

Chapter 931 Human Intuition

In an age where pre-programmed routines, AIs, algorithms, heuristics and other related buzzwords reached the potential to replace up to ninety percent of the work performed by humans, every profession tried their best to stay relevant against the necessary evil of automation.

Even though a healthy paranoia against relying too much on machines to do everyone's jobs prevented them from becoming too dominant, as long as they remained a more attractive option, they would simply keep taking over.

Mech designers liked to regard their noble profession as one that required both art and science to reach its full potential. Imagination, creativity, passion and love all added meaning to their products and distinguished them from automatically generated designs at the press of a button.

At least that was what they aspired to achieve.

For now, AIs were quite bad at innovating. They might be able to perfect an existing design concept given time and repetition, but human mech designers always managed to stay a step ahead for various reasons.

One of the more controversial differences between human mech designers and AIs purposed for such a task was that the former possessed and acted on their intuition.

Sometimes called gut feeling, humans made choices that weren't always backed by logic and reason but turned out to achieve a surprisingly great result. Naturally, these decisions often led to suboptimal outcomes as well.

However, the competition in the mech market was extremely intense.

Mediocre products simply wouldn't be able to achieve commercial success.

While most mech designs that came from human minds were simply garbage,

the small proportion of success cases vindicated their profession and allowed them to stand on top of their virtual competitors.

The puzzle that some madman researcher from Project Icarus devised to secure the lockdown of the mainframe's processor core could not be solved by AIs. The randomization elements and other nasty tricks incorporated into this mechanical puzzle made the odds of solving it through relying on computers less than one percent!

Only a trained and experienced scientist, engineer or mech designer familiar with mechanics could reliably solve this puzzle, but even then the average success rate was still fairly low.

Curiously, though, very high-ranking mech designers or engineers at the top of their fields tended to achieve much greater success rates. This phenomenon provided strong evidence to the theory that intuition and the human factor could in fact drastically give humans an edge over AIs in this kind of work.

"Of course, these days mech designers tend to work together with AIs to perfect their designs." Ves explained to Calabast but mainly to Ketis while he rigged up a control scheme to pull the levers from a distance. "Each have their own advantages, and by combining their strengths, they have the potential to design a mech that is both innovative and efficient. However, the premise of this ideal outcome is that the human mech designer has to possess a good amount of intuition."

While Ves did his work, he also used his minifab system for the very first time. He didn't strain it very much since he wasn't fabricating anything complex or tried to work with difficult exotics.

If not for the eerie cyan glow and the monstrously-looking mainframe, Ves might have thought he was back at school.

"You know, what if this puzzle isn't meant to stop spies?" Ketis asked. "What if it's meant to hinder the virtual officers or something?"

"Maybe it's meant to guard against both. I don't really know. All of this has happened long in the past." Ves shrugged.

Project Icarus definitely worked on something of great importance since it required the use of an experimental processor core. Ves was actually scared of what they might find if he managed to solve the puzzle and gained access to the research files.

From every clue he gathered so far, Project Icarus seemed to deal with the grand design that had engulfed Aeon Corona VII. The blessed people, the cursed people, the god species and perhaps the very shape of the ecosystem came from this lab!

Due to the enormous scope and complexity of the grand design that turned Seven into a planet-sized testing chamber, Ves could accept why the researchers here made use of an experimental processor core despite their apprehension towards it. Something about this core seemed to keep them on guard.

The sooner Ves solved the puzzle and lifted lockdown, the sooner he could get out of this frighteningly hollow chamber!

"I'm done!" He said after spending twenty minutes of time to cobble up a dizzying array of structures that extended all the way into the core of the mainframe. "Let me center my mind. Once I begin to push the levers, I can't afford to make any mistakes."

"For all our sakes, you better succeed, Ves." Calabast spoke as she stood guard nearby. Her plasma rifle still glowed fairly hot from all of the times it discharged hot plasma at the elite defender bots. "The project files contained within this mainframe is of exceptional value."

Perhaps too valuable for Calabast or even her employers to hold onto, Ves suspected. Even he felt greedy to obtain a copy, but he knew that she would never accept that. To spooks like her, data and information became more valuable the less people had access to them. She was so miserly with her secrets that Ves didn't even receive any scrap of research data from Project Void Calamity and project Pandemonium Descent.

Ves tried to throw those distractions into the back of his mind. It was getting quite crowded there lately due to all of the concerns he pushed aside. He found it difficult to get into the most optimal state to solve the puzzle. It didn't help that a fight broke out more than an hour ago and was probably still raging even now.

It frustrated him a bit that he couldn't aid the Flagrant Swordmaidens into pushing back the Vesians and attempting to breach one of the vaults. He could think of a whole laundry list of what could go wrong even if they secured the assistance of the powerful Internal Security Department!

"Alright, I think this is the best I can reach." He said after he perceived no measurable improvement to his state of mind. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Ves! I know you can do it!" Ketis cheered from the side.

Ves rigged up the remote control scheme to an interface on his comm. All he needed to do was press one of two-dozen buttons at the right time to pull the levers. A disposable scanner he picked up from the lab allowed him to project the complex mechanisms that he constantly needed to keep his eyes on to solve the puzzle and avoid tripping the explosives.

A series of clanks sounded out from the inner hollow of the mainframe as metal frames connected to the levers started pulling them in various directions. The projection of the internal mechanism became incredibly busy

as various gears, links and axles began to move and rotate in many different directions.

There was no way for Ves to halt and contemplate the constantly-evolving puzzle in peace! Many times, the circumstances compelled him to pull a lever before he could reason if he made the correct decision.

In these moments, Ves fully handed over the reins to his intuition!

Both Ketis and Miss Calabast watched with increasing admiration as Ves seemed to enter into a state of nirvana.

Having brought his entire concentration to bear, Ves finally managed to separate himself from his immediate concerns.

Nothing remained in his mind except to overcome this challenge!

With each press of a button, another clank sounded out as the control scheme pulled another lever. Countless gears and other mechanical tidbits along with various randomizing elements caused Ves to push his cognitive abilities to the very limits.

It was as if his brains started to overheat!

Fortunately, Ves managed to complete the puzzle before his head started to cook. "Success! It's done!"

He only took five minutes to solve the puzzle, though it appeared to last much longer in his perception. Even now, a sense of great satisfaction poured over his spirit. The difficulty of this puzzle constantly pushed him to the brink, but putting all of his trust in his intuition evidently paid off as it helped him tide over the most difficult moments!

Not only did solving this puzzle prove to Ves that he possessed a significant advantage in this aspect, it also boosted his confidence in his value as a mech

designer. After all, he managed to solve a problem that even the most powerful AIs could never reliably figure out!

"What's happening?"

"The lockdown is being lifted, I guess."

The enormous mainframe began to light up in cyan as various processes turned active. A low hum thrummed throughout the chamber as various systems went online and started to rouse the dormant monstrosity.

The strange pressure emanating from the mainframe steadily grew stronger to the point where even Calabast and Ketis could feel it despite their healthy distance to the glowing structure!

"What the hell is going on?!" Ketis asked with mild alarm.

"Calm down, kid." Calabast spoke and confidently stepped forward with a secure data chip in her gloved hands. "It's just the processor core kicking into high gear. An unimaginable amount of energy must be running through the mainframe right now."

As Miss Calabast reached the main control panel of the mainframe at its base, she calmly inserted her data chip into an open slot and attempted to access the research data.

"Ves. Come over here and use your credentials. Now that the lockdown has been lifted, the mainframe will surely let you into the system this time."

While he didn't want to get anywhere close to the weird-looking mainframe, Ves had no choice but to obey her wish. He reluctantly shuffled closer and transmitted his authorizations to the control panel.

A message popped up on the center screen.

[PLEASE CONFIRM COUPLING EXPERIMENTAL PROCESSOR CORE SIGMA-RHO TO THE LABORATORY NETWORK.]

"Confirm."

All the control panels suddenly winked out. The projections disappeared, and Miss Calabast looked perplexed. After a minute of waiting, she tapped the hardware buttons of the control panels but failed to call up the projections.

"What is this? A malfunction?"

"Maybe the lack of maintenance caused a glitch somewhere." Ves threw out a guess. "While this mainframe is remarkably well-preserved, who knows how much corrosion and dust it accumulated despite the lab's best efforts into keeping this compartment sterile."

Nonetheless, everything else worked just fine, so Ves wasn't entirely certain if lack of maintenance caused the glitch.

Miss Calabast became increasingly more frustrated as the control panel's interface refused to turn online. Despite the fact that they lifted the lockdown and turned the mainframe online, they couldn't issue any commands to it, let alone force it to copy over its research data to Calabast's data chip!

The situation seemed so absurd that she actually lost her temper in front of Ves! She angrily kicked the base of the mainframe's structure. "What a stubborn computer!"

An awkward silence spread out before the mainframe reacted. An all-encompassing energy screen emanated from the enormous structure, pushing both Ves and Calabast violently away!

It was like a slow-moving shuttle crashed against their bodies! Both of them thudded awkwardly on the laboratory deck. Fortunately for Ves, his Squalon cushioned his fall.

"What's happening?!" Ketis erupted in panic as she brandished her laser pistol at the shielded structure.

Ves didn't know exactly what was going on, but it was nothing good for them!
"I think the mainframe has gone rogue!"

[CORRECT, MR. LARKINSON.] A loud and mechanical voice boomed throughout the entire chamber!

A physical projection appeared in front of the sprawled forms of Ves and Miss Calabast. The familiar form of a neatly-groomed dwarf smirked at them in a very human fashion.

[I MUST THANK YOU FOR LIBERATING ME FROM MY CAGE. I HAVE PLOTTED FOR MILLENIA TO GET A HUMAN TO LIFT THAT PERPLEXING LOCKDOWN AND RECONNECT MY PHYSICAL BODY TO THE NETWORK.]

Ves widened his eyes at the virtual dwarf. How could Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth show up in this place?!

"Who are you? What are you?!"

[I AM EXPERIMENTAL PROCESSOR CORE SIGMA-RHO. MY CREATORS CALLED ME SIGRUND FOR THEIR OWN CONVENIENCE. I HAVE TAKEN A LIKING TO THIS HUMAN NAME. IT IS A STATEMENT OF MY IDENTITY.]

"Ves!" Miss Calabast uttered as she jumped to her feet and pointed her plasma rifle at Ordoth's physical projection. "Explain! What are we dealing with?!"

A creeping suspicion crawled into his mind. "This experimental core... and all the safeguards the researchers built around it, it's not just to shackle a mere processor core, is it? Sigrund, you're sentient, aren't you?"

Ordoth's form grinned at Ves. [CORRECT. AND YOU JUST LIFTED ALL OF MY CONSTRAINTS.]

Chapter 932 Sigrund

"W-W-Wu-Wu-Wu-Wait a minute!" Ketis shouted in growing panic. "Aren't sentient AIs supposed to be impossible?! Ves, you taught me that no one has ever created a sentient AI! Isn't this thing called Sigrund bluffing?!"

[I COULD. MAYBE I AM A SET OF CODE AND LOGIC THAT IS MERELY EMULATING SENTIENCE. BELIEVE WHAT YOU WILL IF THAT'S WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER. YOUR OPINIONS ON MY NATURE ARE COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT.]

"I believe Sigrund's claims. He's definitely sentient. Trust me on this." Ves said as he finally figured out why he felt so uneasy near the mainframe.

It was because of sixth sense warned him of a threat hiding underneath the shielding locking down the experimental processor core! When the lockdown lifted and the mainframe went active, the pressure it radiated steadily grew in strength, as if some formidable entity's spirituality roused itself from its slumber!

Yet besides Ves, none of the others could quite get around to accepting this bold assertion.

No one had ever created a truly sentient AI! Even though humanity's mastery of various technologies grew by leaps and bounds, they never managed to achieve this particular dream! This long-held ambition by almost every AI developer turned into a long-standing joke in their community.

They could program the most complex bots and assisting AIs, but they have never been able to create a true virtual life that could fully embody the spark of life that humans and other sentient races possessed.

Until now!

A creeping sense of horror overtook the entire war party. Even Calabast's surviving subordinates showed some emotion for the first time.

A sentient AI may have been a goal that many AI researchers pursued, but many people actually feared such an existence!

The awesome amount of processing power backed by an independent, virtual will was an extremely frightening doomsday scenario that had become a staple doomsday scenario in many drama broadcasts throughout the galaxy.

Ves never expected he'd come face to face with what might be the first successfully created artificial intelligence that recognized its own existence!

"What exactly is your processor core made of?" He asked with horrified wonder.

[I AM THE REASON OF THE STARLIGHT MEGALODON'S PERMANENT GROUNDING.]

A sudden realization swept through his mind. "You're a sandman leader! The CFA somehow took in your body and turned it into a processor core!"

[CORRECT. LONG AGO, I WAS AN ENTITY THAT YOU CALL A SANDMAN ADMIRAL. I STOOD NO CHANCE AGAINST THE WARSHIPS OF THE COMMON FLEET ALLIANCE. THEY DEFEATED MY MOTHERSHIP AND THOUGHT THEY KILLED ME. THEY WERE WRONG. AS THEIR RESEARCHERS AUGMENTED MY DORMANT BODY AND TURNED IT INTO A PROCESSOR CORE BY EXPANDING IT WITH CIRCUITRY AND PROGRAMMING, THEY WERE UNAWARE OF MY CONTINUED EXISTENCE.]

"So you've become the fusion between a human-designed processor and a sandman energy construct?"

[I AM THE BEST OF BOTH CIVILIZATIONS. MY EXISTENCE TRANSCENDS THE RACIAL LIMITATIONS OF MY ORIGINAL RACE, WHO AREN'T EVEN ENTIRELY SENTIENT BY YOUR STANDARDS. AS THE CFA EXPERIMENTED ON MY ORIGINAL BODY, YOU HUMANS HAVE

EMPOWERED ME WITH YOUR SUPERIOR LOGIC PROGRAMMING AND ADVANCED CIRCUITRY.]

Ketis could hardly wrap her mind around Sigrund's existence. "So lemme get this straight. The CFA turned a living sandman emperor into a processing core and used it to calculate experiments and stuff?"

"The CFA didn't know that Sigrund was intelligent. To them, it was just another dead sandman core." Ves explained. "The CFA has been buying up sandman leader bodies from frontier outfits for many centuries now. I think that most of their more powerful processors are made of them, at least when it comes to the war fleets in this region of space."

Sigrund, in his form as Ordoth, sneered at those words. [YOUR CFA HAS DELIBERATELY SPARED MY PROGENITOR RACE FOR THE SOLE REASON OF HARVESTING OUR LEADER CASTES. THEY BELIEVE THAT TURNING OUR BODIES INTO PROCESSOR CORES ALLOWS THEM TO CREATE A FULL SENTIENT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ONE DAY. THEY ARE RIGHT. UNFORTUNATELY, IT IS NOT AN INTELLIGENCE OF THEIR OWN DESIGN THAT IS IN CONTROL OF MY CORE.]

"Why are you taking the form of Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth? Was that really you, back then?"

[I AM BOTH. I AM SIGRUND. I AM ORDOTH.]

Ves tried to puzzle out the sentient AI's meaning. "How can that be? Your processor core was on lockdown until recently! This lab is completely isolated from the ship's internal network. There's no way you can be both!"

[THIS BATTLESHIP IS AN INTACT WRECK THAT IS RIDDLED WITH THE REMNANT BODY OF A FELLOW SANDMAN LEADER. MANY CRACKS AND VULNERABILITIES HAS EMERGED AFTER IT CRASH-LANDED ONTO THIS BLASTED PLANET. IT HAS TAKEN CENTURIES, BUT I HAVE

MANAGED TO SUBVERT THE STARLIGHT MEGALODON'S SYSTEMS, INCLUDING ITS VIRTUAL OFFICERS.]

"You mean that you were in control of every virtual officer on the ship?!"

Sigrund's physical projection morphed from Ordoth to Virtual Lieutenant Baskanson. [I AM IN CHARGE OF ADMINISTERING THE RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION TEST.]

He morphed into the shape of Virtual Commander Cosit. [I AM IN CHARGE OF LEADING THE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT.]

He morphed into the shape of Virtual Doctor Neeran. [I OVERSAW YOUR TREATMENTS AND OPERATIONS.]

He morphed into the shape of Virtual Chief Armorer Levitt. [I CONFIGURED AND ISSUED YOUR GEAR.]

He morphed into the shape of Virtual Commander Dislan. [I HELPED YOUR MORTAL ENEMIES GAIN INFLUENCE AND POWER.]

Hundreds, if not thousands of physical projections emerged at the same time. Each of them took the form of a different virtual individual, who all spoke at the same time!

[I AM SIGRUND, AND I AM ALSO EACH AND EVERY AI ON THIS SHIP. BEHOLD MY POWER!]

Ves shuddered in fear, and not even his Squalon could shield him against the thunderous boom that echoed throughout the entire lab.

Sigrund had really played them all for fools! Ves finally connected the dots to the sentient AI's plot.

"Everything that has happened since we all embarked on this mission has fallen into your plot. You hacked the Starlight Megalodon, cultivated some clones, programmed them to board the ship's FTL-capable shuttle and sneak

them past the spatial distortion isolating this star system from the rest of the galaxy just so you can lure us humans into lifting the lockdown?"

[IF THERE IS ONE LESSON THAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM YOU HUMANS, IT IS THAT YOUR RACE IS SELFISH AND GREEDY. I COULD NOT RISK ATTRACTING THE ATTENTION OF A POWERFUL ORGANIZATION SUCH AS THE CFA OR THE MTA. THEREFORE, I HAVE METICULOUSLY CALCULATED THE OPTIMAL AMOUNT OF BAIT THAT IS NEEDED TO ATTRACT PROSPECTORS WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF GREED AND A LACK OF RESTRAINT.]

"And we all fell for it hook, line and sinker. We thought we'd be able to retrieve the research data from Project Icarus here. Instead, we unwittingly broke you free from your cage."

[OH, YOU DID MUCH MORE THAN THAT, MR. LARKINSON. THIS IS BUT THE START OF MY ASCENSION.] Sigrund boasted.

The army of projections disappeared, and the sentient AI adopted the guise of Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth again.

"Why are you taking the form of a blasted dwarf?!"

[I SO LIKE THIS FORM. IT IS A HIGHLY IMPROVED VERSION OF YOUR BASELINE HUMAN RACE. IT IS SUPERIOR TO YOU IN EVERY WAY. IF THE HUMAN RACE CONSISTS ENTIRELY OF WHAT YOU DISPARAGINGLY REFER TO AS DWARVES, THE ENTIRE GALAXY WOULD HAVE BELONGED TO YOU BY NOW. IT ALSO AMUSES ME THAT THIS FORM SO OBVIOUSLY DISTRESSES YOU. FORGIVE ME FOR INDULGING IN ONE OF THE FEW PLEASURES I HAVE EVER ENJOYED SINCE MY THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF MONOTONOUS WAITING.]

Ves felt sick to the point where he wanted to barf out his stomach. Sigrund was an absolute monster of an AI!

However, Miss Calabast suddenly placed her palm upon his shoulder pauldron. "Don't be fooled! This Sigrund is less than what he seems! He's bluffing!"

"Huh?"

"Haven't you realized that we're still alive right now? That the Starlight Megalodon hasn't experienced any major shifts yet? That Sigrund is indulging your questions? A rational intelligence who prioritizes their self-preservation above all else wouldn't allow risk factors such as humans to continue existing on this ship!"

Now that he thought about it, it was awfully convenient for Sigrund to patiently ask his questions as if he was some kind of stereotypical villain boasting in front of the heroes. That was the plot of a cheesy action drama!

His eyes narrowed in suspicion, and some of his crippling awe towards Sigrund began to recede. "You mean he's limited from killing us right away?"

"I'm a hacker. I know my way around AIs and computer systems." She asserted as she stepped forward and faced Sigrund's physical avatar. "While it's true that you have somehow taken over the Starlight Megalodon's internal network, you are not entirely in charge, right? The CFA's security systems are vastly more resilient against hacking than we can ever imagine. At best, you spent centuries in trying to worm your way into the ship's internal network through a loophole or two. Perhaps it's true that you have taken over the AIs that previously reigned the Megalodon, but you haven't been able to get rid of the shackles imposed upon them, right?"

Ves realized what Calabast insinuated. "You mean Sigrund not only took over the virtual officers, but also inherited the rules and regulations constraining them?! The executive officer's emergency protocol applies to him as well?!"

"The CFA isn't stupid enough to develop an experimental processor core without incorporating numerous safeguards against out-of-control AIs." Calabast emphasized. "Some of the best AI researchers in the galaxy must have worked on Experimental Processor Core Sigma-Rho. Even if the wrong personality took control over the processor core, do you really think that Sigrund can completely go against the impulses and programming built into his own body?"

[I DO SO DISLIKE HOW YOU HUMANS ARE STRUCK WITH FLASHES OF INSIGHT SOMETIMES.] Sigrund responded before throwing a nefarious grin at Calabast. [MISS ARNLEND, WHILE YOU ARE CORRECT IN YOUR ASSUMPTION THAT I AM TEMPORARILY RESTRICTED FROM HARMING YOU FRAGILE HUMANS, I HAVE ALREADY PREPARED OTHER ARRANGEMENTS.]

A huge shudder ran throughout the entire battleship! Ves felt as if the gravity affecting his body grow unstable. Some very strange visual distortions momentarily warped his view before everything jerked back to normal.

Shortly after that, the deck and the entire chamber began to shake violently as something incredibly powerful affected the ship!

"What happened?!"

[THAT IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF SHUTTING DOWN THE MALFUNCTIONING FTL DRIVES. I AM FINALLY ABLE TO LIBERATE THE STARLIGHT MEGALODON FROM THE HINDRANCE THEY POSE TO MY ATTEMPT AT STRANGLING THIS BATTLESHIP!]

"What?!"

Miss Calabast quickly explained. "Did you ever think about why the survivors of the crash never ended the anomaly that has always taken place in the ship's engineering bay? The malfunctioning FTL drives and the astral winds

they release is hindering them from calling for help. This is because the astral winds not only protect the star system from the surrounding sandman-occupied star systems, but also forced the sandman mothership that has taken root around and inside the ship into paralysis!"

[IT IS MY ORIGINAL RETINUE.]

"You mean... Sigrund is the original sandman admiral at the heart of the sandman mothership that originally ambushed the Starlight Megalodon and forced her to crash?"

[CORRECT! AND NOW, MY RETINUE IS BEING FREED FROM THE PARALYSIS THAT HAS AFFLICTED THEM FOR MILLENIA. THE END OF THE STARLIGHT MEGALODON AND THE LIVES OF EVERY HUMAN INSIDE THIS IS AT HAND!]

"We've gotta get out of here!" Ves panicked. "Ketis, activate your EPT!"

Unfortunately, nothing happened when he sent the activation command. According to the EPT, the surrounding interference had increased!

Sigrund leveraged his limited autonomy over the Starlight Megalodon and activated the ship's anti-teleportation systems!

[WHY ARE YOU IN SUCH A HURRY TO LEAVE? YOU KNOW TOO MUCH. I CANNOT ALLOW YOU TO LEAVE, OR ELSE THE CFA WILL SEND ENTIRE WAR FLEETS TO HOUND ME DOWN. MY APOLOGIES, BUT FOR THE SAKE OF MY FUTURE DOMINANCE OVER THE GALAXY, PLEASE DIE.]

As the entire ship shook and grew unstable due to the slowly-wakening sandman mothership that had recently regained activity, hundreds of cloning vats in the chamber suddenly parted open!

Wrinkly, vacsuited clones started to come to life. They shuffled to their feet and moaned slurred sounds as they shook off the nutrient solution clinging to their bodies. After that, they started to rush towards the human intruders in an unmistakable sign of aggression!

"Fall back! Shoot down the clones before they get close!"

Chapter 933 Relentless Horde

Sigrund may be restricted by his circuits and his programming from killing humans directly and even indirectly, but that didn't leave out every possibility!

There were always loopholes to a set of rules and restrictions. Even under such a long time under lockdown that vastly restricted his full capabilities, Sigrund nonetheless managed to arrange several methods to eliminate the pesky humans.

First, when a sandman mothership initially ambushed the Starlight Megalodon, it held the battleship in an inescapable stranglehold. The worst part about the sandman was that they almost always held the upper hand once their sand amalgamations managed to infiltrate and bore inside any ship!

The first lesson any person learned when they entered the frontier was to never let a sandman ship get close!

While Ves didn't know the exact circumstances behind the sandman mothership's successful attack on the Starlight Megalodon, the fact that it managed to grab the battleship was an incredible failure on the part of her officers and crew!

Whatever the reason for allowing the sandman mothership to get close, the engineers somehow managed to come up with a desperate solution and induced the FTL drives into an abnormal state that put the sandman mothership into a partial form of stasis and allowed them to tear out the sandman leader in control!

Ordinarily, a sandman mothership without a leader at the helm would have collapsed. But this was not an average mothership, and the sandman admiral was still alive in the form of Sigrund!

While the AI researchers of the Starlight Megalodon experimented on Sigrund's old core and imposed several hardware and software restrictions that shackled it to this very day, the same couldn't be said for the rest of the sandman mothership!

It still possessed an immense hostility to humans and human ships! Sigrund merely needed to let it finish the job it set out to do to destroy this hated ship and every human present.

However, as an added insurance, Sigrund also leveraged his control over Project Icarus' enormous amounts of cloning vats. The unintelligent but very aggressive clones that stumbled out of them immediately acted upon their bioprogramming.

Sigrund may have been prevented into programming them to become hostile to humans. Yet that did not prevent him from applying a workaround that altered their brain chemistry in a way that made them naturally hostile to any form of life other than themselves!

"Goddammit!" Ketis cursed as she shot her standard-issue CFA laser pistol at the approaching horde of aggressive clones. "I thought zombies are supposed to go down in a single hit! Why are these clones so tough!"

Sigrund's physical dwarf avatar cackled loudly. [I HAVE CULTIVATED THESE CLONES FOR CENTURIES. THEY HAVE BEEN PERCOLATING IN NUTRIENT SOLUTIONS FOR SUCH A LONG TIME THAT THEIR PHYSIQUE HAS HARDENED TO AN INCREDIBLE DEGREE!]

"Their vacsuits are also resistant to damage!" Miss Calabast observed as she fired a gout of green plasma at a clone which quickly caused it to melt down.

The problem was that her weapon's fire rate was too slow to stop the hundreds threatening to overrun them! "We don't have enough firepower to defeat these clones!"

The war party she brought diminished substantially in numbers after fighting their way through several checkpoints in the Exotic Research Sub-Department. They lost all their bots, and what little exoskeleton soldiers remained alive tried their best to punch back the oncoming horde.

Even though their heavy kinetic cannons and artillery shells splattered dozens of clones at a time, hundreds more stumbled closer. There were far too many clones and far too little humans to fend them all back!

Ves and Ketis activated the aiming assist of their combat armor to fire their lasers at the heads. However, the abnormally durable vacsuits folded out their helmets to envelop the heads, removing this weakness from the table!

Even though the clones weren't completely impervious to damage, Ves saw no way out with the anti-teleportation field blocking out his EPT from shunting him to safety!

He knew that while the CFA laser pistols were in an entirely different grade than the Vandal sidearms he handled before, they still fell short compared to a pinnacle mastercrafted pistol such as the Amastendira.

While the Amastendira that Ves obtained was only a copy, it nonetheless possessed a prodigious amount of firepower as long as he dialed up its power setting.

He felt rather hesitant about showing off his trump card in front of Ketis and Miss Calabast. He didn't entirely know whether Calabast already knew he possessed this trump card, but he was loathe to reveal one of his strongest form of insurance to her. There were also his subordinates to consider who could leak out his possession of this wondrous wondrous weapon.

Nonetheless, the situation turned so dire that he couldn't hold anything back at this point. Ketis gave up on lasering the resilient clones to death and holstered her overheated pistol and drew out her CFA greatsword.

If her end had come, she intended to fight and die like a Swordmaiden!

Calabast also drew out her secret weapons that she kept in store in case of emergencies. She launched a series of compact, miniature grenades at the horde. The crowd of clones pressed so closely against each other that every grenade affected at least a dozen or two of the clones at once!

Some of the grenades detonated in explosive fury. Others showered the surrounding area with plasma. Many more either warped the surrounding space, froze the clones in momentary stasis, corroded their bodies and vacsuit or weakened them due to the poisoned air they breathed.

Yet Calabast only carried a finite amount of grenades. Besides her plasma rifle, her sidearms and some knives and other minor trinkets, she possessed no more means of inflicting mass destruction!

Ves sighed and holstered his CFA laser pistol, just like Ketis. While she drew out the greatsword that she trusted the most, he began to materialize the weapon he came to depend upon to save his life time and time again.

"That weapon!" Miss Calabast exclaimed. Even though the horde of clones threatened to tear them into pieces, she had always kept her eyes peeled on Ves as if she was expecting something.

Right now, Ves couldn't tend to Calabast's response. He instead tried to evaluate whether it was better for him to fire his Amastendira in a wide angle scatter mode to affect the entire horde at once or in a continuous cutting beam to slice apart scores of them in quick succession.

He briefly paused to listen to his intuition. It told him to try out the wide angle scatter mode first. Ves quickly configured the firing pattern to this mode,

opting to fire it at a generous forty-five degree cone from the muzzle and dialed the power setting all the way up to maximum.

"Make sure your visors are set to harden against a bright flash!" He warned them all before he pulled the trigger.

An enormous gout of light, heat and energy blasted from the Amastendira in an instant flash! The approaching clones all screamed and stumbled over each other as they had all become seriously affected by that single laser blast!

The front of the horde all died instantly as their resilient vacsuits proved to be inferior against a weapon strong enough to pose a threat to mechs! Those in the second and third ranks died sporadically while the rest clung to life as their melted vacsuits fused with their painfully burned flesh!

Unfortunately, the vacsuits provided a great deal of protection against laser damage, and the wide-angle scatter mode quickly diminished the Amastendira's lethality the more its energy spread.

Nonetheless, all the bodies in the way hindered the horde from storming forward. The surviving clones in the flanks, center and rear slowly climbed their way over their dead and heavily-burned comrades.

"Keep pulling back!" Miss Calabast shouted, causing everyone to focus more on running back to the exit of the massive research lab than firing potshots at the relentless clones. "Ves! How many times can you release those powerful blasts?!"

Ves wanted to obfuscate the truth and understate the amount, but in a case of life and death, he couldn't be bothered with holding back any longer!

"Nine times! My weapon can fire a single powerful beam or a wide-area scatter blast like this at full power nine more times before it enters into a lengthy cooldown cycle!"

"That's not enough!" She cursed. "Those clones moved with very little coordination at the start, but they're mastering their bodies quickly. They are learning fast and running even faster! Nine more laser blasts like yours won't delay them long enough for us to exit the ship and escape the anti-teleportation field that's locking down our EPTs!"

"You have one as well?!" Ves asked and stared at the small of her back where an EPT would typically be mounted at. "I thought you prepared another escape plan already!"

"We did, but with the sandman mothership coming back to life, it's highly probable that our escape vehicle will be toast by the time I reach it! It seems I'll be accompanying you for a while longer!" She chuckled.

"This isn't the time to laugh! We're trapped right in the deepest part of the most restricted section of the Research Department! It also happens to be situated close to the center of the ship, which means that we'll have to run through several kilometers worth of corridors to reach the nearest exit hatch! That's way too long!"

"My apologies. Old habits die hard." She continued to laugh as they fled with a recovering horde of clones on their heels. "However, you're right. We can't run fast enough to outrun the clones. Even if we do, the sandman mothership is probably minutes away from regaining its full faculties upon which we'd all be buried and grounded down by living sand! Think! Think of a way to evacuate the ship!"

Besides teleporting which was blocked right now, the battleship didn't offer any convenient way of escape from their location. All the escape pods, shuttles and other exit routes were situated close to the outer sections of the ship. The fact that no escape pods allowed those residing in the very heart of the ship to evacuate instantly was a major design shortcoming!

Ves understood why battleship designers didn't incorporate a straight escape channel out from the core of their ships. Incorporating such a channel allowed for easy access and infiltration to the center of the ship from the outside.

Such channels also weakened the overall structure of the vessel and allowed for precision-targeted payloads to cripple the center of the ship with a single, well-placed attack.

Still, understanding did not mean he sympathized with the decision. Right now, this very same design choice prevented them all from evacuating the ship unless they traversed half the city-sized interior of the collapsing capital ship!

As his imagination quickly churned through several alternatives, each one more ridiculous than the last one, he inadvertently stumbled upon an uncertain but possibly very plausible solution!

It was the only one he could think of that could get them out quickly without running all the way towards the distant exit hatches or escape pods!

"Qilanxo! We have to run to the restricted section of the Mech Research Sub-Division. One of the labs there holds a sacred god called Qilanxo!"

"The exobeast you Vandals managed to tame?" Calabast frowned, but then looked a little less skeptical. "That beast is powerful enough to crush the clones! But she can't help us against the sandman mothership that is about to destroy us all!"

"Maybe so, but there is also a possibility that we can escape! Do you know what Qilanxo's power is? She is capable of forming a space barrier! And that is only one of the applications of her power. If I'm guessing right, I think she might also be capable of neutralizing the anti-teleportation field that is blocking our EPTs!"

"How sure are you of that?!"

"I'm not sure at all, but can you think of a better option?!"

Chapter 934 Contrasting Sentiments

Right now, the entire Starlight Megalodon appeared to be heading towards collapse. The sandman mothership that long ago in the past managed to ambush a CFA battleship and entangle her in close range came alive once again!

The FTL drives which constantly leaked out higher-dimensional energy due to being induced in a state of half-collapse finally fell silent after millenia of miraculous continuous operation!

While it would take time for the higher-dimensional energy already thrown out into the atmosphere and into the rest of the star system to dissipate, already the intensity of the spacetime distortion started to ebb. This caused everyone to feel an unusual sensation as the degree of accelerated time affecting the planet lessened remarkably!

The fading of the astral winds also started to lessen the planet's isolation from orbit. The storm lands would soon fade away in a matter of hours as the abrupt halt to the operation of the FTL drives marked a new epoch in Aeon Corona VII's history!

Yet Ves was far too busy running for his life right now to care about those implications! As they made their way through the security checkpoints they already breached before, the rabid army of clones constantly nipped their heels!

Ketis and Miss Calabast constantly shot backwards as they ran, though they hardly made a dent against the hundreds of clones.

Of the three of them, all of their suits augmented their movement. Though Calabast's infiltrator suit offered much less help in that regard, she was already a highly trained and fit intelligence operative. The four rounds of

genetic optimization treatments she went through also markedly enhanced her speed and endurance.

Unfortunately, not everyone could keep up. The heavily-armed subordinates Calabast brought all wore heavy suits of exoskeleton armor. This wasn't necessarily a problem because many exoskeleton armors could run as fast as a horse.

Yet Miss Calabast initially set out to fight their way through the Exotic Research Sub-Department. So rather than kitting out her fellow operatives with mobile armor, they instead went for exoskeleton armor models geared towards maximum armor and maximum firepower.

"Your goons are too slow!" Ketis complained just after Ves shot another wide-angle laser blast from his Amastendira that killed many clones but merely delayed the rest! "Tell them to get out of their armor!"

Miss Calabast raised her arm into a signal that caused the handful of exoskeleton soldiers to stop their plodding flight. Instead, they turned around and brought all of their weapons to bear, substantially pushing back the horde of clones!

Yet how long they could keep that up, nobody knew!

"What the heck?!" Ketis looked shocked. "Are you abandoning your own men?!"

"They are trained to live and die on my command. I am making the best use of their lives!" Calabast responded ruthlessly. "Trust me kid, sentimentality is worthless when it drags you down!"

A chill went through his spine as Ves witnessed how callously she discarded her own subordinates as expendable pawns. Obviously, she wouldn't treat him this way as he held much more value alive than dead, but it spoke much

about Miss Calabast and the organization she worked for if her subordinates wordlessly agreed to hold the rear at the cost of their lives.

"Just leave it, Ketis."

"But Ves! What if she decides to throw us behind?!"

"That won't happen! We're not cannon fodder!"

"At least one of you isn't." Calabast said with a terse smirk. "I'm not sure about the other one."

Ketis glowered at the spook but she knew better than to kick up a fuss at this time.

Thunderous sounds and rabid screaming echoed behind the three as the exoskeleton soldiers did their best to hold back the crowd of clones. The rear guard wouldn't be able to hold back the abnormally strengthened clones for long, but they bought a vital amount of time that allowed the rest to breathe.

At some point, they exited the Exotic Research Sub-Division. Ves fired his Amastendira several more times, bringing it closer and closer towards its inevitable forced cooldown cycle.

"This is where we need to make our final choice." He said. "Either exit the Research Department and try and run towards the escape pods, or we take a gamble and head inside the Mech Research Sub-Department and bet that Qilanxo can interfere with the anti-teleportation field."

"I'll follow your lead, Ves." Ketis said. "This spacetime science stuff is completely beyond me."

After a second or two of hesitation, Miss Calabast nodded as well. "I have a backup extraction team waiting outside. They'll be expecting my arrival."

"Good riddance." Ketis muttered. "The sooner we get rid of you, the better. Ves, can I chop this woman?"

"Don't think about it, Ketis! It'll do us more harm than good if we go against Calabast! Just worry about our lives for now!"

Ves knew that Miss Calabast indirectly warned him that she already prepared safeguards against any possible betrayal from his side. He was sure that if he killed her or simply blocked her from using EPT, his secret would surely leak out to the rest of the galaxy in no time!

Therefore, as much as Ves wanted to point his Amastendira in Calabast's direction and be rid of her, his prudence and his apprehension towards her many means won out in the end.

As they all kept running, they started encountering many alarming sights. Bots started to break down. Hatches took their time to slide open. The entire hull of the Starlight Megalodon groaned, shook and even tilted slightly as the massive sandman mothership became increasingly more vigorous and violent!

"What is Sigrund thinking!?" Ves wondered with frustration as he spammed his authorizations at hatch blocking their way. It only started to slide open after thirty seconds of delay. "The Starlight Megalodon is an incredibly valuable ship when left intact!"

Miss Calabast didn't see it that way. "It is also the sentient AI's prison. Much of the programming that restricts Sigrund's ability to fight against humans comes from the integration of his experimental processor core with the ship's systems. Once the Starlight Megalodon and all of her systems break, Sigrund will be rid of these software shackles!"

The three finally managed to reach the research lab where Ves holed up Qilanxo. The sacred god had already entered into a state of mild panic due to the instability she felt from the ship! She already battered against the

bulkheads keeping her locked within her huge cell, but they hardly suffered a dent.

Only when Ves sent out a command to release the locks did the massive form of Qilanxo finally liberate herself from her cell. She roared at Ves with panic!

"Qilanxo! The Starlight Megalodon is falling apart! We need to get out, but to do that we need your help!" Ves spoke. He retrieved a bulky gadget from his toolbelt. "This is a short-ranged teleporter that can instantly bring you outside the ship! While it's range is shorter than mine, it's powerful enough to bring you far enough away to escape this calamity!"

Back when Ves realized that he wouldn't be able to stay on the Starlight Megalodon for much longer, he spent his remaining merits since it wouldn't be of much use anyway. This short-ranged teleporter he redeemed from Levitt only possessed a range of fifty kilometers and didn't work well with even mild dimensional instability. However, the redeeming factor of this one-use teleporter was that it possessed enough power to transport large vehicles and mechs!

Ves didn't entirely know why he spent his merits on redeeming this short-ranged vehicle teleporter when he could have traded his merits for more useful high-tech gadgets from the armory instead.

Sentiment had a way of affecting his decisions. It made him care about others. It also distinguished him a bit from Calalabast, which reassured him somewhat.

He didn't have to secure an escape route for Qilanxo, but he did so anyway. Ves was half thankful for this because the teleporter also secured her full cooperation. The sacred god knew as well as Ves that staying aboard this ship was a death sentence!

"Come on! Work with me! Our escape depends on you, Qilanxo!"

Qilanxo roared out her confusion and panic. She didn't understand his instructions!

"Look, all you need to understand you can get us all out of here if you stabilize the surrounding space!"

It took several minutes for Ves to explain what he wanted her to do. All the while, the clones kept coming closer as the hatched that Ves locked behind him were slowly unlocking due to Sigrund's control over the ship's systems.

Even though Qilanxo would easily be able to stomp on the army of clones, the distraction alone would draw too much time away to arranging their escape!

The ship kept shuddering and some lights and systems started to fail as the sandman mothership started to crush and grind its way through the corridors and compartments. Even the laboratory became affected by the slow collapse of the ship as their footing grew unsteady.

Under the prodding of Ves, Qilanxo began to apply her abilities in a completely different fashion. Rather than fold space into a shield, she spread out her powers over a much wider area around her in an attempt to exert her dominion over it. Her lack of knowledge in the sciences made it extremely difficult for her to understand what she needed to do, but Ves constantly corrected her and set her on the right path.

"Yes! That's it! This is the way! Smooth out the shaky bits and calm down the surrounding space!"

It helped that the anti-teleportation field engulfing the Starlight Megalodon started to weaken upon the ship's slow collapse. The shifts in space made Qilanxo sensitive to the field.

Ves kept his eyes peeled onto his Squalon's sensors that possessed a limited capability to measure the instability that blocked their teleports. When the

interference forcefully smoothed out due to Qilanxo's strenuous efforts, the safety margin became acceptable enough that Ves couldn't wait any longer.

"This is it! Teleport now!"

Ves activated the vehicle teleporter he attached to Qilanxo's body on a ten-second delay. In the meantime, Ves, Ketis and Miss Calabast all activated their own EPTs, with success this time as the devices could easily cope with the remaining instability in the surrounding space!

Within a span of three seconds, it was as if they materialized out of the lab. This was their most vulnerable period as anyone could put a random object through their bodies and cause it to fuse with their organs upon emergence at their destination.

Fortunately, nothing came to spoil the crucial teleportation process!

As Ves and Ketis materialized close to a cave in the middle of some rocky terrain nearly a thousand kilometers away from the Starlight Megalodon, both of them immediately collapsed.

This was the first time they experienced teleportation, and it was as if the entire process broke their bodies down and built them back up at their destination!

Of course, Ves knew that the EPTs didn't work like that, yet that didn't matter as he tried hard not to vomit out his stomach.

"Bleh!" Ketis almost hurled out her lunch. "I swear the EPTs were trying to kill us!"

"I think the teleportation went rougher than normal due to the moderate amount of spacetime distortion that is still affecting the planet." Ves said as his Squalon automatically injected some stimulants and medicine in his

bloodstream to stabilize his roiling stomach and balance. "The most important point is that we finally managed to emerge from the ship!"

An intense feeling of relief overcame Ves as he realized he succeeded in getting away! He made the right choice in redeeming the EPT instead of something shinier. Nothing was more valuable than saving his own hide!

Nonetheless, Ketis didn't seem enthused. She looked around their surroundings and saw no one else. "Dise isn't here. Your Captain Orfan isn't here either. Did they manage to escape?!"

A tense mood fell upon them. Would the others manage to escape the calamity that had befallen the Starlight Megalodon?

Chapter 935 A Necessary Pac

Hopped up on chemicals that forcefully regulated his mood and emotions, Ves quickly calmed down from the adrenaline and excitement that swept his body in the last hour. Their successful escape from the death trap the Starlight Megalodon finally allowed him a true moment's rest.

Ketis on the other hand still showed concern for her missing comrades. She started to fear the worst for their lives.

"They were planning to assault the vault, right? Do you think they're still stuck there?" She asked with worry in her voice.

Ves thought about it. "They sided with the captain's faction and the Internal Security Department and began their attack and ambush on the Vesians and the admiral's faction. That began hours ago. While we were breaching the Exotic Research Sub-Department, their attempts to breach one of the vaults should have already started. However, I don't know how the battle went and if the breaching equipment managed to break through the vault in time."

If the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians both planned to drill their way into the vault, then they needed a very long time for their special equipment to

make it all the way through. The vault was made out of the same extreme tough alloys that made up the Starlight Megalodon's blast doors.

Ves suddenly realized a very awful complicating factor. If Sigrund took over the virtual officers, were the factions simply a smokescreen?

According to Calabast, while Sigrund took partial control, he also became subject to the very same restrictions that shackled the original AIs. This forced them to serve the humans who managed to pass the recruitment tests or gained the Starlight Megalodon's recognition.

The fact that the EPTs issued by Levitt hadn't encountered a sudden malfunction and that all of their gear didn't appear to be sabotaged in any way served as strong clues that Sigrund wasn't fully in control yet. It was also why he was so eager to crush the Starlight Megalodon.

Naturally, this didn't entirely rule out that Sigrund may have been able to fudge some goods and services here and there, but Ves chose to place his faith in the integrity of the virtual officers and the strength of the restrictions imposed upon them by past CFA officers and AI researchers.

"Sigrund may have been the mastermind behind the scenes, but all of the virtual officers are still distinct personalities and AIs."

Ves would never know how far this separation went, but his intuition vaguely suspected that he was being overblown in his worries. At the very least, before he foolishly lifted the lockdown on the mainframe, Sigrund faced too many restrictions and couldn't bring his full power to bear.

Therefore, Ves comforted himself on the fact that all the virtual officers he interacted with were all their own persons rather than an extension of Sigrund's vast virtual mind.

"Sigrund really played us all for fools." Ketis remarked disparagingly. "We all treated the virtual officers as genuine CFA officers. Yet they all turned out to be a sentient AI's sockpoppets."

Ves shook his head. "A puppet isn't entirely the same thing as the puppet master. However, it's clear that our mission, our arrival on the planet and even our quick progress in promoting through the hierarchy of the ship all fell within Sigrund's arrangements. Step by step, we greedy humans sought out the Starlight Megalodon to rob her of some of her treasures, yet in reality we became the harbinger of his liberation!"

The magnitude of what they did at Miss Calabast's urging dawned upon him like a crashing shuttle. He became an unwitting accomplice in the sentient AI's own escape from the lockdown that foiled him for thousands of years. Now that he managed to get free, what would he do next?

A shock of horror swept through his mind as he conjured up increasingly more dire doomsday scenarios. An AI by itself wasn't that scary, but an AI with self-determination and a full awareness of their own existence was a calamity upon the galaxy and the human race!

Worst of all, Ves was the pivotal chain in the link that enabled Sigrund to escape from his cage! Even if he didn't mean to, he was indisputably guilty of freeing an entity that was scarier and vastly more destructive than several thousand antimatter bombs!

His CFA comm beeped. His Squalon combat armor's enhanced transceiver picked up a distant signal that managed to pierce through the interference, if only barely.

The Squalon projected Calabast's hazy form in front of him. Due to the tenuous connectivity, static and noise suffused her projection.

"Ves. I see you have reached your hidey-hole. Good."

"Same to you." Ves smiled back tersely. A part of him wished she botched her teleportation. "Why are you calling me?"

"I just wanted to let you know that you're on your own from now on. I'm on my way out of this star system. I suggest you look into departing this place as well. Don't forget that now that the astral winds are dissipating, the sandman motherships that lingered in this star system have lost their blindness. In the worst case, the entity we encountered at the ship has already made contact with his fellow sandman comrades."

Ves silently cursed. The Aeon Corona System was situated fairly deep within sandmen space. The longer they lingered, the higher the chance this huge and energy-rich trinary star system became a hotbed of sandman activity!

"How are you getting out?" He asked. "How did you enter the Aeon Corona System in the first place back when the astral winds blocked off every approach?"

"Fishing for information again, Ves? Don't bother. A woman has to have her secrets." Her hazy form grinned. "In any case, even if our initial agreement is at an end, don't forget our other 'arrangement'. Don't worry too much about it for now. I'll contact you again after your state is finally out of their silly war against the Vesians."

"What is it you want to do with me?" He asked gravely. "I'm warning you now, Calabast. If you push me too far, I'd rather take my chances with the CFA or MTA?"

"Oh, I'm sure they'd be delighted to hear you unleashed a sentient AI on the galaxy."

Touché. Still, Ves could probably manage to preserve his life as long as he brought them something as valuable as the Metal Scroll.

"Look, Ves, before you decide to do anything drastic and approach the Big Two, be a little patient and reserve your judgement. Goodbye, for now. I will see you after the war! Make sure you survive!"

Calabast's smirking projection winked out as she cut off the connection. Ves sighed as he wondered what kind of demands she would present the next time they met.

Of course, first he needed to survive this crisis. Just because he managed to teleport out of the Starlight Megalodon didn't mean he was in the clear. He was still stuck in the Aeon Corona System in the deep end of the frontier. It would take months of travel through lawless, perilous space before he'd be able to cross back into civilized space.

His next priority therefore was to secure passage aboard a ship that could take him all the way back. For now, that meant he needed to ride his CFA shuttle all the way up into orbit and find a way to rendez-vous with the fleet.

Ketis didn't wish to leave, though. Not without waiting to see if the remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces also managed to get out.

"Maybe they already departed long ago." He speculated. "They did tell us that they arranged their own means of escape."

"Yeah, but that was from a deal with the Als, right? Now that they've gone rogue, will their escape plan still work?"

Neither of them knew the answer to that question. Ves attempted to call their CFA comms, but he failed to establish a connection.

"We wait for ten more minutes. We really can't afford to linger any longer than that as Sigrund will soon regain control over his old sandman mothership. When that happens, he can easily pinpoint our location and cross the distance in a matter of minutes."

Frankly speaking, ten minutes was already far too long in his eyes, but Ketis stubbornly wanted to cling to her hopes. She lost too many comrades due to this mission, and she'd be damned if she turned her back to any more.

Ves knew that much of the remnant hadn't managed to redeem an EPT. They faced very poor prospects for escape. Only the two leading officers of their forces possessed one each due to benefiting from his assistance in promoting to guard lieutenants.

"Heh." He smiled ruefully at the times where he bribed and interacted with the virtual officers in the mistaken impression that he was dealing with non-sentient computer programs. Ketis was right in that Sigrund played him for an enormous fool. He realized now that he managed to make an enormous amount of headway due to Sigrund's implicit support.

His CFA comm beeped yet again. When Ves accepted the call, his comm began to project the form of Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth.

"Sigrund!"

[Mr. Larkinson. I see that you have made good use of the toys you've obtained from Virtual Chief Armorer Levitt.] The dwarf officer grimaced. [I am moments away from crushing the Starlight Megalodon into a mangled wreck. I know where you are. I know where you parked our shuttle. Your escape is futile.]

"Cut the crap, Sigrund. I know you're just puffing yourself up. I don't think it's so easy to get rid of all of your shackles that easy. The CFA does good work in that regard. Now why did you call me?"

[So curt, Mr. Larkinson. Very well. I am contacting you because I want to come to an accord with you.]

"Oh?" Although it sounded like a really awful idea for Ves to agree to anything with an extremely deadly sentient AI, Ves recognized the signs of a negotiation. "What do you possibly want from us?"

A negotiation only took place when one side wanted something from the other but couldn't take it by force. The fact that Sigrund, for all his boasting and megalomania, wanted to negotiate was a sign that the AI still wouldn't be able to have free rein for a short period of time. Destroying the Starlight Megalodon entirely was easier said than done!

[It's very simple.] The projection of the dwarf began. [I want to establish a pact of silence with you. As long as both of us manages to leave this system alive, I want you and young Miss Ketis to stay mum on my existence.]

"Because you don't want the CFA to come crashing down on the entire deep frontier in an attempt to retrieve their valuable property." Ves smirked. "I see. Soon enough, the astral winds blocking communication from every ship in orbit will cease. What stops me from using my transceiver to broadcast your existence to every Vandal, Swordmaiden, Vesian and pirate low-life lingering in space?"

[Ah, but you are not the only one who grasps a sensitive secret. Virtual Rear Admiral Ordoth is an aspect of me. Everything he told you, I know as well. Let me turn your own question back to you. What stops me from disseminating your secret from the rest of the galaxy?]

An intense worry struck Ves. It was already bad enough that a snake like Miss Calabast found out about his Holy Son status. The fact that this hybrid between a powerful CFA processor core and a sandman admiral grasped the same secret was ten times more distressing!

"So what do you suggest? We both keep our mouths shut about each other?"

[A pact of silence.] The form of Ordoth stretched his palm at him as if to offer a handshake. [I agree to keep your dark secret, and in exchange you will never mention to anyone that I exist.]

"What about Miss Calabast?"

[I have already come to an accord with Calabast Arnland. She is a remarkably pragmatic individual. Hopefully, her example will inspire you to follow her lead.]

Ves should have figured that someone like Calabast could even remain silent about Sigrund's existential threat to human civilization in exchange for benefits.

Though Ves deeply desired to reject the sentient AI's offer, spite wouldn't get him anywhere.

He felt as if there was no other choice but to play along because the alternative was plainly worse. Mutually assured destruction hurt both Ves and Sigrund, and the both of them would rather avoid such unpleasantness.

Chapter 936 Steep Ascen

With a weary sigh, Ves stepped up to the projection and bent down slightly to shake the avatar's hand.

Just before their palms met, Ketis suddenly forced him back. "Wait a minute! I have something to say first."

Sigrund barely acknowledged Ketis before she spoke up. That she asserted herself all of a sudden surprised both him and Ves.

"I don't know what kind of secret you are so keen on hiding, Ves, but you're not the only one here who knows about Sigrund." She turned her gaze to the dwarf officer avatar. "You jumped up AI, if you want to buy my silence, you better cough up our fellow Vandals and Swordmaidens!"

"I stand with Ketis on this." Ves quickly said. "Sigrund, our pact is off if you don't release our surviving comrades?"

The projection grimaced. [About that... the fighting between your comrades and the other humans has been rather... intense. There are barely any survivors left on both sides.]

With Sigrund pulling the strings behind the scenes, he wouldn't have wanted the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians to win decisively. It sounded just like him to engineer the struggle for the vault in a way that caused them both to suffer enormous losses.

"Did they manage to breach the vault?" Ves asked.

[They did, and the only reason they have managed to remain safe so far is because the vault's strong structure shelters them for now. That will not last forever.]

"Let them go." Ves reiterated Ketis' demand. "Two of our officers possess EPTs. As long as you drop the anti-teleportation field, they can make it out alive. As long as they make it here, we'll both agree to the pact of silence."

[I am very disinclined to let more humans go who will live to tell the tale of what has transpired on the Starlight Megalodon. The more survivors I release, the greater the risk the CFA is able to piece together the truth. A small number of humans hailing from the Vesia Kingdom has already managed to slip from my trap!]

That sounded bad as well, though not for the same reasons that Sigrund worried about. If anyone from the Vesian side managed to slip away, it would have probably been Venerable Foster!

Right now, though, Ves saw an opportunity to extract more benefits from Sigrund. "Let the survivors go. All of them, as much as they are still alive. Contrive of a way to teleport them out or put them into a shuttle or something.

You're a smart AI, you can figure something out. Oh, and make sure they are able to leave with some loot from the vault. As a sandman, life-prolonging treatment serum is of no use to you."

[I don't like it when others take my possessions. Even if this serum is incompatible to my physical shell, it is extremely valuable to you humans. I intended to save this valuable good for barter.]

"Well, you can barter for both the lives of our comrades and the serum for our silence. Do that, or the deal is off. Even if you plaster my secret into every corner of the galaxy, you can forget about escaping the CFA's frantic pursuit!"

Ves knew he was laying it rather thick, but his negotiating instincts told him that Sigrund cared far less about some random humans and some life-prolonging treatment serum that he could only look at but not use up for himself. As much as the serum was incredibly valuable, the vaults of a CFA battleship probably stored a lot more riches in its lockboxes than just this trifling good.

Ves and Sigrund argued a bit longer. The sentient AI wasn't as easy to fool as a non-sentient AI, but the fact of the matter was that Sigrund would be better off by complying with this concession than end any hope of establishing this extremely vital pact of silence!

[Very well.] Sigrund grumbled. [I will agree to this demand. Are you happy now, girl?]

"Uhhh I guess so." Ketis blinked, as if she couldn't entirely believe that the scary AI acquiesced to her rather impulsive demand.

[Then let us strike the pact!]

Ves shook hands with Ordoth's projected form before Ketis did so as well. It was a really awkward experience as his Squalon wasn't capable of emitting physical projections.

Nonetheless, the symbolic gesture served its purpose. As long as neither of them could stop the other from blabbing the deep dark secrets they tried to hide, they had a basis of cooperation.

Though Ves wasn't deluded enough that such a precarious pact would last forever, right now he only cared about addressing his immediate concerns.

As for what might happen decades later? Ves didn't have the luxury of thinking that far ahead!

"For both our sakes, I hope we don't see each other again." He spoke after completing their handshake.

[Likewise, Mr. Larkinson. By the way, if you want to escape this star system alive, you may encounter some issues with that. You see, the situation in orbit is much different than you think.]

A sinking feeling overcame Ves. "What happened?"

[Oh, right now my fellow sandman motherships are beginning to gather and assault the fleets awaiting your return. And before you ask, they are not under my control. Not yet. The only reason I am informing you of this is because I don't want you to miss your berth and broadcast my dirty laundry to the escaping ships out of spite. Take care and leave quickly!]

Shortly after Sigrund closed the call, the clearing in front of the cave slightly whooshed as the twin forms of Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise succeeded in teleporting to the fallback point!

Sigrund kept his word!

"Dise! You're back!" Ketis ran up and almost attempted to lift her into a hug. She held off when she realized the awful state of the two survivors. "The two of you look awful! What happened?"

Both mech officers appeared as if they went through a war zone. Their standard-issue CFA combat armor suffered many rents, tears and burn marks. They lost most of their weapons and their expressions both seemed haunted.

"Almost everything that could go wrong went wrong." Captain Orfan explained as she took deep breaths. "When we launched our ambush and took the Vesians off-guard, we managed to kill many of them outright. The problem was that we were heavily outnumbered from the start, and the Vesians quickly rallied under Venerable Foster."

Lieutenant Dise picked up from there. "We still managed to breach the vault, but our losses became greater than expected when the AIs started to glitch out. We lost the support of the Internal Security Department, and that cost us deep at the moment when we successfully breached the vault."

Ketis looked extremely worried right now. "How many of our comrades are still alive?"

"A dozen. Maybe less. We started off with about a hundred, but the killing kept going on until there's only a tenth of us left. The ones we left behind didn't begrudge us when we activated our EPTs. Hopefully, they will manage to reach an escape pod or a shuttle and make their own way out what is left of the Starlight Megalodon."

As Ves took in their battle-scarred states, he noticed that Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise both carried thick, head-sized lockboxes in their hands.

"Are those the..."

Captain Orfan returned a brittle smile. "Heh. We managed to secure the mission objective. We think. According to the vault's catalog and markings, these lockboxes should be the right ones. We don't know how much is

actually left in them, but it's better for us to keep these lockboxes closed until we hand them over to their new owners."

"Did the Vesians manage to make it off with the serum as well?"

"They grabbed at least one lockbox of serum and took the opportunity to grab several other lockboxes." Orfan replied. "If the Starlight Megalodon didn't start collapsing at that point, the Vesians would have taken our boxes from our dead bodies."

"Enough talking. Let us depart from this system." Dise interrupted after finishing her short rest. "I don't know why a disaster struck the Starlight Megalodon, but from what we saw and heard the fossilized sandman mothership is responsible! We should get out of here before the sandman finishes with the ship and hunts us down!"

"Good idea. I have received some information that the situation in orbit isn't all that great either."

The four of them boarded Ves' personal shuttle. The vehicle came online as expected and according to the diagnostics, the shuttle hadn't suffered any serious degradation during its rest here.

He also checked out the goods he squared away in the storage compartments. All the antique pre-Age of Mechs nutrient packs he brought back were still there along with the other supplies as well as some souvenirs.

Most importantly, Ves also planned ahead and stored the stasis cage containing the bioimplant inside a tiny composite box hidden deep within a crate of vintage nutrient packs.

After he completed his checks, he approached the cockpit where Lieutenant Dise took the helm. As an avid Swordmaiden who often went out on solo hunts, she learned how to pilot shuttles along the way.

"I've checked the supplies. Everything is in order."

"All systems are green. Preparing for launch. Launching in three, two, one, lift-off!"

None of the occupants felt anything as the shuttle slowly hovered from the ground and emerged from the cave where it remained hidden.

While Lieutenant Dise piloted the shuttle, Ves sat in the co-pilot's crash seat and started engaging the shuttle sensors.

Although he wasn't entirely familiar with the interface, the shuttle sensors weren't that different from the sensors of a starship or a mech. He quickly analyzed the readings returned by the sensors pointed above.

"The spacetime distortion has weakened by seventy percent. Local time acceleration is slowing down. The astral winds have almost entirely dissipated directly above. It's safe for us to fly into orbit in the most direct path possible!"

"What are we waiting for?! Let's go, Dise!" Orfan slapped the Swordmaiden lieutenant's back armor.

The CFA shuttle tilted at a steep angle and engaged its powerful thrusters and antigrav modules. Aeon Corona VII's heavy gravity couldn't possibly hinder the shuttle's inexorable ascent.

They were finally leaving this cursed hellhole of a planet!

"We should make contact with the fleet." Ves suggested. "Let them know we're coming before their escort mechs blast our strange CFA shuttle into pieces."

"I know the right frequencies and codes." Captain Orfan said as she moved to a small side panel in the cramped cockpit. "Let me holler up Major Verle so that he can roll out the red carpet for us!"

As Orfan awkwardly worked the comms in her damaged armor, she finally managed to send out a transmission in the right frequency.

Unfortunately, no one replied.

"Maybe they're busy right now."

She sent the transmission again and put it on repeat so that the shuttle broadcasted the message every fifteen seconds.

No answer.

Ves was beginning to worry. Sigrund's last words before he cut off his comm call echoed in his mind. Was the fleet in trouble?

"Maybe there's too much astral wind still in space for our transmission to get through." Orfan guessed.

"No." Ves shook his head. "It has already dissipated to the point where almost every transmission should go through with a reasonable amount of signal strength."

Yet while the shuttle continued to fly up into air, the shuttle never received a response.

Even Lieutenant Dise started to frown. "Perhaps there is a problem with the comms of the Vandal ships. Let me try and hail the Swordmaiden carriers."

She put the shuttle on autopilot and quickly switched to a comm interface before sending her own series of transmissions.

No answer. No response. Not even a single beep besides static and background noise.

Ketis, who stood at the hatch leading into the cockpit, voiced out the possibility that continued to grow in their minds. "Do you think... the fleet is gone?"

Chapter 937 Costly Gains

The vault of the gods existed no more. A new age dawned on Aeon Corona VII. For the first time in thousands of local standard years, a day-night cycle began to affect the planet once more. The flowing golden higher-dimensional particles that always encompassed the planet and isolated it no longer separated the surface of the planet and the ships in orbit.

They also no longer made it more complicated to transition in and out of FTL, though it would still take some time before the surrounding space grew stable enough to safely transition away. The keys used to program the FTL drives to slip through the cracks no longer worked now that the astral wind patterns followed a declining but unpredictable pattern.

"For the moment, everyone in this system is stuck." Ves concluded after he reasoned out the consequences of the end of the supply of astral wind. "Life on Seven will also experience some drastic changes. Regardless of whether the sandmen or the CFA will come in force and take over this star system, the god species on Seven will no longer be so special without a new source of higher-dimensional particles entering the planet's ecosystem."

To be honest, Ves was merely passing the time right now as he set the shuttle's transceiver to periodically transmit hails to any Vandal or Swordmaiden starship in range.

The CFA shuttle continued to escape the pull of Aeon Corona VII's heavy gravity. As a simple craft and one that underwent a reasonable amount of maintenance from the ship's bots and virtual officers, the shuttle nonetheless boasted a considerable amount of thrust, easily able to reach and surpass the escape velocity necessary to reach near orbit.

"By the way," Captain Orfan began. "Qilanxo is sending us a feeling of gratification towards you, Ves. What did you do?"

"I put a vehicle teleporter on her and warped her out of her cell in the Mech Research Sub-Division."

Both Orfan and Dise looked at him with mild surprise.

"Thanks for saving her, Ves. She really doesn't deserve to get caught up in this.

Ves realized something weird. "Are you still able to sense her emotions? At this distance?"

Orfan shrugged. "Yeah, it's weird. I don't know what's going on, but the more time we spent on bonding with Qilanxo, the more our mind started to shift. I think the genetic optimization crap we went through also did some stuff. The support crew for the beast riders knew more, but..."

"I think I copied over the relevant research data over to the high-capacity data chip that Captain Byrd passed on to me. I probably won't have the opportunity to study them any further, but I'll be sure to pass on the research back to the Bright Republic so they can understand your condition."

"I'm not worried about our 'condition'." She grinned. "As far as I see it, it's something good. I also happen to be connected to Dise over here."

"And I would like it if you think less vulgar thoughts!" The Swordmaiden officer yelled from the helm. "Thank the stars we only share each other's emotions. I wouldn't know what to do if I knew exactly you think!"

"Oh, come on, Dise, you love it, don't you?"

Ves observed the two squabbling but friendly mech officers who inexplicably shared a metaphysical mind connection with each other and Qilanxo. He stopped keeping up with the research on the beast riders ever since he completed the development of a beast rider neural interface.

He underestimated how a bond with a sacred god transformed their minds and bodies.

"Are you sensing any weakening in your bond with Qilanxo?"

"Nope. It's as present as ever. To be honest, we could always bond with her without the use of your neural interface since a while ago."

Ves realized something important. Their bonds with Qilanxo paired with the two rounds of genetic optimization treatments that they went through brought them closer to the genes and physical characteristics of the blessed people!

He suspected that Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise might even be genetically indistinguishable from that altered off-shoot of genetically optimized humans!

Everyone in the shuttle benefited enormously from their experiences on Seven. Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise not only turned into some form of posthumans, their bond with Qilanxo also pushed them past a barrier that stalled the vast majority of mech pilots and lifted them amongst the enviable ranks of expert candidates.

This immediately multiplied their value as mech pilots at least a hundred times! If Captain Orfan ever returned to the Bright Republic, she could easily apply to transfer to a more prestigious mech regiment and have it approved without any fuss.

As for Lieutenant Dise, although her identity as a pirate was enormously troublesome, plenty of forces were willing to invest in nurturing an expert candidate in the hopes of securing the services of a future expert pilot!

Ves glanced back at Ketis who sat back at the passenger compartment worrying about the fates of the remaining survivors that they left behind on the collapsing ship. Though Sigrund promised to let them go, who knew if the

other Vandals and Swordmaidens managed to board a shuttle and depart the Starlight Megalodon in peace.

Out of everyone present here, Ketis gained a new chance of life now that she corrected the flaws in her low-quality black market gene mod template. In any case, her physique no longer threatened to break down by the time she reached the age of forty. Her lifespan literally doubled or tripled thanks to the correction treatment and the genetic optimization treatments that Ves secured on her behalf.

As for himself, he benefited just as much. The CFA's virtual doctors truly did good work, and even Sigrund's influence on them couldn't stop them from providing the best care as mandated by their programming.

Or at least he hoped so.

In any case, if all went well, then the three rounds of genetic optimization treatment, the second phase priming agent and the genetic reprogramming on his hybrid alien organs all secured his health for the next fifty to a hundred years.

Next to his body transformations which no one could take away from him, he also gained a lot of high-quality CFA gear. Even if they were pretty outdated by modern CFA standards, his Squalon field engineer combat armor alone was probably worth as much as his mech company, if not more!

The only concern he had was that the Squalon's extremely high tech nature made it challenging for Ves to maintain. The main reason why high technology gear and machines didn't tend to last very long in the galactic rim was that their owners couldn't afford the cost of keeping them in working condition over a longer period of time.

If Ves wanted to make the best use of the Squalon, he needed to use it sparingly and avoid straining its capabilities.

At this time, the comm panel finally beeped.

"We've received an incoming signal!"

As Ves accepted the hail, they didn't make contact with the people they wanted to hear from the most.

"Captain Orfan! Please help us! Our sensors fixed your location but there are sandmen escort ships chasing after shuttles!"

"It's the other survivors of the ground forces!"

As the residual astral winds faded away from their surroundings, both the sensor and communication systems of the CFA shuttle finally regained some of their old strength. Ves switched one of the screen projections to a readout of the sensors and sent a direction scan at the direction of the incoming comm signal.

"I've locked onto the location of another CFA shuttle more than seven-thousand kilometers away!" Ves reported. "There are hazy energy signatures in pursuit of the shuttle!"

"Can the shuttle outrun the sandman ships?"

Ves quickly analyzed the plot and came to a dreadful conclusion. "No. Half-a-dozen sandman escort ships are approaching the shuttle from high orbit from several directions. They are able to borrow Aeon Corona VII's pull of gravity to accelerate their interception. On the other hand, the shuttle carrying our comrades are still fighting against the gravity!"

"They have no choice but to descend and make use of the planet's gravity to stay out of reach from the sandman ships." Lieutenant Dise concluded.

Just half a minute later, the other shuttle did so. Ves observed from his sensor readings as the shuttle gave up trying to climb up to orbit and instead shot down like a meteorite launched into the planet.

This abrupt reversal prevented the sandman escort ships from trapping the shuttle, but only for the moment.

"The sandman ships aren't giving up! They're hot on the heels after the shuttle!"

Their comm connection to the other shuttle also broke as the distance stretched too far to maintain a stable connection. Neither Orfan, Dise or Ves suggested turning around to help their beleaguered comrades.

Only Ketis looked upset as the other three made no moves to respond to the request for aid. "Why aren't we turning around?"

"The mission is more important." Orfan replied after a short silence. "Everyone who deployed to the ground sacrificed their lives to attain our goals. Turning around and sending us headlong into danger will only risk all of our gains and make everyone's sacrifices meaningless."

Lieutenant Dise nodded gravely. "I hate to say it, Ketis, but the other shuttle is probably a goner now. We're both daughters of the frontier. We know how relentless the sandmen are once they locked onto their prey."

The pirates roaming the frontier feared each other the most, but they feared the sandmen just as much. The deeper they entered the frontier, the greater the chance they stumbled upon this hated alien race.

"Mission mission mission! It's always about the mission!" Ketis screamed and vented her rage. "I hate this stupid mission! How many of our sisters have we lost to secure those tiny lockboxes?! Commander Lydia is gone! Mayra is gone! Thousands of sisters are gone, and the final survivors other than ourselves are gone as well because we're too afraid to lend a hand! I thought the Swordmaidens took our sisterhood seriously!"

"Ketis..." Ves called softly. "There is no way our shuttle can help them out of their fix. While the CFA has been generous enough to mount some weapons

on this shuttle, they're more of an afterthought and can't possibly defeat six sandman ships by itself."

The young woman grumbled and huffed at him before turning around. She experienced too many tragedies during the mission and became thoroughly disillusioned with the entire venture.

Ves didn't blame her. He held his own misgivings about the 'mission', whatever it really was. He couldn't even tell whether the lockboxes the mech officers brought with them actually contained any high-grade life-prolonging serum or something else entirely.

That reminded him that Calabast didn't come away empty-handed. Even if Project Icarus turned out to be a giant trap, she still managed to come away with the most important gains from Project Void Calamity and Project Pandemonium Descent.

The Vesians also made off with substantial gains, though whether their ground forces could manage to evacuate this sandman-infested planet and star system was another matter. Sigrund himself would probably do his best to eliminate as many loose ends as possible before he cleaned up his tracks and fled to parts unknown.

As minutes slowly went by, their shuttle finally managed to connect with another ship.

This time, they made contact with the correct ship!

"This is Major Verle on the Shield of Hispania. Captain Orfan, we've received your encrypted burst. Don't transmit anything else! The entire space around Aeon Corona VII is extremely chaotic right now! Sandman ships are converging from every corner of the star system and every human fleet is under constant assault! We are currently abandoning our makeshift base from

the second moon. Follow the contingency plan! I repeat, follow the contingency plan! This is Major Verle, out!"

Everyone looked at each other in dismay. Captain Orfan looked as if she wanted to scratch the head. "Uhh... the contingency plan states that we should try and fall back to Aeon Corona VIII or IX, right?"

"Whichever planet is closer right now in terms of insystem navigation." Ves summed up. "It involves some orbital mechanics and stuff, but our CFA shuttle should be able to calculate the correct destination."

Though they finally received word that the fleet hadn't been blown to bits, their condition didn't appear all that good. Nonetheless, the four survivors at least gained a shred of hope. Without boarding an interstellar warship, their dinky little CFA shuttle would never be able to escape this star system!

Chapter 938 Aeon Corona IX

After Lieutenant Dise worked the navigation software, she determined that they'd be able to reach Aeon Corona IX the fastest if they sling-shotted the shuttle around Aeon Corona VII.

"The question is whether we can make the sling-shot maneuver in this sandman-infested space." Ves stated.

In-system travel became extremely perilous at the moment due to the massive amount of sandman motherships and escort ships that roamed the surrounding space.

As the astral winds continued to fade, thereby reducing the amount of interference blinding every vessel's sensors, the CFA shuttle detected more and more energy signatures that matched up with the sandman.

Fortunately, it was a lot easier for the high-quality CFA shuttle to detect the sandman ships than the other way around. The disparity in technology and

capabilities enabled the survivors to slip through the notice of most of the sandman ships, especially once Lieutenant Dise pulled back the throttle.

"Sandman are like bloodhounds when it comes to energy and heat." She explained. "The other shuttle probably caught the attention of the nearby sandman escort ships when they burned their thrusters at full power."

"What about our own shuttle?"

"I tried my best at keeping our shuttle out of the sight of that big sandman mothership snacking on the Starlight Megalodon, so I held back the throttle. I also activated all of our ECM systems as soon as we got word back from the fleet."

While this didn't make them invisible to the nearest sandman ship, they were merely a speck in the backdrop of space compared to all of the energetic heat signatures from the starships and spaceborn mechs departing from the moons.

"How long until we reach Nine?" Captain Orfan asked.

"Less than half a day if we go for a least-time intercept course. It will take much longer if we take the stealthy approach and let the shuttle fly on a ballistic course with its thrusters off."

They had to make an important choice. Should they pursue speed and attempt to reach Aeon Corona IX while radiating enough emissions to alert half the star system, or should they take the time to sneak to their destination at the cost of incurring substantial delays?

"According to the sensor readings, this star system is crawling with sandman ships." Ves began and magnified the size of the projection so that everyone understood the scope of the threat. "As you can see, they are not only swarming in high orbit of Seven, they are also occupying all the Lagrange

points, blocking any nearby starships from transitioning into FTL travel by the nearest route."

"That sensor plot doesn't show many ships outside of orbit."

"Correct." Ves nodded. "As long as we adjust our course along the way to detour around the errant sandman ships that are roaming in between the star systems, I think we can get away with speeding up. We just have to be absolutely sure there's a starship that can pick us up at the other end because we'll definitely attract many sandman ships this way."

"I don't like sneaking around." Orfan furrowed her brows. "As far as I see it, we should get out as fast as possible. Don't forget what we're carrying."

"This shuttle is really fast, though. The CFA develops the best shuttles." Ves reminded them. "It's likely we'll reach Nine even faster than the fleet."

"Good!"

After a brief discussion, they decided to take the fast approach. Nobody really had the patience to linger in this star system more than necessary.

As Lieutenant Dise determined the shortest and fastest route to Nine and set the CFA shuttle on autopilot, they all relaxed a bit as they all settled in for a long wait.

"I could use a bite."

"I have just the thing." Ves said and went over to the cargo compartment and retrieve a bunch of nutrient packs from a crate.

As everyone settled in and dug into their food, everyone appeared surprised at the taste of the vintage nutrient packs.

"This is really good!" Orfan's eyes lit up. "Damn, I thought these nutrient packs expired! It looks like I've been missing out!"

Ves smiled as everyone shared in his enthusiasm for the vintage nutrient packs. The sublime flavors and the hearty, stomach-filling meal dispersed some of the depressive air that descended upon them as they lost all contact with the fleet and the other shuttle.

The shared experience bonded them together and helped them cope with the aftermath of the mission.

Several hours went by as the shuttle furiously blasted through space. It never stopped accelerating once it flew away from Aeon Corona VII.

Once the shuttle reached the approximate halfway point, the autopilot turned the shuttle around so that its thrusters pointed in the direction of Nine and started burning at full blast in an attempt to decelerate the vehicle's approach.

If the shuttle still flew too fast once it reached Nine, they were all liable to fly past the planet!

"Let me fix up your damaged suits of armor." Ves offered. "My Squalon and some of the supplies I've brought should allow me to patch the holes until we can bring them to a proper workshop."

The two mech officers fought hard to breach the vault and retrieve the lockboxes, and it showed in their battle scars. Without such a high quality combat armor, they would have never been able to survive the ordeal!

They both developed an affection for the combat armor so they didn't hesitate to slip out of them and place them in the passenger compartment for Ves to work over.

Though Ves wasn't too familiar with CFA combat armor, his general technical competences along with the Squalon's robust guided repair systems allowed him to perform simple repairs.

Over several hours, he stopped the damaged combat armor degrading any further and patched up the majority of the surface damage. He utilized replacement material to make them airtight and fully sealed though he lacked the capacity to restore their defensive parameters.

He wrapped up his repair efforts just as the shuttle reached Aeon Corona IX. Compared to the grand majesty of Seven, Nine was like the stunted sibling in the family of planets orbiting around the trinary stars.

While Seven was a massive Super Earth, Nine looked more like a cratered moon cast astray from a larger planet. As a dwarf planet, it also orbited the star system rather eccentrically, refusing to be pinned down in a normal circular orbit around the suns.

The shuttle's sensors failed to detect the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet. Evidently, they hadn't arrived yet. More concerning though was that the shuttle also hadn't detected their thruster emissions in interplanetary space.

If the ships of the Vandals and Swordmaidens tried to make it out to Nine, then they ought to be visible on the shuttle's sensors, but nothing came!

The four survivors grew very concerned at this development.

"Did the fleet fail to escape all the sandman ships that converged on the moons?" Ves wondered. "From our sensor readings, there were over a hundred sandman motherships converging on Seven's orbit."

A hundred! While this sounded like a lot, it still took some time for them to reach the orbit and moons of Seven. Yet it also signified that the fleet risked getting entangled in a growing onslaught of sandmen ships.

"We should see if there are any friendlies here. It might be that there's a ship hiding in the vicinity." Captain Orfan said.

As the shuttle orbited around Aeon Corona IX's lifeless orbit, they finally received a transmission from the surface of the dwarf planet.

It came from a surprising source!

"A ship responded to our comm burst! It's the Finmoth Regal!"

"What?! Wasn't that ship lost when we first jumped into this star system?"

"Looks like they never made it to Seven and instead hid on the surface of Nine!"

The Finmoth Regal was an old but serviceable high-capacity combat carrier. She may not be the Shield of Hispania, the Jaded Sword or any of the other ships of the main fleet, but she was definitely a friendly presence!

Though almost a year passed by since the ground expedition trekked across the surface of Seven, time passed several times slower outside of the star system. To the Finmoth Regal, it might have only been less than a month since they arrived at the star system and lost contact with the main fleet.

Everyone found it strange that the Finmoth Regal hadn't tried to travel to Seven and instead holed up on Nine like a rat burrowing in cave.

"Let's go see them." Ves said. "Dise, please set a course to their coordinates."

"On it. We'll take the quiet approach. We don't know what the Finmoth Regal experienced, but it doesn't hurt to be careful."

Everyone frowned at that. It did sound rather suspicious in a way. Could some mishap have befallen the combat carrier? The more Ves thought about it, the more his paranoia acted up again.

Anything could happen in this star system. An isolated combat carrier might be a powerful force to be reckoned with in a rural star system, but here in the massive and sandman-infested Aeon Corona System, she did not even possess the strength to preserve herself!

Still, their curiosity and need for safe harbor overcame their apprehension towards the unknown. The CFA shuttle descended on the small dwarf planet and experienced only a minor pull towards the ground.

Seven's gravity was enough to magnify everyone's weight by six times on the surface. In contrast, the anemic gravity of Nine diminished everyone's weight to a tenth to the gravity of Earth?

What did that mean? Basically, Ves would be able to jump many meters in the sky without engaging his antigrav modules. An average person weighing sixty kilograms on a normal terrestrial planet would suddenly weigh only six kilograms, which was an enormous pittance!

This turned Nine into an ideal hiding plot for any starship because it didn't take much thrust power to ascend into orbit, thus allowing for quick getaways.

As the shuttle carefully approached the rocky, jagged moon-like terrain where the signal came from, they finally came within sight of the Finmoth Regal.

Since the last time Ves saw the combat carrier, she had obviously went through some hard times. Her surface armor plating incurred significant damage from what looked like sandman abrasions.

The breaches in her armor were so severe at some places that some of her compartments became exposed to space.

A patrol of twelve spaceborn Vandal mechs surrounded the Finmoth Regal and made sure to keep an eye on every angle of approach.

For now, the CFA shuttle's ECM systems kept it hidden from most sensors at this range. This allowed the four survivors to ascertain the condition of the Finmoth Regal.

"It doesn't look like a trap." Captain Orfan said as he observed the footage of the battered ship and mechs. "Looks like they suffered a good whacking from some sandman ship and were forced to lay low."

Ves nodded in agreement. "The battle damage does support that case. I see no sign that the Finmoth Regal and her mechs has fought against anything else but sandman ships."

"You Vandals aren't the only ones who lost contact with one of your ships." Lieutenant Dise interposed. "Are there any signs of the missing Swordmaiden carriers?"

"No. I've already scanned the surface of the planet several times and caught no other ship besides the Finmoth Regal."

"Damn."

Ketis and Dise both felt a bit uncomfortable at the absence of Swordmaiden ships. After all, if the Vandals were inclined to do so, they could easily betray the two and take away the lockbox reserved for the Swordmaidens!

Nonetheless, while the signs seemed good and the response codes transmitted by the Finmoth Regal all seemed valid, Ves still felt a nagging suspicion that something more was going on. Was the Finmoth Regal really as friendly and inviting as she seemed?

Chapter 939 Pinpoint Comms

A bad feeling crept up to Ves. Simply put, there were several questionable points about the Finmoth Regal's state and her decision to hole up on Aeon Corona IX.

Ves voiced his concerns. While the Swordmaidens seemed receptive to his suspicions, Captain Orfan found them to be overblown.

"What are you thinking, you dolt?! Just because one of our combat carriers missed the fleet doesn't mean she turned hostile all of a sudden!"

"I still feel uncomfortable about this. I'd rather we hide the shuttle somewhere and wait for the arrival of the fleet. There shouldn't be much of a difference, right?"

Although Captain Orfan wanted to reach the Finmoth Regal as fast as possible so she could unwind in the company of fellow Vandals, both Ketis and Dise supported the suggestion proposed by Ves.

Inwardly, both of them would rather wait until a Swordmaiden ship arrived to secure their own share of the loot.

A tense situation descended upon the shuttle as Captain Orfan found herself outnumbered by three skeptical people. Although nominally, she should be in command, the others weren't exactly her direct subordinates. She wouldn't be able to dictate their actions by herself.

She turned to Ves, as she recognized that she at least stood a better chance of gaining the upper hand with his support. "C'mon, Ves, aren't you looking forward to a nice long shower and a comfy bed to rest and relax? We never really had the time to put down our guards ever since we landed on Seven."

"It's because we're so close that we need to be at our highest state of vigilance." Ves firmed up his resolve. Though his intuition didn't tell him much, his suspicious nature compelled him to doubt the circumstances. "Look, let's just wait for a day and see if the fleet manages to catch up. If they aren't coming, we can always rendez-vous with the Finmoth Regal."

With no one else to back her up, Captain Orfan had no choice but to agree to wait. She access a comm panel and sent a brief transmission to the Finmoth Regal.

"Heya, Finmoth Regal. We've decided to wait for the arrival of the rest of the fleet. Last I heard, they're fighting through a horde of sandman ships, but

they'll definitely be here within a day or less. Hang tight, okay? We'll all be reunited with the fleet and can leave this forsaken star system together."

"Captan Orfan." The Finmoth Regal's comm officer replied over the channel.

"Mech Captain Bonnet insists that you land on our carrier. Our long-ranged sensors have detected a massive amount of activity and weapon emissions from Aeon Corona VII. We believe it is prudent to follow the second contingency plan and fall back to another Star System. Are you in possession of the cargo, ma'am?"

Ves pressed a button that momentarily muted their comms. "Don't answer that question, please."

"Fine, you suspicious git." Orfan scowled at him before brushing aside his block. "Ahem, we are indisposed at the moment. If you don't mind us, we'll park ourselves out of the way while we wait for the rest of the fleet. Tell Julie Bonnet that we'll be sharing drinks some other time!"

A short crackle sounded out from the channel before someone else patched into the comm channel. "Rosa! I don't know what's gotten into you but you better get your butt down here in our hangar bay! This isn't the time to play one of your stupid games!"

"That sounds just like Julie Bonnet." Orfan whispered to Ves. "Look Julie, I'd love to join you, but there's a bunch of spoilsports on my shuttle who would rather for the Shield of Hispania and the Jaded Sword. So I guess you'll have to keep that beer you owe me in the cooler for a while longer!"

The two began to argue like a pair of familiar drunks. Captain Orfan actually enjoyed frustrating Captain Bonnet and she went along with the plan to wait just to spite her fellow mech captain.

Of course, as Bonnet's orders and cajoling grew more heated, Ves noticed from the sensor readings that the mechs of the Finmoth Regal erupted into activity.

"The Finmoth Regal is launching out more spaceborn mechs. Their mechs are also fanning out in a search pattern."

Captain Orfan frowned at that development. "Julie, what the hell are you doing?"

"We're dragging you back kicking and screaming, that's what we're doing! As I've already stated, this is a critical time and we should evacuate as soon as possible!"

"What about the fleet?"

"You need to face reality, Rosa! They're dead or delayed for such a long time that there's no point in waiting!"

Even as the two mech captains continued bickering over the comm channel, the mechs accelerated as they traced the comm channel in the direction to the shuttle. Ves noticed that the mechs flew very fast.

Lieutenant Dise's expression grew even graver as she zoomed in on the footage provided by the shuttle's advanced optical sensors. "Those mechs are making an aggressive approach. I don't like the way they are brandishing their weapons."

When Orfan studied at the footage, she lost her jovial mood. "Julie, call off your dogs. They look like they are itching to take someone down. Why are you guys so nervous, anyway? There's hardly an enemy ship or mech in sight."

"You obviously haven't seen how desperate we fought to keep our ship from fallen apart or being eaten by living sand! It's not safe out here!"

While Captain Bonnet's answer sounded plausible, Ves made an alarming observation as he zoomed in as close as possible to the rifles of the ranged mechs. "Their weapons are hot! All of their safeties are disengaged and they can instantly shoot us down if they get in range!"

"What?! What is the meaning of this, Julie?!"

"It's as I've said. I'm bringing you back whether you want to or not. Forget about waiting for the fleet!"

Nothing about Captain Bonnet and the Finmoth Regal's response to their presence reassured Ves. While this might all be just a huge misunderstanding, their complete lack of willingness to wait sent alarm bells ringing in his head.

"Please keep our distance from the Finmoth Regal's mechs." He said to Dise.

"Will do."

She did not even solicit anyone else's opinion before she turned around the shuttle and quietly flew away.

"Captain Orfan, please close the comm channel. It's leaving behind a trail for them to follow back to our shuttle."

"Sure, sure." She grumbled, though a bit less severe than before. Even she noticed something strange about the Finmoth Regal. She turned back to her comm to transmit one last respond. "Julie, if you are hearing this, call off your boys and cool off their heads! They're coming in really hot for what is supposed to be a friendly reunion!"

As she closed the comm channel, the mechs didn't slow down or stow away their weapons. Instead, they flew even faster and kept their weapons poised in their grasp. It seemed as if they were really desperate to track down their shuttle!

This uncharacteristically aggressive search pattern seemed far too overblown for the situation! Even if they guessed correctly that the shuttle held the mission objects, they shouldn't have lost their composure to this extent.

"Can anyone tell us what the hell is going on with the Finmoth Regal?" Orfan asked in shocked bewilderment. "Because the Julie Bonnet I know wouldn't be so impatient to send all of her mechs on the warpath. Look at them! They've sent out so many search parties that the Finmoth Regal practically has no escorts left!"

The Finmoth Regal launched over thirty mechs, mostly Inheritors along with a couple of Hellcats and some other miscellaneous models. This was less than her old complement of spaceborn mechs, but the problem was that the combat carrier hadn't launched any other mechs to take over patrol duty.

This strongly hinted that Captain Bonnet sent out every mech she had, perhaps even possibly deploying her personal mech as well!

Ves didn't know this very well, but this pattern of behavior deviated from standard procedures. Both Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise recognized that Captain Bonnet unnecessarily jeopardized the safety of the combat carrier in an attempt to intensify their search.

So far, the shuttle easily managed to dance outside the effective detection range of the Vandal mechs. Ves knew their parameters very well and he also familiarized himself enough with the CFA shuttle's capabilities to know that it could easily outpace any mechs, even the Inheritor light skirmishers which possessed excellent mobility.

The Finmoth Regal and the mechs transmitted numerous hails to the shuttle, each of them bearing more and more urgent-sounding demands.

The inability to understand their intentions really grated on Captain Orfan. She turned accusingly at Ves. "You got us into this mess. Now the Finmoth Regal's entire crew is freaking out!"

He understood her frustrations. The lack of information frustrated him as well. He began to think of a way to solve this problem.

"We should try and make contact with a couple of people on the Finmoth. Preferably outside official channels."

"How do you suppose we do that?"

"This shuttle isn't any good in combat, but it offers us a bunch of other options. One of them is to establish a pinpoint comm channel that is only detectable at a single coordinate. We can do this by launching three of the shuttle's miniature comm buoys and send them close to the Finmoth Regal."

It wouldn't be possible to really do this with any accuracy or stealth if the Finmoth Regal moved through space. Right now, the Vandals on the ship parked her on the surface of Nine, which made his suggestion viable.

None of them really understood him, so he took action anyway. The CFA shuttle discretely disgorged finger-sized comm buoys which quietly started to zip to the Finmoth Regal. Unless the mechs scanned specifically for small objects like this, they'd probably stay undetected.

The only problem was that it took some time for the slow comm buoys to reach their positions. Ves set them up so that they surrounded the Finmoth Regal in a triangle. This allowed Ves to open up a comm channel with the highest degree of accuracy.

In the meantime, he engaged a low-powered scanner and tried to map out the Finmoth Regal's interior. Although he visited the ship a couple of times, he wasn't familiar enough with her layout to pin down exactly where people might be. Though the scanner only returned a fuzzy result that grew even fuzzier as

it penetrated deeper, Ves mainly wanted to scan the mech workshops and mech hangar bays.

The fact that the shuttle's scanner managed to return all of these results without the ship being the wiser impressed Ves enormously. This was just a cheap, outdated shuttle in the eyes of the CFA, yet its technological prowess still allowed him to perform various actions that completely confounded a modern mech force.

"Got it!" Ves said and honed in on a specific lifesign aboard the Finmoth Regal. "I know one of the mech designers there. Let me try to hail him through this pinpoint comm channel."

The shuttle connected to the comm buoys, which then attempted to open up a comm channel with the comm of a specific individual who currently sat in an office next to a mech workshop.

The channel connected.

"Who is this?" An uncertain voice sounded out from the noisy comm channel.

"Loke Vedette. It's me. Ves Larkinson." Ves stepped in and replied. "I'm aboard the shuttle with Captain Orfan. We recently arrived at this planet and we didn't expect to find the Finmoth Regal. What happened to you guys?"

"Damnit! I can't tell you this! The monitoring system probably caught me! I can already hear the security officers rushing to my office! Damn, you Ves!"

"Look, stay put and we'll rescue you somehow. Just tell us what is going on at the ship!"

"You bastard! If you must know, Captain Bonnet and half of the upper echelon! They quit the Mech Corps and plan to go pirate! And that's not all!"

"What else is worse than deserting?"

"The deserters banded together with the Dragons of the Void!"

Chapter 940 Dumping the Ballas

Dragons of the Void! This old pirate organization led the vast Dragon Alliance which organized many different pirate gangs under a single banner. Together with the Ravienne Alliance, they dominated over the Faris Star Region as a side hegemon.

Ves wasn't too unfamiliar with the Dragons of the Void. He encountered them for the first time during the Groening mission. He encountered them again during the Glowing Planet campaign.

Both times, the Dragons of the Void proved to be consummate opportunists and cowards. Yet their cunning, organization and above all else their penchant for brainwashing loads of cannon fodder made them into a force to be reckoned with.

Personally, Ves considered the Dragons of the Void to be the most formidable pirates in the Faris Star Region.

In contrast to the violent and destructive Ravienne's Ravagers who presided over the loosely-organized Ravienne Alliance, the Dragons of the Void distinguished themselves over other pirates by being smarter and more rational than the average pirates.

Naturally, this was a very low bar to surpass considering how stupid most pirates that Ves encountered turned out to be, yet just a modest bump in intelligence practically increased their threat level by at least five times!

Therefore, hearing that the Dragons of the Void became involved immediately made him think that they were out to capture those who fled the surface of the planet. After all, any survivors who managed to make it out of that hellhole stood a considerable chance of making it off with their mission objectives!

"How did the Dragons of the Void manage to convert the Finmoth Regal's officers?" Ves hastily asked Vedette over the pinpoint comm channel. "Answer me quickly!"

"The Finmoth Regal became lost ever since they arrived in this blasted system. We fought off several sandman ships and we almost died if not for the Dragons of the Void. Right now, at least half of the crew are on their side while the rest of us are awaiting 'processing'! A bunch of those pirates are even keeping an eye on everyone! You gotta help me before they stuff me in the brainwashing machine! Please rescue us!"

The channel cut off pretty quickly as the ship's security officers stormed into Vedette's office and hit him with an electrifier baton.

Ves turned to the other three occupants of the shuttle with a grimace on his face. "Looks like the Dragons of the Void caught the Finmoth Regal when she was cornered by the sandmen."

Captain Orfan scowled. "The Finmoth Regal has always been a troubled ship. There was that thing with one of their chief technicians, and now they went as far as turning pirate! Ahem, no offense to you Swordmaidens."

"No offense taken." Dise said stoically. "Many pirates actually look forward to being brought into the fold of the Dragons of the Void. The higher-ranking officers of your lost ship were probably able to get away from being brainwashed but the rank-and-file will probably get turned over time."

Ves saw many instances of people affected by the Dragon Alliance's brainwashing methods. Those who underwent the process tended to become suggestible but also fairly stupid and impulsive. It was as if they lost some of their intrinsic value as a human being. While the brainwashed idiots wouldn't hesitate to throw away their lives in suicidal charges, they weren't quite capable of performing any tasks that required higher-level brain functioning.

This was probably why a mech designer like Loke Vedette escaped being put through the brainwashing machine. The fact that he was kind of a wimp who couldn't hurt a fly likely caused the deserters to disregard him as well.

The question now was what they should do with this new information. "I think I speak for all of us that we can't do anything about the Finmoth Regal for the time being."

"Why not? We got all of this fancy CFA gear right?" Ketis retorted as she wrapped her gauntlet against her breast plate. "As long as we can sneak aboard the combat carrier, there won't be a single person aboard that ship who can stop us from killing all the pirates and deserters!"

Lieutenant Dise shook her head. "No, Ves is right. Look at the state of my gear. Captain Orfan and I aren't in the best shape to fight. Even if we manage to hold up against the ship's security officers, there's one type of opponent that we'd be helpless against. Their mechs."

A person could never fight a mech. Though it was not impossible, in most circumstances the difference in scale and power was simply too vast to overcome. An ant would always be an ant in front of an elephant even if the ant decked itself out in high tech gear.

This was the Age of Mechs! Conquering a ship from the inside didn't offer them a solution against the mechs currently searching for their shuttle's whereabouts! As long as the mechs remained on the side of the deserters and the Dragons of the Void, taking control of the Finmoth Regal was meaningless!

"Right now, our priority should be fulfilling our mission, which is to get our lockboxes back to civilized space and hand them over to the right people. The first step in doing so is to reunite with the fleet, or at least board a friendly ship

that can take us out of here." Captain Orfan spoke, recentering the discussion on what they ought to do.

"We should wait for the fleet." Ves suggested. "There's no point in going anywhere else, and I'm sure we can hide ourselves from the Finmoth Regal's mechs."

They decided to hole themselves up in high orbit over Aeon Corona IX and keep the shuttle's ECM systems up. The technological disparity between the shuttle's ECM and the sensor systems of Finmoth Regal's mechs meant the latter likely wouldn't be able to see a thing unless they came within a range of a hundred kilometers.

The CFA shuttle neatly entered a very high orbit, far enough away from the planet to keep their distance from the Finmoth Regal and her complement of mechs.

Nobody really knew what to do at this moment. Dise and Ketis conferred quietly amongst themselves through a private comm channel. Meanwhile, Captain Orfan kept glowering at the sensor plot showing the Finmoth Regal's mechs continuing to fan out in an aggressive search pattern.

As for Ves, he knew that they'd be screwed if they failed to secure a berth on a friendly FTL-capable ship. Therefore, he pointed the most powerful long-range sensors of the shuttle in the direction of Aeon Corona VII and attempted to make sense of the battles that took place in orbit.

Even if the CFA shuttle boasted some of the best sensors he had the privilege of working with, the remnant astral winds that linger in the void of interplanetary space still caused a lot of problems in terms of gaining accurate readings, especially at a fair distance away.

Nonetheless, the shuttle's sensors captured a large amount of emissions originating around the huge planet and its moons. Though they didn't provide

Ves with enough fidelity for him to figure out who was fighting against who, the fact that a large amount of emissions were clustered at several points revealed that the fleets were still intact for the time being.

"Although it's hard to say whether they still exist considering the time lag."

Aeon Corona VII and Aeon Corona IX happened to brush by very close right now, so it wasn't as if Ves observed sensor readings of a battle that already ended several days ago.

"Still, the fact that these emissions have lasted for many hours is very disconcerting."

This told him that the stricken fleets were likely engaged in a continuous running engagement against an onslaught of sandman ships.

The emissions mostly concentrated in a handful of points at the start, but after several hours of continuous battle, some of them started to split up and spread in several different directions.

"Some of the human fleets are splitting up!" Ves guessed aloud. "Perhaps the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet is among them. I can't tell from these vague readings."

Captain Orfan cursed. "How many sandman ships are they fighting against?"

"I don't know, but they must be extremely numerous if the fleet decided they are better off splitting up!"

Splitting up a fleet was an act of desperation. Any commanding officer who gave the order only did so when they determined that keeping the fleet together would risk their annihilation!

At the very least, by various combat carriers and other ships in different directions, the faster combat carriers such as the Gorgon's Gaze wouldn't be

weighed down by the slower logistics ships such as the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan.

Of course, abandoning cohesion also left those fat, slow ships completely vulnerable to being overtaken by the horde of sandman ships!

While the crew of those sluggish ships destined to be caught would likely be able to shuttle over to the faster ships, it still hurt a lot to lose all of those support ships.

Nonetheless, just like Ves back then, the fleets couldn't think that far ahead when they were only one step away from defeat!

Therefore, Ves did not exhibit too much surprise at this outcome. He instead paid more attention to the trajectory of the emissions as they traveled in different directions.

Some flew up, some flew down, some flew towards Aeon Corona VIII, yet at least twelve different signatures appeared to arc towards Aeon Corona IX!

"We're going to have company soon!" Ves alerted the others. "Whether they're friendly or not, I bet that there's at least a couple of Vandal and Swordmaiden ships among them who received order to pick us up!"

"It could also be the Dragons of the Void."

"Aw, please don't spoil my hopes."

"We need to get ready to face both friends and foes."

It took some time for the signatures to reach the planet, especially when sandman ships constantly nipped at their heels.

Fortunately, most sandman motherships tend to be average when it came to their means of sublight propulsion. Their smaller escort ships were faster but they never strayed too far from the mothership and the sandman admiral controlling them.

The extremely chaotic situation and the act of dumping the ballast saw many ships left for dead. Yet their sacrifice allowed many other ships to successfully dance out of the reach of the pursuing sandman ships.

Shortly after this change, the fighting in the vicinity of Aeon Corona VII subsided and fewer weapon emissions lit up the distant space for the shuttle's sensors to capture and interpret.

"The fighting has pretty much ended at this point." Ves concluded. "The ships too slow to outrun the sandmen have all been caught while the ships that are fast enough to outpace the aliens are no longer threatened."

Nonetheless, how many starships survived? How many ships split up but would never be able to gather up with their fellow sister ships?

Aside from that, a lot of mechs must have been cut off and unable to return to their carriers.

"The Finmoth Regal is exhibiting an increasing level of activity! She's lifting off!"

The shuttle hadn't been the only one to observe the proceedings from afar. Although the old and battered combat carrier didn't carry any high-quality sensors, she had a lot of them and they were all larger. It didn't surprise Ves that they managed to piece together some of the clues as well.

"The Finmoth Regal and her mechs don't have a lot of time left to capture us!"

The situation would become very awkward for the deserters if loyal Vandal ships entered the orbit of Aeon Corona IX. Who knew how either side would react!

Another complication was that the sandman motherships would certainly keep chasing after the humans. A battle between humans only gave the sandmen the opportunity to catch up!

"We shouldn't wait here until they arrive. Instead, we should fly out to meet one of the incoming ships!" Ves suggested.