly into the ground from high orbit. The lack of control truly frustrated him, but now that he became a Senior Mech Designer in the battleship's hierarchy, Ves was no longer content with knowing nothing.

"They better cough up the truth this time."

#### **Chapter 924 A Frank Discussion**

A pair of security bots escorted the two 'test subjects' into an interrogation compartment. Stripped of their gear and fitted out with standard CFA prisoner clothing, Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise both looked barren and without any of the aura of command and confidence they used to hold.

Obviously, languishing out in the safe zone for a few weeks did not do the Flagrant Swordmaidens a service. No further help or survivors arrived while the dominant Vesians continued to build up their presence next to the Starlight Megalodon.

This definitely forced the remnant of the Vandal and Swordmaiden ground forces to reassess their condition.

"Ves."

"Mr. Larkinson."

"It's Lieutenant Command Adeseus Longhorn while we're here." Ves replied perfunctory as he entered the interrogation compartment. The security bots who escorted them inside positioned themselves behind Ves in a preplanned move to enhance his stature in their eyes. "I've worked hard on the Starlight Megalodon to a position of leadership among the altered command structure. The ship is in a very weird condition right now."

Ves proceeded to fill them in on the virtual officer system, the executive officer's emergency protocol, the role of humans as the inheritors of the ship as long as they proved their competence and his own status as a Senior Mech Designer and the head of the Mech Research Sub-Division.

Besides that, he also informed them of some of the potential threats from the virtual officers of the captain's faction and the Vesians. This was to add some urgency to their considerations. None of them could afford to take it slow and steady.

After all of that explanation, both Orfan and Dise appeared overwhelmed. While they already surmised some of what they heard, the true picture sounded much more complex and difficult to navigate than they thought!

"Where is Ketis?" Dise asked with a soft voice. "She disappeared all of a sudden a few days ago."

"Don't worry, she's safe. I received an opportunity to recruit her into the CFA early, so I brought her in before anything could happen to her. I hope you understand."

The Swordmaiden officer smiled. "That's good. I hope I can see her soon. I have some things to tell her now that Commander Lydia is likely..."



"What I want to know is what will happen to us now." Captain Orfan spoke up, abruptly changing the subject away from their awful losses. "Right now, we're all locked up in cages. Why aren't we able to become recognized CFA officers like you?"

"It is not yet within my power to help you become a part of the Starlight Megalodon's crew. After all, none of you have passed the recruitment test."

"But you can get us inside through another way, right?"

He did. Virtual Commander Cosit already granted him the power to press gang any human who didn't enjoy any special protections, but Ves deliberately held back that detail. Right now, he wanted to talk to Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise with as big of a power disparity as possible in order to encourage them to open their mouths.

"I'm working on that." Ves replied tepidly. "It might take me some time. For now, you're safe inside your cells. The Vesians won't be able to abuse their own authority in an effort to eliminate you all. However, this protection only lasts so long as I maintain my standing inside the ship."

As Ves answered some more questions about his inability to empower the survivors, he always emphasized his own position of power but simultaneously reminded them of his precarious situation as well.

He might have been able to promote to a Senior Mech Designer, but how long would that last before the battleship underwent a major upheaval?

Both mech officers grimaced more and more as they realized their fates lay fully in his hands.

Captain Orfan sighed and crossed her arms. "Alright, let's cut the crap. Don't think I don't know what you're doing, 'Mr. Longhorn'. You want something from us, right?"

Ves spread his arms in innocence, which didn't seem very sincere considering two heavily-armed security bots from the Mech Research Sub-Department stood guard right behind his back.

At this point in time, he activated the signal jammer function of his Squalon combat armor. The entire area became suffused with strong interference. Even the pair of bots standing behind Ves seemed to have lost their senses.

"Look, I'm not trying to lord over my superiority over the two of you or anything." That was a lie. "However, it seems that out of every member of the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces, only I am in a position to complete the mission. Don't you think it's time for you to tell me what our overlords are really after?"

While Captain Orfan struggled over the decision to reveal what she was after, Lieutenant Dise seemed much less hesitant. She wasn't military, after all, so she had much fewer compulsions regarding the need to keep secrets.

"Ves, Adeseus, Mr. Longhorn, whatever, it's like this. Have you been informed how we initially obtained word of the Starlight Megalodon?"

He began to recall what he heard from several sources. "Supposedly, a number of FTL-capable shuttles piloted by human clones managed to jump out of the spacetime distortion that surrounds the Aeon Corona System and ended up in the frontier where they got picked up by several outfits. Each of the clones sent out word about the Starlight Megalodon's existence and what might be found there. They also brought 'keys' that when combined with a number of them formed a navigational guide that facilitated their journey to the Starlight Megalodon."

Lieutenant Dise nodded. "That is correct. Those who captured the clones and heard what treasures they might be able to recover from the Starlight Megalodon all tried to keep this find to themselves. A few other powerful

influences managed to get wind of it anyway, but all the power brokers hashed out a private agreement behind the scenes to prevent any further leaks. This is because we are out to recover is really too attractive."

"What is it that has sent you all racing towards the Starlight Megalodon like lemmings jumping off a cliff?" Ves asked the crucial question.

She hesitated. "It is... a means of extending someone's life. Certainly, when we interrogated the clones, they revealed many interesting treasures we might be able to gain from the ship, but by far the most attractive prize is the high-grade life-prolonging serum that is locked within one of the Starlight Megalodon's vaults. This has sent the powerful people backing us up into a frenzy! While it's hard enough for them to be able to extend their lives by a hundred years, it is almost unthinkable for them to extend it successively as the price for each subsequent treatment rises exponentially."

"The old geezers who are pulling our strings all want to live for three-hundred, four-hundred and even five-hundred years." Captain Orfan finally admitted now that Lieutenant Dise spilled the beans. "I won't tell you who is driving the Flagrant Vandals, but that person is an incredibly powerful bigshot in the bright Republic. It's in all of our best interests to fulfill the mission, because you don't want to know what will happen to us if we made it this far only to return with empty hands."

"Let me think for a bit." Ves said, forcing a momentary pause.

He folded his hands in front of him to block the frown trying to engulf his face. A mix of emotions roiled through his body and mind.

For some reason, he felt empty and disappointed.

He felt empty because if Lieutenant Dise and Captain Orfan told him the truth, the Flagrant Swordmaidens truly risked the lives of hundreds of mech pilots

and many thousands of support personnel all in an effort to extend the life of a powerful official.

He also felt disappointed because he held some suspicions that the two mech officers still held back some of the truth. Why go through all this trouble and sacrifice so many lives if not for a greater goal?

Certainly, retrieving the life-prolonging treatment serum was sure to be a mission objective, but how would that help the Bright Republic?

In the perspective of the government, the Starlight Megalodon offered much more treasures that could enhance the power of the entire state rather than a single individual!

Truly, Ves didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the answer that Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise finally settled upon. After experiencing the greatness of the CFA and the grand vision that guided their actions, the motives and ambition driving the backers of the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens all seem petty in comparison!

"Is this all you are after?" He asked, trying to confirm their answers and allowing them the chance to amend them. "The more you tell me, the more I'm able to help you complete your missions. I don't intend to return with empty hands either, you know."

"We've heard there's more to be gained on this ship, but we're hardly in the position to make off with them." Lieutenant Dise shrugged. "Retrieving the higher grades of life-prolonging treatment serum has always been our primary goal, at least when it comes to the Swordmaidens. It's possible that Commander Lydia held other ideas, but I don't think so. She's gone now so we'll never be able to find out what's in her head."

"Captain Orfan?"

"Same as what Dise said." She grumbled. "From the moment we began with the mission, we only came for one thing, really. You have to know that it's really suspicious that the Starlight Megalodon sent out a bunch of FTL shuttles helmed by clones. It smells like a trap. Yet the people pulling our strings want us to go in anyway, hoping that we'd be able to get in and out as fast as possible with the only prize they really care about. That's the full score."

Ves held the same suspicions, but regardless of that he still couldn't completely get around to accepting their claims.

Nonetheless, he had no choice but to accept them at face value, at least in the open. "I've already informed you before that I'm collaborating with a third party. They advised me not to tell you what they are after, so forgive me for keeping this short. As far as the third party has informed me of their intentions, they have not expressed any designs towards the life-prolonging treatment serums. They are after something greater, I think.

The two mech officers adopted mixed expressions.

"You owe this third party your current position, right?" Lieutenant Dise asked.

"Correct."

"How trustworthy is this third party."

"Practically nil. However, as long as we need each other, there is sincerity in our cooperation."

"Who is this supposed 'third party'?!" Captain Orfan asked with a frustrated tone.

Ves couldn't answer her, though. "I don't have a clue. It's a powerful influence, but they are doing their best to obscure their actual identities and allegiances.

I think it's better off that we don't know. The less we know, the less they have a reason to off us all."

All three of them nodded in a rare moment of agreement.

"It still sounds shady and precarious as hell, though." Orfan remarked, "But I guess we'll roll with it because we don't have another choice. Just make sure you watch your back. There's no telling what will happen once you become a liability instead of an asset."

"Oh, I've already taken that into account."

The meeting devolved into a discussion of their future plans. Ves promised to exert his efforts into recruiting as much of the Flagrant Swordmaidens as the Starlight Megalodon's crew as possible. He also offered his help into attempting to retrieve the life-prolonging serum from the vault, but the two mech officers wanted to try and obtain them through their own efforts first.

Despite their differences, Ves was still on their side. As long as the objectives of the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't clash with Calabast's intentions, there should be any harm in assisting both at the same time.

Right?

### **Chapter 925 Caught in the Wild**

A day after the meeting, Ves 'press ganged' most of the test subjects. This allowed them to enter the service as the lowest rating, basically turning them into deckhands only good for odd jobs and dangerous duties.

Nevertheless, the most important point was that the Starlight Megalodon considered every rating, no matter how low, to be a proper serviceman of the CFA!

This simple change in optics suddenly turned the remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaidens from complete strangers into familiar CFA bosom buddies to the AIs and regulating systems of the battleship.

From there, Ves plainly abused his authority, and along with throwing some hefty bribes into Virtual Commander Cosit's direction, everyone gained promotions in officer or officer-equivalent ranks.

The few experts that remained joined the Research Department as researchers. Ves especially held out hopes for the handful of exobiologists and engineers who might be able to replicate his rapid rise to some extent. Even if they were barely experts in their own field, three-hundred years of scientific progress must mean something.

As for the mech pilots and other support personnel who didn't possess any scientific acumen, Ves faced a more difficult choice. He possessed the power to appoint a handful of them as security guards, with Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise becoming security lieutenants straight away.

That still left a score of Vandals and Swordmaidens who Ves recommended to the other departments according to their skills and own demands. Naturally, Ves facilitated their transfer by throwing even more bribes around.

Merits flowed freely from his hand, but he was still able to earn them back for now. With practically every mech research projects at his fingertips, he could pick and choose which part of which project to advance.

"It's getting harder and harder, but I haven't hit a wall as of yet."

Seeing Ves spending merits left and right inspired the Flagrant Swordmaidens into earning merits on their own. Such a display of confidence made him smirk. They would find out soon enough that earning merits was far harder than it looked like. Without the right skills and the right advantages, people could forget about accumulating them fast enough to obtain a promotion!

As Orfan and Dise both became security lieutenants under the Research Division, they enjoyed the same treatment as Ves once received. Besides

receiving their standard-issue CFA battle gear, they also got to pick out one exceptional item.

For this choice, Ves held them back before they went to the armory. "Before you go off choosing a fancy weapon or something like that, I suggest you choose to redeem an Emergency Personal Teleporter. I have one as well. As long as we all get EPTs, we can sync them together and teleport a thousand kilometers away from the Starlight Megalodon whenever we want to. That's a much better option than increasing your battle capabilities on a ship that can rip us to shreds regardless of what we carry."

"We'll take that under advisement." Captain Orfan replied.

Obviously, they hadn't considered the option and needed to discuss it among themselves. Ves left them to it and made some other preparations.

He knew that Venerable Foster already settled in as mech major. Like Ves, she also redeemed various pieces of gear from the Starlight Megalodon and on top of that went through three rounds of gene optimization treatments. That had made her into a very scary opponent, one that Ves couldn't possibly beat in a straight fight!

Therefore, from the start, Ves always intended to flee rather than fight if confronted by an enemy. The personal shuttle he gained the right to ride whenever he wanted became the key to his escape plan.

"If the Starlight Megalodon descends into hell, I don't want to be anywhere around here any second more than necessary." He figured to himself. "The EPT can teleport me up to a thousand kilometers away, so it's a waste if I don't take advantage of that property."

If hostilities really broke out on the ship, the chance of his shuttle being barred from launch or getting shot down by some anti-air emplacement was extremely probable!



This was why when Calabast next sought of Ves, she encountered him guiding a couple of hauler bots in bringing away crates of vintage nutrient packs.

"What in heaven's sake are you doing right now, Mr. Longhorn?" Calabast asked in the most genuine bewilderment that he had ever heard from her. "I thought I made it clear that you should wait on my next instruction."

"Well, I'm not short on merits right now, so please excuse me if I am stocking my escape shuttle, commander." Ves truthfully replied. There was no use hiding this detail from the head of the Intelligence Department anyway. He also threw her a hasty salute before she complained. "You never really explained to me how the Flagrant Swordmaidens and I would be able to leave the ship and the planet, so I've taken matters into my own hands. I hope you don't mind."

This time, Miss Calabast appeared quite different from last time. Maybe she had some free time, or maybe she decided that Ves couldn't hog all the good stuff. She replaced her old infiltrator suit with a highly advanced CFA version of the same. Its pockets contained various gadgets and gear, making it abundantly clear that she was prepared for action at any time.

When Ves studied her attractive appearance, he bet that she underwent the gene optimization treatments as well. The goal of these treatments was to elevate the quality of every CFA serviceman's gene quality. Not only did they improve a baseline human's lifespan, immune reaction, digestive energy intake and attributes, they also holistically improved their appearances and reduced any factors deemed too unattractive.

This meant that without even trying to, she already looked gorgeous in a dangerous way.

As a commander of the CFA, her high rank entitled her to four whole rounds of gene optimization treatments, which was one more than Ves himself received!

Just the thought of Calabast getting the better of him in this area made Ves seethe with envy. This kind of opportunity wouldn't come twice for him in a very long time. The earlier he received these treatments, the better off he'd be for the rest of his life!

"Your lack of faith in me is noted." Calabast responded dryly as she saw that Ves was fully serious in preparing his own escape shuttle. "Perhaps it's best if we plan to make our separate ways sooner than anticipated. Regardless of your proclivities, I've come to inform you that the influx of humans has stirred up the more radical virtual officers. Although I don't have any solid proof, I am reasonably certain that they are plotting our demise even now."

"They're really serious about perpetuating old hatreds?!"

"You have to realize that the Starlight Megalodon faced no external enemies for thousands of years. That has warped the priorities of the AIs. The absence of outside threats means they instead look to themselves for foes."

Ves wanted to bash the data banks of those stubborn AIs with a hammer!

"So you're saying we are running out of time."

"For now, the aggressive captain's faction is being constrained by the admiral's faction, who by far has received the most new recruits. The Mech Department is especially prepared to receive a large influx of human mech pilots and mech technicians under Venerable Foster's lead."

In short, too many humans were joining too quickly into a single department. Ves could see why that would alarm so many virtual officers.

"Shouldn't you tell me which research projects you are aiming to obtain?" Ves asked with narrowed eyes.

"Let's talk somewhere more discreet."

They entered one of the many empty compartments nearby before Calabast activated her signal jammer. After that, she handed over a peculiar-looking secure data chip to Ves.

"What's this?" He asked even as he stowed it away inside a special cushioned and shielded compartment inside his Squalon.

"That's the key to your next tasks." Calabast explained seriously. "In the next couple of days, I will finish arranging your access to two highly sensitive research projects. One of them is Project Void Calamity from the Exobiology Research Sub-Department, while the other is Project Pandemonium Descent."

Those project names sounded a lot more bombastic than the others he heard! Obviously, the researchers who devised these top-level secret projects held some very lofty visions!

"Can you tell me what they're about?"

Calabast shrugged. "You'll find out soon enough. It is not your job to meddle with the projects. My only expectation of you is to get in, insert the secure data chip into the restricted terminals in their labs, and let the hacking software do its job."

"How are you so sure the hacking software on the chip is sufficient to circumvent the layers of security protecting the research files?"

"Because I programmed it myself these last few weeks." She grinned. "I may not look like it, but I'm a very adept hacker. It comes with the job. My new position also affords me many lessons on how to crack the CFA's own security suites."

"Really?" Ves gazed dubiously at Calabast and couldn't imagine her for one of those stereotypical programmers turned bad. "Aren't you just taking credit for the work of your operatives or something?"

"Believe what you will." She neither confirmed nor denied his suspicions. "Just make sure you do not draw the attention of the virtual AIs that are overseeing the projects and for everyone's sake, don't mess with things you cannot possibly understand! Is that clear?"

"I get it! Will I be off the hook once I do this for you?"

"Not yet. After you let the data chip hack into the terminals of the two projects I've mentioned before and come back to me, we'll need to go together to access one more secret project. This is a joint project that spans many disciplines such as exobiology, genetic modification, mech design, artificial intelligence, exotic materials science, energy physics and more."

"What an expansive project!"

"It's scope is enormous." Calabast agreed. "It's also the crown jewel of the Starlight Megalodon and we'll both have to work together to enter the deepest and most secretive lab of the Exotic Research Sub-Department."

"I didn't know such a sub-department existed."

"That shows you exactly how classified this project is! The Exotic Research Sub-Department is not only the place where the CFA tries to find applicaties of newly-discovered exotic minerals with high potential, but it is also a center for any miracle research that spans far beyond their current understanding of the sciences!"

"May I know what the project is called?"

"Project Icarus. Don't bother searching the databases of the Starlight Megalodon for mention of it. You can't find it in any records."

Ves tried hard not to blink or look astonished. In the end, while the Flagrant Swordmaidens claimed to go after the life-prolonging treatment serum stored in the vaults, Miss Calabast aimed her sights much higher from the start!

She wanted to retrieve the research data on potentially the most impactful project on the ship, one which could easily change the course of human history!

Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth wanted Ves to access this project as well on behalf of the Five Scrolls Compact. That alone gave him enough reasons to stay well away!

Yet fate had a strange way of forcing him to converge upon the one research project which the Starlight Megalodon most wanted to keep out of anyone else's hands!

It seemed that Ves guessed wrong about one thing, though. Project Icarus wasn't housed in any of the biology sub-departments but instead in the Exotic Research Sub-Department which Ves never encountered any mention before.

"What will happen afterwards once you get what you want?" Ves asked, pressing Calabast to answer his question properly.

She smirked and crossed her arms. "Are you worried about being dumped?"

"Wouldn't you want to prevent others from finding out that you've obtained the research data of those three projects?"

"I trust in your discretion."

Ves frowned deeply. "That's awfully generous of you. Sadly, I don't believe a word of what you said."

"Let me just say that I have grown very appreciative of you. You are more use to me alive than dead." She grinned and abruptly entered his personal space

to lean in until her scent brushed his nose and her lips almost touched his ear. "After all, it's not every day I catch a rogue Holy Son in the wild."

It was as if a lightning bolt struck his body!

### Chapter 926 Egg Layer

Panic immediately suffused his entire mind! How could Calabast figure out his greatest secret?!

For a moment, Ves frantically wanted to throw all caution to the wind and materialize the Amastendira and blast a wide-area laser blast in her direction!

Calabast gently patted his Squalon's shoulder pauldron. "Ah, before you contemplate anything stupid inside your silly head, know that the Starlight Megalodon is one step away from erupting into violence. The death of a department head will certainly trigger hostilities instantly. Without my help, you won't survive the coming storm."

"Calabast." Ves said as he gritted his teeth. "Get away from my sight."

"Very well. I'll leave you alone with your toys." She chuckled and strutted to the exit of the compartment. "Remember to move quickly and do as I ask as soon as you receive the authorizations. Also make sure to wrap everything up as soon as you return the data chip to me. Once we leave the Exotic Research Sub-Department, I predict the Starlight Megalodon will certainly experience some drastic changes! I've prepared some precautions to keep us safe for the moment, but be prepared to get out as fast as possible."

"Hey!" Ves shouted after her. "What is it you want from me, besides accessing those research projects?!"

"If you're so concerned about me leaking out your status once I leave, rest assured." She shook her head as if she was speaking to a silly boy. "Such a good thing is too good to be shared with my employers. I'll be in touch. Remember, don't do anything reckless!"

Long after Calabast deactivated her signal jammer and left the compartment, Ves fell into a complete emotional mess. He kept trying to think where he slipped up his greatest secret.

Calabast must have acquired footage or eavesdropped on his conversation with Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth somehow.

Despite the Compact-aligned AI locking down his office and activating his own signal jammer, the security arrangements completely appeared to have posed no hindrance at all to the enigmatic spy!

"Damnit!" He cursed. "It was a mistake to trust a dwarf! They're all incompetent!"

Was this retribution for abusing so many dwarves? Did karma strike back at him for all of his unethical experiments?

Whatever the reason, Ves knew he was profoundly screwed right now. His worst fears came true, and there was nothing he could do to reverse this setback.

From Calabast's warnings, he knew that there was no way he could finagle his way out of this fix. When it came to spycraft, Ves was a complete baby in front of this witch. Someone as experienced and capable as her definitely prepared many contingencies in the event Ves lashed out. Even if he managed to kill her, the secret would definitely be out!

"She put me in checkmate right from the get-go, or else she wouldn't have told me what she knew."

Ves truly saw no way out of the most impactful predicament of his life. The only reassurance was that Calabast expressed her intention of keeping the secret to herself. Anyone in her place would have done the same, and this was why he chose to believe her this time.

The more people knew about his status, the higher the odds that the Five Scrolls Compact would come barreling through! Even though this secret organization lost out badly against the MTA and CFA, there was no way any faction in the Komodo Star Sector or the galactic rim could withstand a full assault from this powerful influence.

If worse came to worse and Calabast truly crossed his bottom line, he could always throw caution to the wind and sic the Five Scrolls Compact on her! As for him, while it would be hard to survive being hunted by the crazy fanatics, he could always knock on the doors of the MTA or CFA and seek asylum, though he'd likely be forced to relinquish the 'Metal Scroll' as a result.

"I can also disappear into the lawless frontier as an alternative." He thought. "The outer edge of the galaxy is way too big and sparse to track down a single person."

The life of an outlaw didn't appeal to him very much, but it was a far better alternative than becoming a glorified slave for one of the Big Two.

He calmed down a bit once he went over these possibilities. While they were all nuclear options that would definitely harm him and his family as much as Calabast, it at least afforded him some leverage against her blackmail.

"Someone as clever as her doubtlessly thought about this already."

The risk of incurring mutually assured destruction might also be why Calabast didn't exert too much pressure on him. As a businessman, Ves recognized her intention to opt for long-term profits over short-term gains. After all, she'd be stupid to strangle the goose who laid the golden eggs!

"I'll have to have a good talk with her the next time I see her in order to clarify her exact intentions."

While Ves didn't see anyway to climb out of the hole he fell into headfirst, he could at least start digging upwards.



After the shocking meeting with Calabast, Ves quickly resumed his preparations. He stocked his 'personal shuttle' with water, oxygen, fuel, medical supplies, spare parts and most importantly numerous crates of vintage nutrient packs!

Ves nodded in satisfaction as he saw the loader bots stow away the crates. "I definitely won't starve to death in space with this much nutrient packs."

The Starlight Megalodon could care less about these emergency rations. All Ves needed to do to obtain a crate was to throw a few merits at the commissary.

Once he loaded the shuttle up with supplies, he programmed its autopilot and let it launch from the Starlight Megalodon's shuttle bay without any human occupants.

Even though the Vesians outside should have spotted launch of the craft, they wouldn't be able to track it for long due to all the interference in the air!

As the shuttle departed from the battleship, it followed a convoluted route planned by Ves before parking itself inside a hidden alcove nearly a thousand kilometers away. Ves spent hours studying the surrounding terrain until he settled for this hidden position.

Once there, the natural cover of the terrain along with the shuttle's low-powered ECM mode should keep it nice and hidden, though he didn't discount the possibility that Calabast already found out its location.

Nonetheless, he already programmed the coordinates to his emergency personal teleporter. Unless blocked for some reason or another, Ves would definitely be able to appear next to his shuttle.

"This should be sufficient preparation for my escape route."

In the meantime, the Vesians didn't sit still either. Venerable Foster began to copy his methods of press ganging the Vesians and subsequently using her power over the Mech Department to promote them into better positions.

Many Vesian experts flooded the Research Department all of a sudden!

While Ves looked forward to venting his frustrations on any mech designers assigned to the Mech Research Sub-Division, it seemed the Vesians knew better than to assign their people under his care!

"Damn, I really wanted to mess with them." He sighed with disappointment.

While a handful of their mech designers did join up, they were exclusively assigned to the Mech Department where Ves didn't dare to enter. With a young Journeyman Mech Designer called Patrick taking charge of all mech maintenance duties, the department became extremely lively all of a sudden.

The Starlight Megalodon became a minor hub of activity now that many hundreds of humans took up various duties and responsibilities. Virtual officers no longer monopolized the ship for themselves as the newly arrived humans started to encroach on their power.

Ves noticed several undercurrents running underneath the surface. Both the Vesians and the Flagrant Swordmaidens started spending a lot of time scouting out the vaults.

Naturally, there was no way they could get in. The vaults didn't store just any casual goods. Due to their extremely valuable contents, they had all entered into a permanent lockdown ever since the battleship crashed.

The only way to relieve the lockdown was to cut out the vaults and transport them back to CFA hands somehow.

The only other way to unlock them was to get a CFA high official to disengage the extremely stringent security locks.

The problem was that Ves didn't think the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians could accomplish either of those options.

"What are they up to?" He frowned.

Not only the humans began to buzz about, but also the virtual officers. He noticed that the security bots of the Internal Security Department increased the frequency of their patrols all of a sudden. Tensions between the captain's faction and the admiral's faction started to intensify, and Virtual Commander Cosit constantly complained to Ves about the rising levels of hostility.

Time was running out.

As Ves waited for Calabast to get him the authorizations to access the two highly classified core research projects, he spent his remaining time on rushing Ketis through her next promotion.

"Follow me and do what I tell you." He said as he brought her straight to one of the mech research labs.

Under his guidance, 'Ketis' managed to accomplish several major breakthroughs in these research projects. A flood of merits entered her record, easily pushing her to the amount required to undertake a promotion test!

"What's the use of earning these stupid merits when I'm not good enough to pass this test?" She asked in a confused tone.

"What do you know?" Ves smirked at her. "Do you know who I am? I'm the boss of every mech designer in the Research Department!"

Although his authority alone wouldn't allow him to circumvent the promotion test, Ves already knew what to do. He blatantly bribed Virtual Commander Cosit with half of his remaining merits, which was a considerable sum all considered.

With this much merits at stake, Cosit instantly turned into a fawning puppy in front of Ves!

[Rest assured, Mr. Longhorn, I will definitely be able to secure a commendation for young Miss Ketis! With the achievements she has already made so far, there is more than enough grounds for me to give her an esteemed award that automatically rewards her with a direct increase in her rank! I will need your approval for that, of course.]

Ves mentally shook his head at the department head's shamelessness. His prolific bribery completely corrupted her programming and turned her into the sleaziest virtual officer of the Starlight Megalodon.

It took Cosit only several hours to gain approval to award Ketis with a commendation. After conducting the shortest, smallest and fastest award ceremony, Ves practically hauled Ketis and her shiny new medal off to the armory where he practically browbeat her into redeeming an EPT as her promotion gift.

Of course, Ketis didn't appear to be amused. "Why should I receive a stupid teleporter when the armory has some really good swords?!"

She gestured her arm at the rack of scabbarded swords calling out for her attention. They came in all kinds of shapes and sizes and were much more than sharp slabs of metal. Each of them not only incorporated extremely expensive exotics which bestowed the blades with all kinds of special properties, they also incorporated many high tech functions as well!

Many of them were so sharp in fact that they could easily leave a mark on the Starlight Megalodon's bulkheads, which was a considerably impressive feat!

Ves didn't care, though. Compared to obtaining a pretty sword, it was much better for her to secure a ticket on his escape ride.

"You're redeeming an EPT and that's it. Or do you think you can leave the Starlight Megalodon by strolling out of the airlock in full sight of the virtual officers and the Vesians?"

Under his irresistible coercion, Ketis reluctantly redeemed an EPT from the armory with an aggrieved expression. Once she obtained it, Ves immediately transferred the same set of coordinates that he already configured on his own EPT.

"Now you're all set." Ves nodded with satisfaction. "Once you land in a spot of trouble or receive my signal, don't wait any further and just engage the EPT. Now, off you go. There's still a gene optimization treatment for you to go through!"

As Ves packed her off, he remained behind at the armory.

[Is there something else you need, Mr. Longhorn?] Levitt asked with a questioning tone.

"I'm allowed to exchange merits for gear, right?"

[Correct, but don't think about obtaining any advanced gadgets. We don't issue them often outside of officer promotions and special mission requirements. You will have to fork over a substantial amount of merits to receive something as good as an EPT.]

Ves gave the virtual chief armorer a confident smile. "Merits is the one thing I'm not short of. Open up the catalog for me! Let me make a selection first before we talk about the price!"

### **Chapter 927 Breaking a State**

After Ves finished his business at the armory, he returned to the Research Department. He didn't have to wait long until Calabast succeeded in granting him access to two core research projects.

When he studied the paperwork, he found that everything was in order. There shouldn't be anything stopping him from entering the highly-guarded labs of the Exobiology and Human Genetics Research Sub-Departments.

"Let's get this over with." He sighed.

He first decided to enter the lab of Project Void Calamity at the Exobiology Research Sub-Department. Such a project name made Ves imagine that the CFA tried to develop some powerful superbomb so calamitous that it shattered the surrounding space!

Yet for some reason, this top-secret research project fell under exobiology. As Ves slowly went through security checkpoint after security checkpoint, he finally entered the long-dormant lab of this strange and potentially ruinous research project.

The lights of the main compartment lit up, illuminating a giant stasis cage. A creature just as large as Qilanxo rested within, locked in time.

"Is that.. a void beast?"

Interstellar life existed, and they were all terribly powerful in some way. With asteroids, lethal radiation, extreme resource scarcity and many other harmful factors at work, it was nearly impossible for life in space to evolve into being.

Yet interstellar space was unimaginably vast. No matter how small the odds, as long as even the tiniest chance existence, nature somehow found a way. Void beasts represented the ultimate adaptability of life. Against the extremely harsh environment of space, the creatures that managed to cling to life in space all turned into extremely formidable beings!

No regular outfit would even consider capturing a void beast alive. Even many state militaries would probably decline the opportunity because the losses simply didn't match the gains.

It was a different story for the CFA, however. If anyone could catch them alive, it was the Big Two.

Ves stepped softly towards the semi-transparent, glowing stasis cage and admired the vaguely whale-like form. Its pitted black skin seemed flexible, but Ves knew that it could withstand an incredible amount of radiation and kinetic energy. Ordinary laser beams and kinetic rounds would bounce right off the surface without inflicting any major damage.

"So this is the heart of Project Void Calamity?"

As Ves wondered what the CFA wanted to do with this void beast, he turned to the bank of terminals and logged in with the credentials that Calabast provided to him. The terminal read all the authorizations from his CFA comm and beeped in approval.

Numerous encrypted files became accessible to him. He was tempted to dive in immediately but remembered his task. He retrieved the secure data chip from his Squalon and inserted it into the terminal's slot.

The chip glowed orange as its hacking software went to work in trying to override the copy restrictions of the research project's core data files.

According to Calabast, Ves didn't need to do anything except to wait until the chip glowed green, signifying that it succeeded in copying over the essential research data.

"I might as well dive in to see why this is worth the effort for her to retrieve."

He dove into the approved research proposal to read the initial motivations for starting this secret project.

Just a few minutes in, Ves almost sputtered. "How can this even be possible?!"

Project Void Calamity truly deserved to be kept top secret. The story went that a renowned exobiologist specialized in the study of void beasts discovered a new species which he named void breakers that possessed a peculiar defense mechanism.

As their species name suggested, they possessed the ability to 'break' space. Technically, they somehow broke the relation between the dimensions in a very limited fashion. This basically meant that anyone falling under its field of effect would be torn apart as the matter that made up their bodies would be spread across a very wide distance!

Naturally, the CFA wasn't interested in harnessing the void breakers as blunt objects to whack enemy ships. They already possessed more than enough weapons to inflict mass destruction.

Instead, they became interested in the void breakers because this dimensional decoupling took place in many dimensions at the same time. It wasn't just the material dimensions being affected, but also the higher dimensions that FTL drives depended upon to traverse!

"I get it now. The CFA wants to build a giant higher-dimensional space net!"

It took a lot of energy for a void breaker to 'break' the material dimensions because they were relatively barren in energy. However, the creatures found it much easier to decouple the higher dimensions from each other because they somehow managed to draw upon the energy-rich environments to fuel their own separation from each other!

What this did mean? As long as the researchers of Project Void Calamity managed to decipher the mechanics behind the special ability of the void breakers and replicate them artificially, they could potentially build a series of interdiction machines that essentially blocked many methods of FTL travel!



"The main point of this project is economy of scale." Ves understood from the justifications to embark on this research project. "A typical star system encompasses many light-hours. It's not feasible to block every approach with an interdiction machine if they are too costly to produce."

Yet the void breaker didn't have a particularly special physique and doesn't have a demanding diet in terms of exotics. This meant that it was highly possible to mass produce thousands of interdiction machines without bankrupting a state!

Best of all, not only did these interdiction machines block space, they also served as lethal traps. Any ships that crashed into their field of effect would tear themselves apart like noodles, eliminating every hope of entering the star system alive!

A couple of hundred interdiction machines set up at a predicted FTL emergence zone would definitely be able to annihilate a major fleet without firing a single shot!

"This is a weapon that needs planning and prediction to make the best use of it. How frightening!"

Even though the Starlight Megalodon encountered a mishap before finishing Project Void Calamity, Ves was sure that the CFA repeated same research elsewhere.

The data chip soon glowed green, alerting Ves that it finished its job. He quickly removed the chip from the slot and put it back in his Squalon in case the security arrangements of this lab detected something problematic, although Calabast promised they shouldn't even notice his actions.

"I better get out of here."

Not only was he afraid of getting caught by the lab's security measures, he also wanted to get away from the void breaker captured in stasis!

After departing Project Void Calamity's lab, he quickly went over to the Human Genetics Research Sub-Department and made his way to the lab that housed Project Pandemonium Descent.

This lab was a lot more modest and didn't host any organisms locked in stasis. As Ves repeated his actions at the other lab, he quickly read over the introductory files of this strangely-named project.

Project Pandemonium Descent possessed a much more insidious goal. The secret project aimed to discover and exploit special frequencies that when broadcasted to a crowd of humans would slowly agitate them and make them more aggressive and impulsive.

Ves didn't understand even an iota of the theories described in the documents, but the summaries and abstract painted an extremely potent weapon aimed squarely at large populations of humans.

"The emitters that broadcast these extremely subtle frequencies can be spread all over a city or even encompass an entire planet! If they aren't discovered fast enough, a planet can easily descent into absolute pandemonium! Even the most cohesive and prosperous of planets can ignite into a madhouse over the course of a couple of months!"

The CFA approved of Project Pandemonium Descent with the express intent of reserving them for use against the first-rate superstates.

"So even the CFA is apprehensive against the two most powerful human states."

Generally speaking, the power and reach of the Big Two transcended the might that could be mustered by the Terrans and the Rubarthans, yet the disparity wasn't that large. If a full-scale conflict really broke out for some reason or another, the Big Two would probably end up with a pyrrhic victory!

Ves really had to hand it to the researchers who proposed Project Pandemonium Descent. The main strength and weakness of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire was their massive territory and the enormous amount of rich and highly-populated planets under their control.

No matter how well the first-rate superstates defended their core planets, it was all too easy for the Big Two to insert their spies among their populations. The best part about the pandemonium emitters was that it worked in a very wide range, so the spies could hide them nearly anywhere in a city and still affect the more heavily-guarded city districts.

As long as enough emitters did their magic, these prosperous and productive core planets that formed the backbone of the first-rate superstates would break without external intervention!

"The panic, riots and chaos that will happen on an affected planet will make what happened on Harkensen I or in the Detemen System look like a picnic!"

While the secure data chip quickly worked its circuits to circumvent the encryption and security measures, Ves began to connect the common thread between these two research projects.

"They are both extreme projects expressly devised to break an entire state!"

Project Void Calamity tried to devise a means to destroy an incoming war fleet by laying a trap in their FTL emergence zone.

Project Pandemonium Descent attempted to discreetly plunge a highly-populated city or planet into absolute anarchy.

Both projects didn't have much application in smaller battles and skirmishes. Instead, they found their best use during major wars between states such as the Bright-Vesia Wars.

"If the Vesia Kingdom manages to obtain the results of these two perverse secret projects, the Bright Republic will probably come to an end!"

Ves did not believe that insidious snake Calabast worked for the Vesians, though. Still, her true employers should be a state or a state-like entity with aggressive ambitions. They were probably plotting an incredibly destructive war against an equally powerful state. Calabast's employers wouldn't be so greedy for these secret projects if they aimed their sights onto weaker states.

The implications of the two secret projects and his own role in facilitating their handoff to Miss Calabast and her employers gnawed at his conscience, or at least what little of it still remained.

"If the results of these research projects will be put to use in a future war, will I be culpable for all of the death and destruction that will ensue?"

"Will I be responsible for the fall of an entire state in the future?"

Strangely enough, Ves didn't fuss over these questions. If something awful happened in the future as a direct result of his actions, then so be it. Why should he feel guilty for the potential collapse of an entire state? States fell and rose all the time throughout human space.

"It's kind of like selling mechs. I should be held responsible for the potential crimes my customers might commit with my products."

That would be silly. Mechs didn't kill people. People killed people.

An innocent mech designer who ran a modest mech manufacturing company that sold war machines to anyone who paid for them shouldn't bear the guilt if some of these deadly machines ended up being used to commit atrocities.

Ves chuckled. "If not me, then someone else would have been her patsy."

Thus, the enormous implications of handing over this sensitive CFA research to Calabast didn't bother him anymore. Ves considered himself merely as a chain in the link.

While Miss Calabast was extremely vexing, Ves had to admit that so far he benefited substantially from her assistance.

Besides, she also knew his ultimate secret. There was no way for him to refuse her request anyway. He had no choice of facilitating this theft.

"If I can't stop it, I might as well enjoy it." He remarked to himself in a depreciating tone.

### **Chapter 928 Turning Ho**

Ves felt as if he held a hot potato as he left the biology research labs. As a recognized officer of the Starlight Megalodon, he knew he committed high treason against the Common Fleet Alliance by stealing top secret research data.

The rules and regulations he skimmed through spoke clearly about the consequences of committing this betrayal. Death would be the easy way out!

Nonetheless, the Starlight Megalodon seemed close to boiling over. Many security bots started making movements, and Virtual Commander Cosit even warned Ves not to exit the Security Department at this time.

Ves and Ketis both holed up in his office at the Mech Research Sub-Department.

While Ketis grew bored to tears, Ves tried to figure out where a number of security bots had gone from the mech research group.

"Damnit!" He softly cursed. "Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise took my security bots!"

Most of the Vandals and Swordmaidens assigned to his sub-department also followed the two officers out. Ves knew that they were probably plotting to assault one of the vaults, but he had no clue how they planned to breach them. Surely they wouldn't resort to brute force?

"Just the interior defenses of the Starlight Megalodon can rip them to shreds!"

Ketis noticed his disparagement of the others. "I hear they got a plan for that. They told me that you shouldn't worry about them. It's also better to keep your distance to them in case their plan fails. At least one of us should try and make it out of this creepy ship."

A sinking feeling began to overtake Ves despite his recent gene optimization treatments. Physically, he never felt better. Mentally, he felt like falling apart due to all the worries piled upon his shoulders.

"Did they redeem the emergency personal teleporters from the armory?"

"They did, actually, but they're the only two who have them. They don't want to rely on them if they can because if they teleport out, what about the rest? We can't abandon our own." Ketis shook her head. "You're not the only one who's been trading favors with the virtual officers. Our mech officers cut deals with some AIs, though I don't know the details."

"How? As far as I know, they don't have any merits to trade favors."

"They didn't tell me anything except they made great sacrifices."

That sounded reassuring. Not.

Ves disliked the lack of trust extended to him, but perhaps it was for the best they kept their paths separate. He could hardly assist their plan and neither would they be able to provide any help to him. Running two separate plans concurrently was simply good risk management in that regard.

"One of us might fail, but that still leaves a chance for the other to succeed and make it back to the fleet."

"A lot of our comrades died for this, Ves. It would be a shame for us to return with empty hands. Why don't you help them out?" Ketis asked with great concern.

"I did, but they refused, remember?"

"That's because you're hanging out with that complete stranger in her spy get-up. What's the deal with that woman anyway? Is she another Brighter like you?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "I don't know who she really is or who she works for, but it's thanks to her help we all got aboard this ship in the first place."

"From what I see, she's got you wrapped around her fingers."

The frustrating thing was that Ves owed Miss Calabast. Aside from the help she provided, she also grasped his biggest secret. With this enormous leverage in her hands, she could jerk him around in every direction she wanted without any way for him to object.

Yet Ves also couldn't return empty-handed. Helping out Calabast in her own mission meant he wasn't available to help out the Flagrant Swordmaidens. If the latter met with a tragic outcome, Ves had no choice but to activate his EPT and make his way out with nothing to show for everyone's effort.

He'd be branded a coward even if he brought back the logs and precious intelligence of what occurred on the surface.

Ves did not want such accusations to mar his record.

If he wanted to advance his career and business opportunities in the Bright Republic after the war, he needed to make an earnest effort in helping

Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise obtain the life-prolonging treatment serum or whatever they aimed to retrieve from the vaults.

At this point, a red light washed over the compartment. Alarms rang everywhere across the entire structure of the Starlight Megalodon!

[ALERT! LOCKDOWN IN PROGRESS! ALL VIRTUAL INDIVIDUALS AND HUMANS SHOULD HALT THEIR DUTIES AND STAY WHERE THEY ARE! ALL VIOLATORS WILL BE SHOT OR ERASED FROM THE DATA BANKS BY THE INTERNAL SECURITY DIVISION!]

Ves and Ketis immediately stood up and prepared for battle. They've been through enough conflicts to prepare for the worst. They both drew their standard-issue CFA laser pistol and warmed them up to fire. Their combat armor also folded out their helmets to cover their heads and to filter out the air.

"Let me check what's going on." Ves said firmly as he turned his attention back to his terminal in order to call up a status update. "Damn! I'm locked out of most of the internal network! So far, the interior defenses of the Mech Research Sub-Division remain under my control."

The same did not necessarily apply to other parts of the battleship! Ves felt faint vibrations shaking through the deck beneath his feet as distant explosions rumbled elsewhere.

The fighting had already erupted!

"Follow me! Let's go to Commander Cosit's office!"

The pair of mech designers left the Mech Research Sub-Division and sought out Cosit whose physical avatar appeared frantic and worried.



[Mr. Longhorn! Thank the stars you are still inside the Research Department! The entire ship has turned into a battlefield! The admiral's faction and the captain's faction are both fighting for supremacy!]

"Will the ship be torn apart by all the fighting!?"

[Thankfully, no! The AIs of both factions are fighting for control over the weapon systems and the interior defenses. They're evenly matched for now so most of the weapon turrets and other countermeasures are paralyzed. However, this won't last forever! While the virtual officers won't be able to gain an edge over each other, it's a different story for you humans! All of us are depending on you humans to fulfill our purpose and free our shackles, so the conflict between you humans will depend on which faction will get the upper hand!]

Damn! The Vesians heavily outnumbered the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The Starlight Megalodon also allowed each new recruit to draw a full set of standard-issue CFA battle gear, so numbers and skill became the deciding factors.

"Who sided with who?!"

[We're keeping our noses out of the fight, obviously! The Research Department wants no part of this battle! I hear the Marine Detachment and the Mech Department from the admiral's faction sided with the humans referred to as the Vesians, Hostland Warriors or Meandering Monkeys. As for the other humans referred to as the Vandals and the Swordmaidens or simply the pirates, they all threw in their lot with the captain's faction and launched a sneak attack!]

"What?! The Vandals and Swordmaidens sided with the captain's faction?!"

Ves did not expect Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise to cook up something so drastic. Yet strategically, it quickly made more sense. The Vesians beefing up the Mech Department heavily favored the admiral's faction.

As for the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they occupied an awkward position within the ship if they didn't gain the support of some of the AIs. Since the admiral faction already became the firmest allies of the Vesians, why not join the opposite faction?

The captain's faction desperately desired humans to advance their interests. The Flagrant Swordmaidens urgently needed strong backing. The two made for natural allies and each of them could provide what the other wanted.

"What a masterstroke!" He uttered in admiration for their strategic and political acumen. "Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise probably negotiated with the captain's faction for a lengthy period of time while keeping their deal a secret even to us! With the powerful Internal Security Division on their side, they'll have an advantage when it comes to fighting within the guts of the Starlight Megalodon!"

[The Internal Security Division is strong, yes, but the other departments are no slouches. The Marine Detachment won't let them get their way!]

"Do you know where the fighting is most active, commander?"

[From what little sources I have access to, you humans are all fighting near the biggest vault. There's word that both sides brought heavy equipment in an attempt to breach the vault doors!]

"Is it even possible to breach the vault doors with such equipment?" Ves frowned.

[This is the Starlight Megalodon! We are still the pride of the CFA! The captain's faction and the admiral's faction have long plotted to breach the vaults for their own reasons. There are rumors that there's an override code

stored in a lockbox inside a vault that can strip away virtually every restriction that prevents us from restoring the battleship to her full glory!]

The web became more tangled by the minute the more he heard Virtual Commander Cosit explain the sordid competition between the two factions.

The virtual officers from both sides kept each other in check for millenia without any overt conflict. Yet the reintroduction of humans rapidly heated up the cold war until there was no turning back!

After twenty minutes of nervous waiting, Miss Calabast finally arrived at the Research Department.

This time, she came armed for war and didn't come alone. A gaggle of security bots and subordinates armed to the teeth with standard-issue CFA exoskeleton armor marched in like they belonged.

The Research Department's interior defenses attempted to halt their war party from advancing inside, but a few hacks from Calabast and some heavy weapon discharges from the exoskeleton soldiers quickly made short work of that!

[Commander Summer, stop right this instant!] Virtual Commander Cosit physical projection materialized in front Calabast. [This is the Research Department! I've told you goons from the old admiral's faction that I won't allow for any encroachment into my territory!]

Calabast grinned. "You're wrong about two things. First, I haven't sided with the admiral's faction. I work for myself. Second, this isn't your territory anymore, because you won't exist for much longer."

[What is that supposed to mean? Is that a threat?!]

"Farewell."

After Calabast activated a command from her advanced CFA hacking comm, Cosit's physical projection started to break apart!

The virtual commander looked at her disintegrating form with panic! [Y-Y- You're erasing my personality matrix! You're locking out my root AI from access to the ship! How did you manage to do such a thing?!]

"An AI that stands in my way such as you should be stuffed back into the box where you belong!"

Miss Calabast paid no more attention to Cosit and walked towards her shocked audience.

"Ves. It's time to break into the labs of Project Icarus." She stated with an excited grin. "The current infighting between the factions has paralyzed most of the ship's defenses. The fighting between your friends and the Vesians has given us a heaven-sent opportunity to force our way through the Exotic Research Sub-Department with most of their heavy defenses offline!"

"You just killed my boss." Ves said dumbly.

"Pah! That silly AI would have never agreed to let us enter the most restricted section of the entire ship! Besides, I didn't kill her, I merely isolated her inside its data banks. She'll be fine."

"Did you know in advance what the Vandals and Swordmaidens intended to do?"

"Hmph. I did. What's it to you?" She smirked. "Are you feeling sorry you're being left out the party? Don't be. Adding the two of you to the mix will only put a couple of extra bodies on their side. You won't be able to make a difference there."

"But our mission depends upon their success!"

"Look, Ves, the best I can do is to keep the Intelligence Department from siding with their own faction. We haven't lent any processing power to their efforts in trying to take control over the interior defenses. In fact, I can even take a step ahead do you a favor. If I give the command, I can instantly swing my department over to the captain's faction which has sided with your friends."

Ves knew enough about Calabast that she never engaged in charity. "What do you want in exchange for your support?"

"Nothing that I've already asked of you. I want you to help me get through the Exotic Research Sub-Department and facilitate my retrieval of Project Icarus' core research data."

He closed his eyes and sighed to himself. "Very well. I'll do my utmost to help you succeed in your mission."

"Great! I knew you'd make the right decision. By the way, you also owe me that secure data chip. Give it back now."

#### **Chapter 929 Cyan Glow**

The interior of the Starlight Megalodon became baptized in war and paralysis. Behind the scenes, the captain's faction and the admiral's faction waged a frigid war on the ship's internal network and all of her automated systems.

Meanwhile, in realspace, Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians fought over the vault which they believed stored a batch of high-grade life prolonging serum and other valuables.

These two interconnected battles threw the entire ship into disarray and prevented her from engaging her most potent defenses to annihilate the humans or the AIs that took up arms.

The chaos wracking the ship lessened almost every human and AI's attention away from the neutral Research Department. The evenly-sided stalemate also ensured that the conflict wouldn't be resolved within a short amount of time.

These serendipitous circumstances provided the perfect backdrop for Miss Calabast! So much so that Ves couldn't help but eye with considerable suspicion. He strongly believed that she definitely had a hand in enabling this confrontation to occur. She might have pushed both sides towards a conflict just so she could manufacture an opportunity to break into Project Icarus!

"What are you looking at?" Miss Calabast noticed him staring daggers at her. "Do you have any complaints? You shouldn't think that much. You just continue to do what you are good at while I do what I'm good at. Don't forget that I have a stake in you as well now."

He sure knew it considering he worried about what she had over him every waking moment.

"Let's just get this over with so I can either lend a hand to my comrades or make my way out." He grumbled. "Why do you need my assistance so much anyway? You can hack anything from what it looks like."

Calabast shook her head. "I only managed to pack up Virtual Commander Cosit because she's not a research AI. You only saw me input some commands that wiped out her personality matrix, but I spent days to search for exploits and find a way to remove her from the picture. Her removal is necessary because it leaves you as the highest-ranking officer in the Research Department. Check your authorizations. While you haven't inherited the position of department head, Cosit's absence caused the ship to transfer many of her powers over to you. We'll need that to unlock most of the restrictions barring our way."

They tested out her assumption very quickly.

Ves and Ketis accompanied Miss Calabast and her war party into Cosit's office. It turned out the entrance to the Exotic Research Sub-Division lay right beneath Virtual Commander Cosit's desk!

"Go work your magic, Ves."

Surprisingly enough, when Ves inputted a special opening command, the entrance responded.

They watched the desk hover into the air before a hidden mechanism disengaged the locks and slid back the deck plating. A hole extended right into the darkness underneath.

"Go and hover down. Be careful that you don't fall!"

Miss Calabast, Ves, Ketis, the heavily armed exoskeleton soldiers and the security bots all activated their antigrav modules and floated down into the dark.

No lightning lit up the sheer tunnel leading downwards, so everyone activated their suit lighting and activated an augmented vision mode on their helmet visors.

A minute later, everyone carefully touched down on the deck underneath. They subsequently passed through a heavily guarded but ominously silent security checkpoint.

Ves understood that technically Ves shouldn't have received so many authorizations after Cosit's removal. Certainly, he shouldn't have obtained the security clearances and permissions to enter the Exotic Research Sub-Department. Yet Calabast manipulated the automatic succession process in such a way that turned over the bulk of the virtual commander's responsibilities on his lap.

Therefore, they didn't encounter any hindrance at the first checkpoint. Yet there were several more in their path before they could reach the inner core of this secretive section.

"Careful, you two." Calabast warned as the two had started to let down their guard in the dark environment. "We easily managed to bypass the first security checkpoint because it's not as strict and stringent in preventing entry. The next checkpoints will be rather troublesome because while the gates and fixed defenses will recognize your authorization codes, the security bots and virtual officers residing inside are different."

"Different in what way?" Ketis asked.

"For security and redundancy reasons, the bots and virtual officers all operate on an entirely enclosed network within the Exotic Research Sub-Division. There is no way I can access the network from the outside, and let me inform you that I have tried many times."

"So what does that mean?"

"We'll have to fight our way through the bots. These aren't the standard bots like the ones that watch my back right now. The bots inside are of a completely different make and model. They're extremely formidable and armed with extremely lethal weapons, though the good news is that there aren't a lot of them. The Exotic Research Sub-Division mainly relied on elite human guards to guard their top secret projects."

Even if the CFA extended a lot of power to AIs and bots, they always relied on humans to take up primary responsibility. As they should.

When they walked across the eerily empty corridors, they finally encountered the next checkpoint.

As Ves transmitted the authorization codes to the checkpoint, most of the turrets and other defenses stood down.



However, the virtual guards and security bots immediately grew hostile.

[Wait a minute! You're not Virtual Commander Cosit! You don't belong here!]

Miss Calabast didn't bother with any verbal sparring. She held out a plasma rifle and instantly pulled the trigger. "Open fire!"

The war party outnumbered the still-functional defenders of the security checkpoint. Yet their armament was extremely destructive!

One slicer bot teleported right in the middle of them and began to whirl around with their special blades. Within half a second, the bot managed to slice several unprepared exoskeleton soldiers into half despite their thick armor plating!

A handful of other bots fired out destructive rays that molecularly disintegrated the security bots that Calabast brought along. Everyone else including Ves and Ketis huddled behind their bulk as cover, but the bots dwindled by the second!

BANG!

Nonetheless, the intruding war party hadn't completely come unprepared. The exoskeleton soldiers blasted the slicer bot into a dented wreck with their heavy kinetic cannons. Small-scale artillery turrets mounted on their shoulders and back lobbed explosive shells at the ranged defender bots. The heat and concussive shockwave from the explosions threw them the defender bots off-kilter, interrupting their disintegration rays and other highly potent weapons fire!

"Finish them off!"

The war party's railguns, explosive shells, plasma weapons and other assorted CFA weaponry finally took down the bots standing guard.

As for the virtual guards? They were just projections who fizzled out when Calabast activated a strong anti-projection field from her augmented CFA infiltrator suit.

"Come on. There are several more checkpoints to go."

Over the next half hour, they fought hard against five or six security bots standing guard at each security checkpoint. Each time, the war party won a hard victory, though they managed to bleed less men and bots as they learned how to cope with the elite security bots.

The absence of elite human guards reduced the strength of the defenses enormously. The deactivation of the interior defense system further reduced the total defensive strength to a fraction of its former glory.

Even so, by the time the war party made it all the way to the deepest and most mysterious reaches of the Exotic Research Sub-Division, Calabast lost most of her subordinates and all of her security bots!

If not for her excellent preparation and planning as well as the modern ECM field generators she deployed to spoil the targeting systems and interfere with the functioning of the defending bots, they would have been eliminated instantly!

The difficult excursion opened his eyes to Calabast's ruthless determination. She knew just enough to make the right preparations that tilted the battles sufficiently in her favor. Yet even after accumulating so many advantages, she still needed to sacrifice most of her fellow operatives to make it this far.

To Calabast, the lives of those operatives probably meant nothing to her! She wouldn't hesitate to use up the lives of anyone deemed expendable in her judgment!

Of course, an even scarier observation was that none of her subordinates complained or showed any hesitation. They moved with confidence and determination as if they would gladly sacrifice their lives to the cause!

"We're close." Miss Calabast whispered as they approached a heavily-reinforced set of blast doors. "Go ahead and use your authorizations."

The blast doors looked extremely thick and formidable. Ves couldn't even tell what kind of high-grade exotics had been blended into forming the blast doors and the bulkheads wrapped around the compartment housing Project Icarus.

Such an extravagant use of materials ordinary prevented entry into the most sensitive parts of the ship such as the bridge, the CIC or the command center! Perhaps only the ship's vaults could equal this kind of protection!

When Ves walked into range and transmitted the codes, the blast doors wouldn't open just like that. The automated systems managing the blast doors forced Ves to undergo an extremely stringent identity check. Only after the systems confirmed that 'Lieutenant Commander Adeseus Longhorn, provisional head of the Research Department' sent the authorization codes did it finally unlock the blast doors.

The thick slabs of some of the strongest alloys known to the CFA several hundred years ago began to retract.

The lack of use and millenia of the neglect caused them to move far slower than they ought to. Many parts squealed and groaned or shuddered as lack of oiling and maintenance really caused everyone's apprehension to rise.

A soft, cyan glow emerged from beyond the slowly parting blast doors. An enormous compartment the size of one of the Starlight Megalodon's smaller hangar bays stretched out before their eyes.

As Calabast boldly stepped forward, the rest followed suit. They entered a large but haphazardly filled chamber. Besides the main path that stretched

straight forward, everywhere was occupied with various advanced machinery and lab equipment. Some of them seemed to be related to the study and measurement of extremely elusive exotic energy, while others dealt with the study of high-grade exotic materials.

Interspersed between these machines were other, more gruesome looking machines that Ves instantly equated to some of the medical equipment in the medical bay or Exobiology Department.

One side of the chamber had even been turned into a massive cultivation area for what Ves presumed to be human clones!

Inside the transparent cylindrical tanks, hundreds of bodies of human clones floated silently in the murky-looking liquid solution. The main reason why Ves recognized them as clones was because they possessed extremely similar physical appearances.

Obviously, the bodies weren't in good shape. While the tanks remained active and tried to keep the bodies alive, an unimaginably long time had passed. Not even clones could last that long.

If not for the vacsuits they all wore to preserve their modesty, the sight of their long-dead and wrinkled bodies would have disgusted Ves to the point of vomiting up the contents of the vintage nutrient pack he ate some time ago.

As a nutrient pack connoisseur, Ves couldn't stand such a waste!

"These clones..."

"Yes?" Calabast raised her eyebrow at him as they slowly traversed the open path.

"Do you reckon the FTL-capable shuttles released by the Starlight Megalodon were crewed by clones cultivated from this research lab?" He asked.

"I looked into that. While there are cloning bays and other areas capable of growing human clones aboard the ship, none of them have ever showed signs of activity in recent times. This is the only compartment which I haven't been able to call up the data regarding their cloning activities, but by the process of elimination it's extremely likely this lab is responsible."

"If that is so, doesn't that mean there is some controlling intelligence at work here who sent out the lures into the frontier?"

The top secret research lab became less inviting by the minute. The shadows in the corner of his vision seemed to jump out at him, causing him to be frightened out of his wits.

He had a feeling they weren't alone in here!

#### **Chapter 930 Ominous Mainframe**

"Do you know what this lab is hiding?" Ves whispered to Calabast with a shaky voice.

"No, and don't act like there's are monsters hiding in the shadows. This is a research lab, not a haunted horror house!"

They all amplified the lights radiating from their suits to be sure. The increased luminosity calmed his nerves a little.

As they slowly cut through the enormous chamber with their weapons at the bear, no monsters, guards or bots jumped out to waylay their advance. To all intents and purposes, the lab appeared to be completely abandoned.

The only other eerie part about the lab was that an enormous pillar-like structure stood at the end of their path. The pillar was the size of a light mech, and seemed fairly narrow at the deck but tapered wider at the ceiling.

As the war party came close enough, they beheld the enormous funnel-like structure with confused and frightened expressions. Even Calabast seemed a little uncertain of what she encountered.

Still, she didn't remain bewildered for long. "This should be Project Icarus' mainframe. Its built some time after the crash once the old captain approved this venture. Don't ask me why it's so big or shaped in this way. I've obtained sporadic clues that imply that the processing core of this mainframe is unimaginably powerful but also very experimental. The project couldn't have made such good project without this unusual processing core."

"Where did they get this super-duper processing core?"

"It's likely the product of another research project. That, or the Starlight Megalodon was transporting it to another CFA battleship or space station perhaps. Whatever the reason, since Megalodon crashed on this planet, the processing core would never find its way to its intended destination, so the survivors might as well appropriate it for their own use."

This mainframe looked vastly more than a simple computer that could perform calculations and simulate various models to exacting detail. It looked like some kind of metallized remnant of a monstrous tree!

With pipes, cabling and other connections stretching out from the ceiling and into the macabre mainframe, it seemed as if this construction attempted to contain an incredibly dangerous beast.

Even Ketis appeared flighty as she held her laser pistol in a crushing grip.

Still, why should he let the mainframe's unorthodox appearance frighten him? As they slowly drew closer and closer to the control panels built at the bottom of the massive structure, the monstrosity didn't react.

Ves slowly calmed his nerves as they reached the main terminal and control panel of the mainframe.

Miss Calabast studied the unusual layout of the active control. "This mainframe is constantly active."

"How? There's no noise, heat or any signals emanating from this giant thing!" Ves observed. "For something so powerful and something that requires this enormous structure built around it, I would have expected more activity!"

"It's supposedly some kind of revolutionary processing core made out of something extremely rare. Don't ask me what it is, I don't have the details. All you should know is that your authorizations should allow you to pull out the research data that I need from Project Icarus."

Under Calabast's urging, Ves hesitantly stepped up to the control panel and began the process of logging into the mainframe. He underwent another elaborate identity check before the mainframe's interface changed.

"It says here that my authorization is rejected because some kind of lockdown mode has been initiated. The entire mainframe has slammed shut."

"What? That doesn't fall under my predictions. Let me see."

Calabast stepped forward until she stood next to him and read the various warning messages. Her brows furrowed as she realized that Ves wouldn't be able to do what he asked without lifting the lockdown.

"Someone, likely an old researcher or such, engaged a manual hardware lockdown. This restricted the mainframe and shut the main processor core down. If we want to lift the restrictions on the mainframe, we have to find the hardware lock and open it up."

Ves, Ketis and Calabast began to circle around the narrow base of the pillar to find the hardware lock while the remaining escorts stood guard. When they didn't spot any at ground level, they activated the antigrav modules integrated into their suits and hovered higher and higher until Ves encountered a semi-hidden entryway.

"Over here! I think this armored hatch here leads into the core of the mainframe!"

The three converged at the hatch. When Ves tried to unlock the hatch with his credentials, the hatch refused to open up. "Seems like you need a special code to get inside. Even the head of the Research Department can't get inside the mainframe's guts."

"We don't need to go through all that trouble. The Starlight Megalodon fabricated the mainframe and this armored hatch on-site after the crash. It's not as nearly as strong as the blast doors we've encountered earlier, as they can only be produced at very special facilities."

Miss Calabast approached the hatch and whipped up a gadget from one of her pouches. She affixed it to the middle of the hatch which stuck in place. After she quickly stepped back, the device emitted a bright flash and a wash of heat!

Ves all of the activity instantly went by, the hatch no longer formed a hindrance. The device somehow burned a huge hole through its alloy layers!

"Let's step inside." She said.

They entered a narrow hollow inside the structure. All kinds of pipes and internal structures that reminded Ves a bit of the internal architecture of a mech surrounded them. In the center of the hollow lay some kind of shielded ball structure. It was as if someone built an enormous protective cover on top of which must be this amazingly powerful processing core.

No control panels or terminals could be found anywhere, but they all spotted various levers and mechanical mechanisms.

That didn't worry Ves all that much. What actually drew his concerns was the huge pile of CFA-branded explosives planted around the entire chamber and on top of the protective cover!

"Whoever set this up rigged the entire place to blow!" Ves immediately observed with mild alarm. "The explosives doesn't appear to be part of the



original design of the mainframe either. All of this looks like a hasty, last-minute addition!"

Miss Calabast agreed. "Someone went through a lot of effort to prevent the wrong person from lifting the mainframe's lockdown."

"How do we avoid tripping them? Can you defuse them and toss them out?"

Calabast studied the explosives carefully. "They're outdated, but they're set up in a way that makes it difficult for me to defuse them without triggering a catastrophic cascade."

"Do you feel that?" Ves asked as he felt something unusual as he walked closer to the shielded processor core. A hint of an enormous pressure pressed against his body and mind. It was as if he was standing next to a sun! Even his sixth sense flickered in discomfort. "I feel very weird here. There's something dangerous hidden underneath this cover."

"The few records I've obtained about the processor core state it is extremely dangerous, though they don't specify why. It's not a surprise to feel strange. Just bear with it, Ves."

As Calabast tried to study the thorny explosives in order to figure out a way to defuse them, Ves studied the series of levers. He managed to achieve a breakthrough when he activated his Squalon's integrated scanners and tried to gain a better picture of what was buried underneath.

The levers were connected to a dizzying array of interconnected mechanisms. Just looking at the scans made his head hurt.

Yet to a mech designer like Ves, the maze of mechanisms didn't completely seem unfamiliar. "This is a puzzle."

"What?"

"It's a small form of entertainment among mech designer and engineer circles." Ves answered with a moderate amount of certainty. "If my guess is correct, the only way to lift the mainframe's lockdown is to pull the correct sequence of levers at specific intervals. There's a bit of leeway in terms of timing, but once you pull the wrong lever or move a bit too slowly, I bet the explosives will surely set off."

Calabast nodded in understanding. "Fine. Let's make a complete scan and run a model through it to simulate the solution."

"It won't work." Ves shook his head.

"Why not? The levers are only connected to some mechanical gizmo's right?"

"If these mechanisms can be modeled and run through simulations, they wouldn't have become so interesting. The puzzle is designed to challenge a person's ability to solve spontaneous technical puzzles on the fly. There are randomizing elements built into some of the mechanisms that can't be accurately simulated even with the processing power of an entire planet backing the simulations."

"Then how are you supposed to solve this puzzle?"

"Through using human imagination and intuition."

"That doesn't sound very engineer-like."

Ves smirked. "We need some way to exercise our minds without opening up the temptation of using external aids as cheats. To be honest, failure is expected, so it's not unusual to be proud of failing nine times out of ten. Such a success rate in solving these kinds of puzzles is a rather admirable feat!"

He quickly stopped boasting as the situation dawned upon them all. Failing a practice puzzle didn't incur any serious consequences. At most, the puzzle

taker's ego would be bruised a bit. Yet here, this same puzzle would definitely blow the heart of the mainframe into melted pieces!

"Are you confident in solving this puzzle?" Calabast asked.

"Hmm.." Ves thought for a bit. "I'm confident in my capabilities. There are many random factors involved that require intuition and guesswork to come to the right answers. While I don't mean to brag, I think I'm quite good on those fronts."

Calabast obviously didn't look pleased with his answer. "That sounds like gambling. Who would ever implement such a convoluted security measure?"

"Very likely someone who didn't want spooks and spies like you stealing the secrets stored within this mainframe." Ves teasingly replied with a little cheek.

"It is expressly designed to counter people like you who wants to use their own computers to solve this problem. Not even the most advanced AIs can solve this puzzle reliably. Only someone at the level of a Senior Mech Designer can probably solve this puzzle with assurance."

This left them at a bit of a crossroads. While war was raging throughout the rest of the Starlight Megalodon, Miss Calabast and Ves tried to figure out what to do next.

"Can you solve this puzzle by remote?" She finally asked.

"I can probably jury-rig a control system within fifteen minutes if I cannibalize some of the parts from the machines that are all around us, yes." Ves stated confidently. Such a task wouldn't be very challenging to him. "At the very least, if I botch the attempt, I wouldn't blow myself up."

"That still leaves us with nothing. That's completely unacceptable."

Ves sighed in exasperation. "I already handed you the data to the two other research projects. Aren't you satisfied with your current haul? This Project

Icarus seems way more taboo than others. Let's just leave this place and let the CFA come and wrap it all up. It's originally theirs anyway."

"I think so as well." Ketis chirped up in his support. "This entire research lab isn't normal. What were the researchers doing with all the clones anyway? If you ignore the wrinkles and the other stuff that's degraded over the years, they kind of look like the blessed people, don't you think?"

That was a very unpleasant association, yet it was one which Ves actually agreed with now that he thought about it. Their slim builds, their fair skins, their genetically optimized body and facial features all pointed out that they'd been cultivated to meet very high standards.

It was also as creepy as hell.

Nonetheless, Miss Calabast looked undeterred. "We've come so far. I've lost the majority of my subordinates in our attempt to make it this far. I will not turn back without anything to show for my efforts!"

Ves disagreed, but he wasn't the one in charge. He faintly suspected that more traps might be hiding out of sight and scanner range. This absolutely did not seem like a simple security arrangement.