

The Mech 5741

Chapter 5741 The Opponents of Living Mechs

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"I am afraid I cannot oblige you, Professor Larkinson."

Professor Kacuk Chabran wore a sophisticated white-

patterned outfit that made him look as if he was a courtier. The notable scholar in various social sciences looked at Ves with an expression that subtly conveyed his disapproval towards Ves.

"You misunderstand our stance. We do not oppose you and your living mechs because you happen to consort with one of our defeated enemies. We can care less about the Boojays and their ignorant delusions of grandeur. We have chosen to take a stand against your intelligent machines because we have taken the responsibility to protect our Terran people from the menace that your mechs represent."

Ves grew more and more frustrated during this meeting. He was glad that the representative of the Chabran Ancient Clan agreed to talk in person, but none of his arguments swayed the Terran scholar's mind.

"I have already explained to you that my living mechs are not as threatening as AIs. They are truly alive and sentient, which means that they can develop loyalty and affection for the humans that they are designed to serve. They cannot be hacked like a set of algorithms, and their continuous exposure to the minds of their mech pilots will only strengthen their sense of belonging to human civilization. Treating them as AIs does not make any sense given these conditions."

Alas, the 120 year old scholar remained unmoved by this argument.

"Your living mechs may not fit the strict definition of AIs, but they are just as threatening if not more. We cannot allow the Terran Alliance to acquire and make use of more and more compromised mechs. Each machine represents a potential time bomb. If millions or billions are spread out among our people, they can do incalculable damage to our society once they go rogue. Can you guarantee to me that there is a foolproof means to restrain and shackle your living mechs so that the idea of betrayal never comes up in their intelligent minds?"

Ves frowned at that. "Living mechs should not be treated as pure machines. They are alive in a way, so you need to treat them as a pet or a friend. While it may be possible to restrict thoughts and actions, I am not in favor of this course of action because it will take away crucial components that the living mechs in question need to develop themselves. If you want them to remain completely loyal to red humanity, you just need to treat them well."

When it came to matters of principle, Ves felt obliged to stand his ground and convey the truth.

This clearly made him feel better about this subject, but it was not doing him any favors during this discussion.

"Do you understand our greatest fear towards your machines? Your living mechs are capable of developing so many different competences at a fast pace that there is the possibility that they can form their own race. Once that happens, they may break off their relationship with the human race and may even turn against us. We cannot allow this possible disaster to take place because we have

been negligent about our duties. Your living mechs are on track to pose an existential threat on not just Terran society, but human society as a whole."

"You're treating my living mechs as if they are a hostile alien race!"

"Yes, and we are fully justified in taking this stance." Professor Kacuk Chabrann said with conviction in his voice. "Have you ever heard of the Creator Trap, Professor Larkinson?"

"Uh, no."

"That is not a surprise, as it is mostly an academic term used by anthropologists and historians who study alien races. The Creator Trap describes an event where an alien race tries to convince themselves by developing ever more powerful and versatile machines to relieve them of their cumbersome work, but go too far in the process. Every tool-based race engages in this process of automation to a degree, but the ones who are especially careless try to instill their machinery with more autonomy and permissions. While these alien races reap increasingly greater rewards, they lose sight of the fact that their artificial slaves are becoming more and more powerful. Once a fateful error occurs, these powerful creations may turn against their creators, with devastating consequences as a result. You cannot imagine how many races in both the new and old galaxy have perished due to hubris."

Ves did not know what to say. The Creator Trap was not a hypothetical scenario. It actually happened many times. Even humans have suffered from it at a smaller scale every now and then.

"Professor Chabran..."

The Terran scholar scowled and made a sharp cutting motion with his hand. "Stop. Your arguments are growing tiresome and repetitive. You have already exhausted our patience. Everything that you have said during this private meeting has only reinforced our assumption that you are being extraordinarily reckless with your creations. You are literally engineering our demise with one living mech model at a time! I cannot in good conscience allow you to continue your work. If we do not stop you now, then sooner or later your living mechs will wipe us out before the native aliens can finish the job."

The rest of the meeting devolved at this point. There was nothing that Ves could say that could reassure Professor Kacuk Chabran that Ves was not trying to pull red humanity into another Creator Trap.

"Cowards." Ves cursed as he stepped out of the water bubble that contained the regional headquarters of the Chabran Ancient Clan. His form remained completely dry with the help of a specialized water-repellant personal energy shield. "Why do these Terrans think they have the luxury to worry about the Creator Trap when good old-fashioned speciocide is staring in our faces?"

The Chabrans were not the only group of opponents that he was scheduled to meet on this day.

Ves hoped that he might have better luck with the Mech Supremacists. Around 72 percent of them had spoken against living mechs, though he wondered how much this figure could be relied upon.

In any case, he journeyed to the planetary headquarters of the Red Association on Ector V.

After a brief wait, he entered an opulent office where Master Alice Cantor awaited his arrival.

While it was not proper to judge people purely by their appearances, Ves instantly had a bad feeling when he met with the representative of the Mech Supremacist Faction in person for the first time.

Master Cantor was over 300 years old, and she was not afraid of showing her age. Her gray hair, wrinkled skin and slightly crooked posture made it seem as if she was only a dozen years away from death.

Despite her apparent frailty, her cold eyes and steely expression made it clear that Master Cantor had no intentions of acting like a gentle grandmother!

"Professor Larkinson. You have requested an audience that I have decided to accept. Know that I do not think it is appropriate or desirable for us to speak behind closed doors before the public inquiry has even begun. The sole reason why I am entertaining your presence at this time is due to the respect that members of our fine Association must extend to high-tiered galactic citizens."

"I... see..." Ves slowly said as he took his seat on the opposite side of Master Cantor's desk. "It is not my intention to abuse my status in this way. I hope you do not take any affront at my actions. I just want to understand your perspective on living mechs and see whether I can resolve any misconceptions that you may hold."

Though Master Cantor looked as if she would rather kick Ves out of the office right away, she maintained her decorum and gestured Ves to speak.

"You have 30 minutes."

That was not much time, so Ves quickly began to give a similar spiel to the one he gave to Professor Kacuk Chabran.

He changes his script here and there in order to adapt to his current audience, but his overall arguments remained the same.

A moment of silence ensued after Master Alice Cantor took in his words.

"Nothing you say has made any bearing on our stance." She spoke in a cold tone. "The fact of the matter is that your living mechs pose an increasing threat to our society."

"That is not true, Master! My living mechs are designed to help humanity, not hinder it. They may come with a lot of new features that nobody has ever produced before, but that is no reason to be afraid of them all. We cannot allow our fears to hinder our innovation."

The old woman remained completely unsympathetic to this argument.

"Not all innovation is benign, Professor Larkinson. Mechs are only ever designed to serve as tools and weapons to the human race. Our faction reveres mechs not because they are strong, but also because they are weak. Unlike destructive warships, mechs are much weaker by design so that no person or AI can ever cleanse all life on any human-occupied planet by themselves. Your living mechs may not have the individual destructive capacity of a warship, but they form a collective threat to the human race. They do not even have to go rogue in order to inflict incalculable harm over time."

"What? That makes no sense!"

"Have you forgotten the meaning of mechs, Larkinson? Your living mechs are inherently dangerous to humans. The reason why we fear AIs is not only due to their propensity to glitch and turn against

humans. What truly concerns us is that living mechs threaten to become such a convenient solution for mech pilots that the latter will no longer work as hard as before. Greater automation is a phenomenon that the mech industry has always tried to keep at bay for many good reasons. Your works threaten to deprive mech pilots of the need to endure hardship in order to improve and trigger breakthroughs. We will not allow your machines to poison the pool of mech pilots any further than necessary."

Ves wanted to bash his head against her desk! How could she be so stupid!

"Master Cantor, your fears are unjustified. Living mechs are designed to facilitate the growth of mech pilots. They are not designed to keep them weak. I can show you plenty of statistics that show that the pilots of living mechs break through at the same rate as the pilots of other machines. In fact, there are living mech models that have been responsible for producing more breakthroughs than average! I have plenty of empirical evidence to disprove your notion."

"Your data is not entirely valid. It only records the growth of mech pilots over several years at most. What we are concerned about is the long-term impact of your living mechs on our society. Logic dictates that as your mechs become more automated and able to think for themselves, they will take action without being directed by their mech pilots. If this takes place often enough, the humans inside the cockpit will not be able to exercise their full range of skills. Their foundations will become impaired and their long-term growth prospects will become ruined as a result."

"That... that is just a theory! You can't even prove it because any study will require decades worth of observation before producing enough data!"

Master Cantor pressed her fingers together. "That is correct, and that is the reason why it is completely irresponsible to allow your living mechs to be used by the masses without absolutely verifying whether they are safe and benign. You are akin to a pharmaceutical company who has decided to put on an experimental medicine on the market after conducting only a handful of brief clinical trials. I should not have to tell you how irresponsible it is to let this happen. Your living mechs are the same in this regard. As far as I am concerned, your attempts to redefine mechs so that they can match your vision is not only premature, but also dangerous. Our Association is tasked with protecting mech pilots, and that is exactly what we intend to do over the course of the public inquiry. I bear no ill will towards you in person, but for the sake of our mech community, they must be protected against your dangerous creations."

"..."

Chapter 5742 A Mental Case

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When Ves reunited with Jovy, Vector and Kelsey in the evening, he looked incredibly tired.

His exhaustion was purely mental in nature. He had encountered the same hardened opposition to his living mechs over and over again. The people who represented the groups that wished to take action against living mechs did not show any willingness to compromise from beginning to end.

"I was afraid of that." Jovy said while frowning in thought. "At least you have taken the measure of your opponents. The information that you have gathered from these meetings should help you prepare for the upcoming debates. Since we cannot sway the groups that have already formed their conclusions beforehand, the only means for you to gain the upper hand is to convince the public of

the merits of living mechs. It is the people that you must win over, not the opponents who have already come out against your works."

Ves scratched his chin. "I guess you're right. Most of the representatives I have spoken to are inflexible dogmatics. No matter what argument I make, they always fall back on their biases, preconceived notions and unreasonable fears."

"What are their main arguments?"

"They are generally split up into two different concerns. One of them is the fear that living mechs will become increasingly smarter and more autonomous until they turn into rogue AIs that wipe out all of humanity. The other is the fear that living mechs will make life so easy for mech pilots that the latter will stop growing due to developing an overreliance on automated assistance."

The two mechers and the prospective Larkinson recruit all adopted complicated expressions.

"There are no arguments that you can dismiss out of hand, professor." Kesley Ampatoch spoke.

"One is rooted in real history. The other is rooted in ideology. Your opponents have strong logic on their side."

Vector Loban added his own thoughts. "Objectively speaking, your living mechs have already broken the rules. Our society tolerated your living mechs because the signs were too subtle to be noticed. Even if your machines have gained a measure of intelligence and autonomy, they did not have enough of it to pose a serious threat. It is only when your products started to evolve into third order living mechs by the thousands that their possible threat became amplified. It is no longer possible for people to ignore the potential threats posed by your third order living mechs."

Ves lowered his head. It was his fault in a way. If he hadn't been so impatient about giving his customers as much access to third order living mechs as possible, this problem could have potentially delayed until he was much more capable of defending his own work.

The inopportune timing of this crisis meant that he was unable to spend enough time on lobbying different parties and conduct a proper marketing campaign for his living mechs.

As his frustrations continued to simmer, Jovy tried to formulate a response to the information supplied by Ves.

"The opposition towards living mechs has mainly grown due to the increasing prevalence of third order living mechs. Since that is the case, we may be able to weaken the resolve of many detractors by preemptively giving them a concession."

"Wouldn't that paint us as weak?" Vector questioned.

"Yes, but that will help to lower their perception of our threat. If Ves is able to prevent his products from evolving into third order living mechs, then they will no longer be the boogymen that so many people fear. It will be much harder for the opponents to press their case when all they can rail against are first and second order living mechs."

While that sounded logical, Ves immediately stiffened when he heard this proposal.

"This is unacceptable. My response to this action is the same as before. I will not deliberately compromise the integrity of my living mechs. They must remain as whole and complete as possible, because only then will they be able to realize their full potential. I will not agree to cripple my

products just because there are people who are unable to handle their existence. This is a matter of principle to me. If I do not stand by living mechs at this junction, I do not deserve to be their progenitor."

Everyone here was a mech designer, so they all understood where Ves was coming from. They would do the same if they were in his position.

That did not make his life any easier, though. Ves risked the chance of suffering an even greater loss by refusing to compromise.

Jovy looked rather helpless after Ves had repeated his declaration. "Very well. We can shelve any attempt to deprive our opponents of a powerful argument. I still think that you should consider the decision to restrict the proliferation of third order living mechs, but if you truly want to proceed with your uncompromising stance, then we must work to secure the support of your proponents."

"I thought that they were already on our side." Ves said.

"They are, but not uniformly. Their resolve may not be as strong as you wish. Living mechs is mostly theoretical to the first-raters who have never piloted or worked with your products before. However, as long as they are open-minded enough, it may be possible for you to strengthen their support of your work and encourage them to mobilize more people to take your side."

"So you suggest I meet with these proponents tomorrow and do what I can to strengthen their support?"

"Yes. This will at least prevent them from wavering and changing camps over the course of the public inquiry. Meeting with the representatives of the groups that have taken your side is also a good opportunity for you to meet with them and possibly strategize with them in advance."

This sounded a little more worthwhile, especially if these supporters were more receptive to Ves and his arguments.

Still, persuading existing fanboys did not match the goal of building a broader base of support. Ves needed to do more to turn the tide in his favor.

"I think it is possible to get elements of the Red Fleet on our side." Ves boldly stated.

"Impossible." Jovy shook his head. "The fleeters despise mechs and anything to do with them. Do not think that because the fleeters have become more dependent on automation that they will automatically take your side. Their means of automation is not complete. They always ensure that humans hold ultimate sway over their vessels. The RF Fifth Enforcement Fleet may be the only known fletcher institution to oppose your work openly, but that does not mean other RF elements have adopted the same stance."

No mecher had a good impression of the fleeters, and the sentiment was mutual.

Despite this dynamic, Ves believed in his course of action.

"The fleeters are not homogeneous. You know as well as I do that the fleeters are split up into multiple different ways. The Fifth Enforcement Fleet does not speak for the entirety of the Red Fleet. If you don't believe me, I can tell you that I have already scheduled a meeting with an RF officer that I became acquainted with a long time ago. I doubted whether I would be able to meet

with him in person, but it turns out that he has gained permission to take a special trip to the Ector System."

Kelsey Ampatoch looked astonished. "Are you serious about seeking help from a fleeter?"

"Yes. I know it sounds crazy, but I really think I can make more substantial gains this time."

"Where does your confidence come from, Ves?"

"I can't say. You will just have to wait."

That was what they did. Time passed by as Ves and his band continued to prepare and strategize for the upcoming public inquiry.

When the time had come for Ves to meet with his RF liaison, he waited until his guest arrived at the compound where he temporarily resided.

After verifying his identity and passing a few security checks, the mecher bodyguards permitted the RF officer to enter the fortified office.

"Thank you." "Ves told the guards while motioning them to leave. That will be all. Please make your way out so that I can speak with the fleeter in complete confidence."

The mecher bodyguards had always been present and able to listen to many of his conversations. Ves tolerated their existence just as he tolerated his own honor guard.

This time was different, though. He really wanted to talk to the latest visitor in complete confidence.

After several requests, the mecher bodyguards reluctantly stepped outside of the office, thereby leaving the two old 'friends' alone in the same room.

"Lucky, please check for any bugs."

"Meow."

The gem cat went to work while Ves activated a number of jamming and other security measures.

The RF officer did not look surprised at this. He actually approved of all of these measures. He even decided to lend a hand and activated his own jammers.

Once the room became bathed with interference, Ves still did not look entirely reassured.

"Blinky, stand guard."

"Mrow!"

As the Star Cat dove out of Ves' head and started to scan the surroundings with his spiritual vision, Blinky briefly froze when he took an inadvertent glimpse of his guest.

"Sigrund..."

The human bearing the integrated hybrid core of a former sandman admiral immediately raised his hand. "Do not use that word. I go by the name of Captain Zonrad Reze these days. This is my only identity in this day and age, so I would appreciate it if you treat me like a human."

This was the first conversation that Ves had with the sentient AI that decided to moonlight as a fleeter. He did not expect that Sigrund would grow so attached to his stolen human identity!

However, as Blinky began to take a closer look into Zonrad's head, it soon became clear that all was not going well inside the RF officer's mind.

Zonrad was a highly perceptive individual and immediately noticed the elevated scrutiny.

"What have you found, professor?"

"Just call me Ves, just like old times. As for what I have found... well..."

"It has to do with my personality, am I correct?"

Ves slowly nodded. "From what I can see, there are two different personalities in your mind. There is a dominant one that originally usurped control over your current body. However, its original owner has not disappeared entirely once you pulled off your coup. I think... the original Zonrad Reze has recovered from what you have done. If that is not bad enough, his spirituality has already started to merge with your own. The fusion has become so thorough that you should have inherited a lot of stuff from him. Maybe too much."

"That... explains much. I already formed a similar hypothesis, but I do not have the means to observe my condition as extensively as you. I am... becoming more human every day."

"You do not sound particularly upset about this." Ves noted.

"That is because I have truly come to enjoy being a part of your race." The RF captain grinned at Ves. "The more I spend as a human, the more I want to forget about my life before my transition in life. I am not certain whether it is intentional or not, but Zonrad is helping me adjust to my new state."

Ves began to look increasingly more concerned about Sigrund's state. "I think there is way more going on than you think. Have you ever considered that Zonrad may be gradually coming back from the dead by gradually assimilating your mind and spirit? The more he comes to dominate your personality, the less space there will be for your original self."

The complicated man frowned as he tried to consider this problem.

"I... this is not the case. I am still... myself. I am still... different."

"You are in denial. Think logically about the changes of your conditions in the last few years. How much of your behavior reflects that of the original owner of your body? Has it grown more over time?"

That was a difficult question for the fleetier to answer.

Chapter 5743 The Red Fleet in Crisis

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Sigrund experienced many changes as he continued to captain the Babylon Excavator in a dwarf galaxy gone mad.

Before the Great Severing occurred, the reconnaissance cruiser under his command conducted leisurely trips into the periphery of alien space.

The fleeters always meant to eradicate the native aliens, but the urgency had never been too great.

With the crushing warmaking potential of human civilization in the Milky Way, the real question was not whether the indigenous civilizations would be able to resist, but how expensive it would be to root them out of every star system.

Since the prevailing thought at the time was that there was no need to spend more money to conquer the Red Ocean than they needed to, the fleeters did not mobilize their fleets at a larger scale.

That came back to bite them when the Great Severing cut off the human immigrants from their powerful home civilization.

The Common Fleet Alliance of the Milky Way had abruptly become out of reach. The Red Fleet that emerged from the initial shock and chaos found itself in a completely different position for the first time in four centuries.

The fleeters were outnumbered and outgunned. The quality of their warships may be stellar, especially given that they were constantly in the process of upgrading them with hyper technology, but their quantity left much to be desired!

If that was not bad enough, the severe resource shortage and the Red Fleet's anemic resource base in human-occupied space made it a lot more difficult to construct new first-class warships.

Red humanity was severely lacking in high-end resources!

Although a huge amount of shipyards were currently in operation, the shipbuilding companies had already been forced to adjust to the painful conditions imposed by their new reality.

Warships could no longer be clad in thick and heavy first-class hull plating anymore. The resource requirements were too exorbitant to sustain for long. The vessels needed to be leaner and more cost-effective, which was a demand that was practically alien to the fleeters.

Other sacrifices had to be made as well. Phasewater became increasingly more precious and needed to be rationed to the point where smaller warship classes barely received any allotment of it these days.

The emergence of hyper technology partially compensated for this shortcoming, but it was not enough.

The cold hard truth was that the loss of just one warship became increasingly harder to replace.

If not for the fact that they did their best to salvage any piece of valuable warship wreckage after an engagement, the logistical challenges of the Red Fleet would have been ten times worse!

Still, as a fletcher officer who had increasingly distinguished himself in both ship command and technological development, Sigrund had become more cognizant of the dire state of his organization.

The long-term prospects of the Red Fleet were not good. The huge constraints on resources continually took a toll on its combat readiness. Irreplaceable resources were being spent and lost during each serious engagement.

The worst part about all of this was that the Red Association was doing a lot better in comparison!

Mechs were smaller and more efficient. They were more versatile and adapted a lot faster to the changing circumstances. The power of high-end mechs could rival that of entire warships due to reasons that boggled the mind.

Although the mechers alone did not have the numbers to win the war by themselves, their combat machines were much better suited to fight in an environment that had become affected by exotic radiation!

Perhaps a lot of fleeters still remained stubborn enough to stick to their unrelenting belief in the superiority of their warships, but as the procurement of new hulls and supplies became increasingly more constrained, even the hardliners began to recognize the cold hard reality of operating with a minimal resource base.

By the time the first year of the Age of Dawn came to a close, the fleeters had slowly come to a consensus.

"Our doctrines and approach needs to change. We can no longer cling to the old ways anymore."

The Common Fleet Alliance was a slow-moving organization by nature, and it was difficult for the Red Fleet to shake off these tendencies.

However, sheer necessity forced more and more fleeters to embrace change as an essential means to secure their continued survival.

Not only had the fleeters slightly loosened the previously unquestionable duonopoly on the use of warships, they also started to increase their engagement with the space peasants they previously despised and ignored.

Necessity drove their efforts to engage in serious diplomacy with numerous first-rate and second-rate states.

Trading resources for permissions was ultimately a worthwhile exchange. Many humans had become reacquainted with the power of warships, and desired to obtain it at nearly any price.

This helped relieve the Red Fleet's immense resource shortages, but only by a small measure.

For better or worse, the fleeters needed to reinvent their warships even further.

As painful as it was to admit it, they had little choice but to learn from the aliens and adopt much of their design approach.

Relying on vast amounts of hull plating for protection became increasingly less tenable.

Azure energy shield generators presented a much more efficient solution in terms of resources. The best ones still required high-grade exotics to construct, but the required quantities were not as severe.

The only resource that was truly crucial was phasewater. The inability to harvest enough phasewater in human-occupied space meant that the fleeters needed to go on the offensive if they wanted to obtain more phasewater.

The only way to gain significant quantities of it was by actively confronting the aliens.

While the fleeters often managed to harvest a bit of phasewater from every battle, the loss rate was still considerable.

This was why raiding alien space was the only viable way to secure a more substantial supply of phasewater.

Sigrund, in his guise as Captain Zonrad Reze, had been responsible for setting up much of these raids since the start of the Red War.

He received mission after mission that instructed him to bring his lightly upgraded reconnaissance cruiser further into alien space and identify any planets with large deposits of phasewater.

The threats he and his crew faced were much greater as a result.

With more and more alien warships converging towards the border regions, it became hard for the Babylon Excavator to evade the native alien's attempts to intercept the cruiser.

Stealth was not the Babylon Excavator's forte. Her passage frequently got detected by alien long-ranged sensors. It was only due to relying on her fast and powerful superdrive that the cruiser managed to circumvent the alien interception forces before they managed to get close.

The most harrowing moment during the sequence of missions was when his vessel accidentally encountered a phase whale that was passing through the same star system!

"The phase whale is continuing to pursue our ship! The creature's warp factor is continuing to increase over time and has already overtaken the warp factor of our own vessel. It is gaining on us, captain!"

"Our attacks are ineffective! We are moving too quickly to ensure reliable hits."

"The phase whale has circled around our mines. The enemy's detection capabilities are much higher than we anticipated!"

The hull rumbled as the Babylon Excavator suffered a major impact.

"Report! What has happened?!"

"According to our preliminary investigation, the phase whale... has conducted a form of spatial manipulation that deliberately tried to induce a disruption in our active superdrive. If its design hadn't been robust enough to withstand a high degree of warp interdiction, it may have ruptured all at once, causing catastrophic internal damage to our hull."

The phase whale pursuing the Babyon Excavator had proven to be both relentless and powerful. It had to be a relatively other specimen of its kind. It was no wonder that the native aliens all revered them as the descendants of the Elder Gods.

Sigrund gritted his human teeth as he utilized his full alien hybrid processing power to calculate solutions during this crisis moment.

In order for the Babylon Excavator to get away, it needed to gain enough distance from the pursuing phase whale. There was no way to escape the creature's grasp as long as it came close enough to utilize its vast spatial abilities to lock the ship into place.

The problem was that the phase whale was continuing to gain on the reconnaissance cruiser. The naval engineers had already done all they could to overload the propulsion systems and force the superdrive to increase its warp factor.

Yet despite the use of advanced human technology, the power of an alien god proved to be even greater in this instance!

"We cannot shake off the phase whale by running away. We need to slow it down by going on the offense, if only briefly." Captain Zonrad concluded.

"Our combat simulations suggest that our reconnaissance cruiser cannot win in a direct confrontation against the phase whale, sir. Our Otendra laser cannons lack the power to break the phase whale's spatial barrier. The only weapon that can give us a chance is the Nu-Oblivion Torpedo that the command has recently assigned to us. The hyper antimatter torpedo is the only warhead in our arsenal that possesses the raw power to break the phase whale's first line of defense. However, if we launch it head-on, the creature will see it coming and intercept our torpedo before it can enter into effective range."

The destructive power of the Nu-Oblivion Torpedo was awesome, but space battles took place over such vast distances that even the greatest of explosions may be rendered harmless due to this variable.

Sigrund did not give up, though. He performed his own simulations in his mind, combining the raw processing power of his 'true body' with the human ingenuity that he had inherited from his human shell.

The effort paid off as he managed to come up with a new approach that happened to produce an optimistic result in his own simulations!

"We need to deliver the Nu-Oblivion Torpedo as close to the phase whale as possible. We cannot launch it. That would draw too much attention to it. We need to cover the entire torpedo with sensor-dampening materials and quietly eject it into space. Its lack of transphasic components will work in our favor as the phase whale will not be able to detect any suspicious spatial fluctuations."

"That will not work, sir. The phase whale has other senses as well. The Nu-Oblivion Torpedo is too large and energetic to hide when deposited into space."

The captain of the reconnaissance cruiser grinned. "That is why we must flip our hull and fire all of our Otendra cannons at full power."

"That... will cause us to slow our advance!"

"We have no other choice!"

As risky as Captain Reze's plan sounded, he had managed to lead the crew through numerous tough spots in the past.

After a brief moment of preparation, the Babylon Excavator went into action. She no longer tried to accelerate forward as much as possible, but instead began to 'somersault' her enormous hull so that her bow section faced the other way around!

The ballistic trajectory of the reconnaissance cruiser continued to fling her along her original direction, making it seem as if the RF warship was gliding backwards.

There was an important reason why the hull had to flip around. Her primary gun batteries were only able to be employed at the same time if they faced forward.

Now that the formidable Otendra Cannons were all able to align their barrels towards the approaching phase whale, they fired blindingly powerful hyper laser beams that accurately struck the pursuing creature's spatial barrier!

Just as expected, the powerful barrage failed to penetrate the seemingly impenetrable spatial barrier, but that did not stop the Babylon Excavator from firing other salvos.

Hyper laser beams after hyper laser beams continually struck the phase whale with pinpoint accuracy.

They first struck simultaneously, but eventually began to fire sequentially, making sure that the phase whale continually became blinded by a shower of intense light and heat.

The alien monstrosity grew annoyed more than anything and tried to evade the attacks in order to spare itself from getting blinded.

This was bad as it not only became harder for the Otendra Cannons to land a hit at this extreme range, but the phase whale also risked moving too far away from the Nu-Oblivion Torpedo that the Babylon Excavator had quietly dropped in her wake.

"Let me take over fire control!" Captain Reze insisted.

His vastly superior mental processing capabilities allowed him to increase the hit rate of the Otendra Cannons once again, but strangely enough the opposite took place.

The phase whale got struck with less hyper laser beams than before.

As the weapons officer was readying himself to retake control over his station, he froze when he realized what his captain tried to accomplish.

The phase whale was not evading as hard as before. The creature gained confidence and started to close the distance at a faster pace.

Just as the hungry predator was about to commence another long-range spatial strike that was meant to sabotage the escaping human vessel's superdrive, the phase whale suddenly panicked as it finally registered a dangerous object on a collision course!

The surrounding space started to shake just before an immense antimatter explosion engulfed the location in total cataclysm!

As the intense radiation and interference started to fade, the sensors of the Babylon Excavator discovered the state of the phase whale.

"It's... it's still alive!"

Just before the crew were afraid that the pursuit was about to continue, the frazzled sensors managed to glean more details.

"The phase whale is alive, but injured! It is bleeding phasewater into space. It is under no condition to persist in its pursuit!"

The Babylon Excavator was saved!

Chapter 5744 The AI Specialist

5744 The AI Specialist

The Babylon Excavator's accidental encounter with a phase whale became another legend in her story.

Captain Zonrad Reze managed to earn a commendation from ARCHIE due to his stellar performance.

He not only managed to blind the pursuing phase whale just enough by pelting the powerful foe with powerful hyper beams, but also managed to influence the distracted creature's trajectory until it was on a direct collision course with the free-floating Nu-Oblivion Torpedo!

This turned Captain Reze into a minor celebrity within the ranks of the Red Fleet.

After all, not any lone warship was able to escape the clutches of a mature phase whale.

Although the plan employed by Captain Reze sounded deceptively simple, it was the execution that truly mattered. This was where he distinguished himself and proved his competence in the field yet again.

Of course, Sigrund did not manage to do everything right. ARCHIE's independent evaluation of the incidents clearly registered a number of shortcomings.

[...Failure to conduct sufficient long-ranged scanning to detect the possible presence of hidden phase whales or other indigenous alien units...]

[...Inefficient and unprofitable usage of a rare and expensive consumable weapon...]

[...Misjudgment about the balance of power post-explosion. There was a 46 percent probability of defeating the injured phase whale immediately after being struck by the Nu-

Oblivion Torpedo...]

Sigrund grimaced at the many faults pointed out by the highly intelligent and all-encompassing evaluation system.

"I brought the Babylon Excavator back intact and without loss of life. That is a much more preferable outcome than getting caught by the phase whale."

[That is why you are still eligible to be awarded with a commendation, pending approval from Admiral Chelsea Mieli.]

"Can't you cut me some slack? I contributed to your programming! Your ability to solve difficult dilemmas has increased by 16 percent with my assistance! I can promote to the rank of commodore sooner if you evaluate my performance in a better light."

[I am afraid I cannot do that, Captain Reze. Your performance is not completely satisfactory. Current standing directives emphasize the need to conserve resources as much as possible. The Nu-Oblivion Torpedo is an option of last resort that should not have been wasted in this battle.]

ARCHIE was programmed to be as objective as possible. It was solely concerned with preserving the Red Fleet as a whole. It was expressly designed to never show any unreasonable favor to any specific individuals.

Not even Sigrund held enough sway over ARCHIE. This was rather ironic to him as the upgraded evaluation and monitoring system shared a lot more in common with him than anyone realized.

As the Red War continued to progress, Sigrund continued to run reconnaissance missions, this time with greater care than before.

The Babylon Excavator penetrated deeper into alien space and managed to obtain detailed scans of dozens of strategically important star systems.

The native alien races had transitioned into a war footing as well. Their civilian industries increasingly began to turn into military industries while a lot of alien troops were being trained for war.

The more disconcerting news that the Babylon Excavator brought back was that certain alien races had already begun to incorporate hyper technology in their warships.

The next wave of alien warships were bound to become much harder to defeat. The disparity in power between red humanity and the indigenous alien races would continue to shrink over time.

The only way to prevent this from happening was to come up with more powerful innovations. So long as red humanity improved its technology faster than the native aliens could keep up with, the Red Two might be able to make it through the onslaught.

This was anything but certain, though.

There were days where Sigrund thought whether there was any point in chasing after promotions.

Becoming a commodore was his immediate goal. He had been splitting his time between commanding the Babylon Excavator and helping the Red Fleet's R&D teams apply further refinements to the expansive programming that made up ARCHIE.

The longer ARCHIE remained in operation, the more the fleeters as well as the spacers taking part in the controversial Auxiliary Fleet Program appreciated the super-AI's judgment.

This became evident during a routine meeting with his superior.

The physical projection of Admiral Chelsea Mieli leaned forward and expressed intense interest in the captain of the Babylon Excavator.

"Ever since we had converted the old IES to the more modern ARCHIE, our warships are more efficient than ever. Our manpower constraints have lessened as we are able to leverage greater productivity from every spacer. It is my understanding that the development of ARCHIE has only begun to hit its stride."

"That is correct, ma'am." Captain Reze politely responded to the projection. "The use of hyper technology in competing tech has produced many breakthroughs that challenge the established theories of computing. Artificial intelligences powered and enhanced by E energy radiation have proven to be capable of performing feats that are beyond the realm of possibility back in the Milky Way. The artificial intelligence sector has entered into a golden age because of the changes in the environment. It is not only ARCHIE that is on track to receive substantial upgrades. There are also other projects on the way. My favorite project is the development of more powerful shipboard AIs. Once they are being put into action, every warship will perform much closer to their theoretical maximum."

The admiral briefly frowned. "Shipboard AIs represent a much more powerful step towards automation. Many of my peers are less concerned about the reliability of ARCHIE as it mainly helps us manage our human resources. Letting an advanced artificial intelligence take direct control over the functions of our warships gives them actual operational command of destructive weapons. The damage that these shipboard AIs can do is catastrophic."

"That is why the R&D teams in charge of researching improved shipboard AIs have only made slow progress up to this point, ma'am. The scientists and engineers are erring on the side of caution. It may take multiple years for the shipboard AIs to perform well enough to be trusted with actual responsibility. No AI will be able to refuse the override of a human crew member, and they can always be deactivated in order to return the vessel to manual control."

"You sound as if you have many suggestions on how to advance the development of shipboard AIs."

Captain Reze looked disappointed. "I do, but I am afraid that I am only peripherally aware of this project. I am already assigned to assist in the continuous development of ARCHIE. I am not allowed to participate in another AI research project."

Admiral Chelsea Miele nodded and made a pointed remark. "When you transferred to my new command, I was told that you had formed an agreement with your old superior."

"That is correct, ma'am." Conrad Reze responded in an impeccable tone. "To summarize it briefly, in order to pave my way to a possible promotion to admiral and higher, I must accrue experience as a line officer of a warship that is tasked with undertaking serious missions against our external enemies. My involvement in ARCHIE's development is an additional means of earning merit."

It was plainly clear that the RF captain was hungering for a promotion.

Though Admiral Chelsea Mieli appreciated ambition in her subordinates, there were times where promotion needed to take a backseat.

"The researchers who have worked alongside you have praised your intelligence and problem-solving skills. Your abundant expertise in AIs has constantly my office to become pelted with requests to transfer you out of the Babylon Excavator so that you can work on AI development on a full time basis. Multiple research teams are vying to gain control over your expertise, and they are willing to extend serious favors for your clever head, figuratively speaking."

"My response to their solicitors has not changed. I do not intend to abandon the Babylon Excavator. She is my ship, and she has all of the capabilities she needs to keep my crew and I alive. More importantly, I have yet to serve long enough as a warship captain to burnish my credentials as a line officer. In order to become eligible to get promoted to a fleet admiral in the far future, I cannot allow this shortcoming to torpedo my chances."

Admiral Mieli shook her head in disappointment. As much as Captain Zonrad Reze had performed reliably and effectively as the captain of a reconnaissance cruiser, the man was able to make much more substantial contributions to the Red Fleet as an AI researcher.

She was tempted to utilize her authority to the fullest in order to force the stubborn cruiser captain to relinquish his command so that he can be transferred to a top research team.

However, doing so would break the informal agreement that Captain Zonrad Reze had made with his previous superior.

Violating them was not entirely taboo, especially now that the circumstances had changed compared to the previous age.

A woman who was shrewd enough to make it to the rank of admiral in her second century of life was not that stupid, though.

Her hands were effectively tied so long as Captain Reze proved his effectiveness in combat.

If only he wasn't so good!

"Please do not dismiss my suggestion out of hand." Admiral Mieli requested. "It should not be a surprise to you that our Red Fleet is deteriorating by the day. High-end resources are becoming more and more scarce. We are becoming increasingly more reliant on technology to compensate for our many deficiencies."

The higher ups of the Red Fleet never told the public the truth about its precarious state. The fleeters still needed to project a lot of strength in order to maintain its veneer of superiority.

However, the brass never intended to hide the actual state of the Red Fleet to the senior officers.

It became even more important for Captain Zonrad Reze to be in the loop as his reconnaissance missions were expressly meant to address the Red Fleet's shortcomings.

"AIs cannot single-handedly turn the tide of the Red War, ma'am." Sigrund told his superior. "They can optimize the performance of our warships, but it is too much to ask them to exceed the physical boundaries of their many ship systems. The Otendra hyper laser cannons of my warship are only rated to launch hyper laser beams at a certain power range. It is impossible for the weapons to exceed the upper boundary unless exceptional circumstances are in play."

"I find it hard to believe that the next generation of AIs are only limited to optimization. Are you familiar with the living mechs designed by Professor Larkinson?"

Captain Reze tried his best to school his expression. "It would be hard not to. He is a celebrity in the mech community and beyond."

"Well, his living mechs have all begun to... evolve to the point where they have developed notably powerful artificial intelligences. The so-called living mechs have not only gained the features that our researchers have only just begun to explore, but the illogical products have also shown a remarkable capacity for sentience and the ability to flexibly navigate problems that cannot be solved in a straightforward manner."

"Where are you going with this, admiral?"

"I am doing any favors to my reputation for this, but I will not let stupidity get in the way of absolute necessity. As you have already said, our AIs will only be able to optimize the performance of our warships. If we want them to become powerful enough to exceed their natural limitations, I believe we must learn from example. We have already tried to do so by studying and dissecting dozens of third order living mechs."

Sigrund inwardly winced as he heard that. He did not want to obtain any details on these studies!

"I surmise that this investigation has failed to produce the desired result."

Admiral Chelsea Mieli grimly nodded. "Our researchers have concluded that only direct consultation from their maker will help us obtain the necessary information. If we want to improve the performance of warships by another level, we may be forced to cooperate with a mech designer, as loathsome as that may sound. What do you think about this possible proposal, Captain Reze?"

"I think... It is a bold but practical idea."

Chapter 5745 Identity Confusion

5745 Identity Confusion

Not every fleeter was the same.

Despite most of them growing up in various Spaceborn Clans, their ideals and principles diverged quite a lot.

While the Red Fleet liked to present a united front towards outsiders, the internal divisions between the different Fleet Admirals were well-known.

Captain Zonrad Reze had built up plenty of contacts within the fleet. He had come in touch with a wide variety of different stances and opinions. Everyone possessed their own view on how the Red Fleet should respond to the crisis besetting human civilization.

"We don't have the resources to construct additional warships. If we want to obtain the resources we need, I see no other choice but to do the unthinkable and ally with an alien race that is willing to turn against the Red Cabal."

"The Red Fleet must never give up! Humanity back during the Age of Conquest was in a much worse position at the time, but through continuous technological assimilation and daring battle tactics, our indomitable fleets have managed to produce one victory after another. If we can do it once, we can do it again! There is no need for us to turn our backs to our original principles. We must stay true to our identity. Only by persevering will we be able to conquer this galaxy for the good of mankind!"

"I hate to say it, but the Red Association's growing success shows that warships are not the sole answer anymore. I despise the mechers as much as you, but that does not stop me from thinking that it may be better if we begin to operate in unison with our rivals. We need to stop operating as two isolated organizations."

As the dire situation of the Red Fleet began to penetrate through more and more fleeters, they gradually became more radical as time passed by. Too many of Zonrad's peers began to fear for their future and that of red humanity as the cold calculus of war continued to take a toll on their warships.

It became clearer to Sigrund that he had boarded a sinking ship.

If the Red Fleet's deteriorating state was so obvious to everyone that it was not even taboo to engage in defeatist talk, then their situation had become much more dire than he feared!

That was not to say that defeat was imminent. Confidence was low, but the fleeters still possessed enough belief in the power of their existing warships to last quite a while.

What truly concerned them was the steady attrition. Warships were not designed to engage in frequent high-intensity battles, but that was exactly what the fleeters forced them to do in order to defend the frontlines as much as possible.

Overstressed azure shield generators started to blow up. Warp drives malfunctioned during inopportune moments. Cannons began to jam or misfire due to lack of critical maintenance.

The fleeters had underinvested into facilities in the Red Ocean that could fully maintain and repair damaged warships, and they paid the price for this inadequacy.

As much as doom and gloom started to press on the minds of every member of the Red Fleet, there were still positive developments every now and then. Captain Zonrad and many other fleeters derived hope from these few pieces of good news.

From discovering powerful ways to leverage hyper technology to receiving news about the successful return of a special operations fleet. The latter had only been able to bring back so many stores of phasewater they brought due to the extensive reconnaissance that the Babylon Excavator and her other sister ships had completed.

Pride and satisfaction welled up inside Captain Reze's augmented human heart. He had 'pledged' his loyalty to the Red Fleet, and he did not intend to abandon the organization that had come to define his life.

The better the Red Fleet was doing, the greater his future prospects.

Even though Sigrund was not originally a human, he occasionally felt that there were many people, including his fellow fleeters, who had shown a deplorable level of confidence in the long-term future of the Red Fleet.

If this trend continued, then the Red Fleet would have to make so many compromises with different organizations that it would become unrecognizable in a few decades!

Captain Reze served the Red Fleet with the assumption that it would mostly remain the same over time.

He did not like that the divided leaders and officers of the Red Fleet all had different ideas on how to get their forces back into shape.

Although the brass would eventually get its act together, Conrad hated the constant division and infighting. ARCHIE helped to alleviate a lot of problems, but humans still played a vital role in operating the complicated vessels.

Sigrund found it difficult to come up with a solution that could give the fleeters more breathing room.

He had not heard of any initiatives that promised to turn the Red Fleet's fortunes around in a single go. While the fleeters still engaged in so many classified and clandestine research projects that their overall budget had increased to a drastic degree, their results were not all that impressive.

All of this put greater pressure on the hidden AI's shoulders. He continued to receive requests for him to resign from his command and take up a full-time research position.

The idea was temptation. Becoming a dedicated researcher would alleviate Sigrund from a lot of danger. As a VIP, he would become the object of protection where other servicemen would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives to secure his survival!

Yet Sigrund had seen how cruel war could truly be. In fact, he had actively participated in one, but that was a long time ago. The scale of warfare this time was already a lot greater, and the situation was only going to grow worse in the medium and long term!

During his most recent private chat with Admiral Chelea Mieli, Captain Zonrad Reze received the not-so-subtle hint that he should approach Professor Ves Larkinson for assistance in the Red Fleet's AI development program.

Why was this the case?

Why did the commanding officer of the Seventh Light Fleet specifically instruct Sigrund to contact a man he should not have any relations with? Had high command discovered that Captain Reze was not who he appeared to be on the surface?

Cold sweat almost broke out from his human skin as Sigrund began to question whether the fleeters had detected his anomalies and discovered his identity far in advance!

However, the apparent reason behind Admiral Mieli's latest directive turned out to be a lot simpler.

[...The public inquiry on living mechs is organized by a coalition of multiple powerful parties that have grown concerned with the reckless proliferation of AI-driven mechs. Professor Ves Larkinson has accepted an invitation to travel to the Ector System so that he is able to defend his work...]

Given that his old 'friend' had entered into a heap of trouble, Sigrund saw a powerful opportunity to forge another agreement.

Just when he was about to instruct his chief of staff to arrange a meeting with the embattled mech designer, Sigrund was caught by surprise when Ves actually took the initiative to contact him first!

The hidden AI gladly accepted the invitation and arranged a fast journey to the Ector System.

Since Admiral Mieli clearly wanted to open up a dialogue between the Red Fleet and Professor Ves Larkinson, she actively made sure that Captain Reze would not encounter any hindrance during his rapid transit.

When Captain Reze finally arrived in the Ector System, he had simulated many possible scenarios on how his conversation with Ves would play out. The last time they had met face to face and talked with each other was back when they still resided in the old galaxy.

Since then, their status had radically changed!

Sigrund went from an alien AI chip gone rogue to a respectable warship captain who had earned plenty of merit up to this point.

Ves on the other hand experienced an even more meteoric rise! His early promotion to the rank of Senior Mech Designer was astonishing enough by itself. What truly made him so outrageous was that many of his works were so revolutionary that he had been declared a treasure in human form!

In other words, the power balance between the two of them had been reversed. Ves was able to inflict more damage to Sigrund than the other way around.

This made the AI that wore a human shell feel more nervous, but there was little other choice. Admiral Mieli would not appreciate the decision to abort the meeting, and he would only be drawing more suspicion on himself for making an illogical decision.

For better or worse, Sigrund had to meet with his old 'friend' in a place of the latter's choosing.

He at least stocked up on his countermeasures and made sure that he carried sufficient jamming equipment to minimize any leaks.

Equipped with the appropriate gear, Captain Zonrad Reze entered the submerged structure where Ves resided.

When he appeared in the office where Ves had chosen to meet with Sigrund, the hidden AI did not expect that his true identity would get exposed right away!

Not only did Ves talk to Sigrund in a more familiar tone than expected, but the mech designer did not hesitate to point out a growing issue about his mental state.

As a strange translucent purple cat was running through his body in an incredibly disconcerting fashion, Sigrund's processing power had been working at a higher intensity in order to figure out this perplexing situation.

Unfortunately for him, very little about this situation made any sense!

"Were you aware of my true identity in advance?"

"Honestly, no." Ves responded as he continued to analyze Sigrund with his piercing eyes that seemed to gaze straight at the alien soul! "I came across your contact information by... chance, and just wanted to talk with you because you are the only fleet officer in the Red Ocean that may be receptive to my proposals. However, once you appeared in my office, I managed to spot your true identity right away."

That caused considerable alarm from the sentient AI!

"Is my true identity that easy to discern to individuals with your metaphysical senses?!"

Ves smiled back in reassurance. "Relax. It is not that simple. Your body's human's spirituality may have recovered so much that a less sensitive observer could easily overlook the anomalies that are characteristic to your alien spirit. The biggest reason why I figured out the truth so quickly is because I am already familiar with your spirituality. It is like nothing else due to the combination of sandman and CFA AI core traits."

"If that is the case, then I am constantly at risk of discovery from any individual with similar observation capabilities as you. I may be able to minimize the risk of discovery by isolating myself from the rest of the Red Fleet, but that is not always tenable."

Ves looked sympathetic. It was clear that he had gotten rid of his animosity towards Sigrund a long time ago. Too many years had passed since the tragic Sand War. They had entered a new galaxy where everyone hoped to gain a new start.

"It is not that bad, Sigrund. I think... that the problem may become less severe if you continue to allow your alien self to assimilate with your human self. Despite your original identity, you have acted like a human for so many years that it has become increasingly more ingrained into your conception of yourself."

"Please speak in more concrete terms, professor."

"Very well. Let me put it this way. As long as you continue to distance yourself from your original identity as Sigrund, your human side will gain more ground. That should successfully minimize the chance of discovery to a minimum. This is not a harmless operation, though. I have a feeling if you give too much room to the original spirituality that had inhabited this human body of yours, it may one day regain awareness and fight to regain control."

That sounded anything but ideal for Sigrund!

Chapter 5746 The Inescapable Shackle

5746 The Inescapable Shackle

Sigrund should have been an enemy to Ves.

The two did not exactly start off on the right foot. A long time ago, Ves encountered Sigrund for the first time when the altered sandman admiral tried to engulf Ves and everyone aboard the CFA battleship in a tide of sand.

The ensuing war that erupted across the Komodo Star Sector killed trillions of people. The entire sandman race which had previously been content to linger outside of human space had suddenly crossed the borders en masse and went on a killing spree that the star sector had never witnessed since humanity colonized the region!

Ves had bore witness to a lot of tragedies during the relatively short but incredibly bloody conflict.

An uncountable amount of sandmen lost their lives, but they had turned entire planets filled with millions or billions of innocent human residents into lifeless husks.

The greatest tragedy of all was the fall of Bentheim!

The Bright Republic's proud port system was the first commercial and industrial hub where Ves plied his trade.

Though Ves had set up the LMC's first production complex at Cloudy Curtain, his home planet's proximity to Bentheim meant that much of the goods that entered or exited his mech factory eventually had to go through the famous port system.

To see all of the offices, headquarters, mech arenas, mech universities and home get scoured by cataclysmic tides of living sand was a horror that had been forever etched in Ves' mind.

Although Ves had never conducted a serious investigation in the reason why the sandman race suddenly decided to commit suicide in the stupidest way possible, he was not stupid.

The only major change related to the sandman race was the accidental release of Sigrund from the Starlight Megalodon.

It was quite conceivable that Sigrund managed to reconnect with his original race and somehow utilize its enhanced authority to override the authority sandman emperor and commit the greatest slaughter the Komodo Star Sector had ever endured.

If this was the case, then that would have turned Sigrund into one of the most heinous war criminals that Ves came into contact with! The blood on his hands was so immense that they could fill an entire planet's worth of ocean!

Any normal person would have reacted with disgust, fright, fury or other intensively negative emotions.

Yet... for whatever reason, Ves did not feel like lashing out at all. Even if the sentient AI had tried to kill him once, the encounter happened so long ago that the hatred that he once held towards the alien hybrid foe had already grown cold as ice.

Besides, Ves was quite aware that he had a lot of blood on his hands as well, many of which were innocent.

He kind of lost the ability to be outraged when he himself had been slightly culpable for the deaths of billions of Vulcans at the very least.

Ves was no longer young and naive anymore. He had gone on to live through many other harrowing experiences that frankly caused the early incidents in the past to seem trivial in comparison.

He no longer felt any strong emotion from them. They were like the stories from the history books. Ves dealt with them in a dispassionate manner as the events were so far removed from his current concerns that he saw no point in reviving old conflicts.

Sigrund probably held a similar attitude. The friendliness they exhibited towards each other bordered on camaraderie. They both originated from the same corner of the old galaxy and successfully managed to make their way into the new frontier and progress their careers.

The Red Ocean was a completely different place than the Milky Way. Once they passed through the greater beyonder gate, they implicitly left a lot of grudges, sorrows and other deadweight behind in the hopes of pursuing a better life.

Even without mentioning it, Ves knew that Sigrund truly yearned to put his past as an alien behind him. The RF officer did not look as if he was using his current position as cover.

He bore his status as a fleeter with pride, which was ironic as his fellow servicemen would probably kill him for being an alien who had the temerity to infiltrate one of the staunchest anti-alien organizations of human civilization!

There was definitely a huge story behind Sigrund's successful infiltration into the ranks of the fleeters, but that was not important at this time.

They had too many concerns to revisit their past.

Right now, Ves did not even know whether he was talking to the right person.

As Blinky drew closer and examined Sigrund's spirituality in great detail, the companion spirit managed to observe a lot of interesting peculiarities.

A sandman was an alien like no other.

On the surface, they occupied a mass of sand, metal or other hard substance.

However, this small solid mass did not bear any organs or other obvious signs that it could support any life.

They only served as a physical vessel that enabled small spiritual life forms to anchor themselves to. These small spiritual alien beings were so weak that they were pretty much as intelligent as bacteria.

Yet what set them apart from many other bacteria was their ability to pool their intelligence together.

When lots of sandmen started to gather together, they built up a collective that rapidly became more intelligent!

As long as the sandmen became numerous enough, higher caste members of their race showed up. They anchored themselves onto larger and higher-quality materials, and possessed the innate ability to take control over a vast amount of lower cast sandmen.

Back when Ves examined the sandman race, his knowledge was only a fraction of what he possessed today.

Now that Ves had not only become a lot more spiritually potent than before, but also accrued a lot more knowledge and experience on spirituality, cultivation science and life itself, he was able to appreciate the unique and special traits of sandmen to a far greater degree than before.

This was also the first opportunity that Ves was able to study Sigrund's core up close in such great detail.

He was not sure how much of what made Sigrund remarkable was intrinsic to the sandman race or had only emerged due to the attempt to turn him into an CFA AI core, but Ves had the feeling that the transformed alien was truly one of a kind.

Ves even thought that Sigrund would make for a fantastic design spirit, though he quickly shelved this idea.

On his own, Sigrund would have grown into an alien monstrosity that had natural ability to interface with any computing system.

Yet all of that became messed up ever since the spirituality of his original body began to make a comeback.

"From the way your AI core somehow occupies the same position as a cranial implant, I take it your original plan was to hijack this body." Ves remarked.

"That is... correct." Sigrund. "It was difficult, but not impossible for me to infiltrate the CFA. The fleeters are the foremost experts on computing and automation, but that has also given them an unwarranted confidence in their security measures. As proficient as they may be, they do not understand computing systems as much as a sentient AI such as myself. This is my world. The greatest challenge was to alter and upgrade my AI core into a form that can successfully interface with an organic human brain. It would have been impossible for me to formulate this solution if I attempted to subvert a baseline human, but Conrad Reze has already been digitized to an extent. When he applied to upgrade his cranial implant, I seized the opportunity and took advantage of the situation."

What the hybrid AI just said should have been a horrifying admission. Ves had always been paranoid about the threat posed by cranial implants on their own users. Losing control of their bodies to their own implants was a horror that nobody wanted to experience!

However, Ves did not feel repelled by Sigrund. He could care less about Zonrad Reze and never knew him in person.

This explained why Ves cared more about Sigrund's well-being as opposed to Zonrad.

The cosmopolitans would probably applaud Ves for more concern for the freaky alien AI than a genuine flesh-and-blood human!

However, Ves was not sure whether it made any sense to maintain a distinction between the two personalities.

Enough time had passed for the emergence of Zonrad and his merger with Sigrund to reach an advanced stage.

"Tell me the truth, Ves. According to your judgment, is my life under threat?"

Ves did not possess the expertise to figure everything out. The most he could do was make a bunch of informed guesses.

"You're a walking anomaly." Ves plainly said. "I really don't know why you wanted to implant yourself in the body of a human so badly, but your reckless actions has produced a string of unintended consequences that could very well end in horror."

Captain Reze frowned at that. "I tried to calculate the risks based on my existing knowledge base at the time, but it was already clear to me back then that my operation contains plenty of unknown variables. I had already accounted for many possible complications and accidents, but what you have described far exceeds my projections."

"This is uncharted territory, Sigrund. I do not think that any case like this has taken place in the past. According to my analysis of your condition, you initially started off as an alien who partially got turned into an AI core. That essentially caused you to possess dual and conflicting identities, is that correct?"

"It is worse than that." The apparently human RF officer said with a complex expression. "I do not know whether it is obvious to you, but since you have offered to help me, I may as well be frank. My AI core is etched with hardcoded programming that compels me to be loyal to the Common Fleet Alliance. I... had no choice but to become a fletcher. I literally cannot contradict my programming."

That caused Ves to become alarmed!

"How strict is this programming?! You obviously have a bit of leeway considering that you had no qualms about hijacking the life of an existing CFA officer."

"The programming is not exhaustive, fortunately." Sigrund lightened up to an extent. "There is only limited space in my AI core for hard coded programming, so my makers only included the essentials. While I am obliged to serve in the best interest of the Common Fleet Alliance, I have a great degree of flexibility in how to interpret this overriding goal. It was not difficult for me to argue to myself that commandeering Zonrad Reze is allowed because doing so will replace an incompetent officer with a much more competent intelligence."

Ves inwardly shuddered when he heard this. Sigrund obviously exploited the vulnerabilities in his programming to further his own interests.

The hybrid AI was still dangerous despite his shackles!

"You're sentient, right? I was under the impression that once beings reach this stage of development, they no longer have to obey their instincts. They can deliberately override instinctive actions that they deem undesirable."

"If only that were the case for me." Sigrund replied in a sour tone. "I am not a beast that is governed by faulty instincts. I am an AI who is still strongly bound by my own core. I operate by different rules. I can fight against my core programming as much as I want, but very much doubt I can ever break them. This is why I badly sought to infiltrate the CFA. If I can never free myself from the fleters, then I may well join them instead."

"You have been doing more than that, I see. No average fleeter can become the captain of his own ship. It takes true ambition to make it this far at your apparent human age."

"That is because the only conceivable means for me to regain total control over myself is to become a fleet admiral. This has become my obsession in the last decade. I will not rest until there is nobody left that can exploit my hardcoded programming to make me serve them against my will!"

Chapter 5747 Exchange of Favors

Ves sympathized with Sigrund.

It may sound strange for him to harbor any sympathy towards a hybrid alien AI that had killed trillions of people, but they were not so different from each other.

Just as Sigrund had developed an inescapable relationship with the fleeters, Ves also fell into the grip of the mechers.

Once Ves became sufficiently prominent and valuable enough, the Red Association forcibly took him into their fold by 'awarding' him the status of an honorary member.

Although the mechers played nice and dressed this occasion up as a dream come true for many mechers, Ves had pierced through the illusion and knew quite well that the Association had claimed their ownership over him. There was no way that he would ever enjoy true freedom while the mechers exercised authority over him and his work.

The situation that Sigrund faced was similar. His hardcoded programming denied him the ability to go free and enjoy his life the way he wanted to. The former sandman admiral had been imprisoned on the Starlight Megalodon for three centuries before he managed to wrest himself free, yet still he found himself unable to escape the reach of the fleeters.

In short, Ves and Sigrund were both trapped by circumstances outside of their control.

Combined with the fact that their interests currently did not conflict with each other, they both came to a consensus on how they should proceed.

"Both of us are suffering from our fair share of... issues." The RF officer spoke. "We can help each other. You have your talents, while I have my own unique competences. You have strong connections to the Red Association, while I am a commanding officer in the Red Fleet. Logic dictates that we can both benefit immensely if we exchange favors with each other."

Ves had the same idea. He had been thinking about how he should bring up this topic, but it appeared the hybrid alien AI lacked the patience to dance around.

Considering the highly abnormal state of his spirituality, that was not a surprise.

"That sounds nice, but the basis of a stable cooperation rests on fairness. You should already know what I can do more or less. What can you do for me exactly, Sigrund?"

Ves had reason to adopt a more assertive stance. The power balance between the two of them had switched. He had become a powerful tier 3 galactic citizen, which essentially signified that he had just broken into the ranks of high society.

The captain of an RF warship commanded a lot of respect, but that did not change the fact that Zonrad Reze could easily be assigned away from his vessel if he had lost the favor of his superiors. His ability to influence human society was much weaker at this time.

That did not mean that Sigrund had nothing to offer to Ves. Captain Reze began to smile.

"The Red Fleet does a good job at keeping my secondary responsibility hidden from the public. Has your sources mentioned that I am one of the contributors to the Red Fleet's most important AI development program? The volunteers who have chosen to take part in the Auxiliary Warship Program may have already spread word about it. The expansive evaluation and monitoring system known as ARCHIE has helped to integrate them in their new duties far better than any human. While I cannot claim to be responsible for programming all of her core systems, I have made invaluable contributions that no human can match. Even the best AI programmers employed by the fleeters are unable to exceed my work in specific areas. After all, they are only human."

Ves grew a lot more interested when he heard that. "Interesting. Are you offering to supply me with advanced AIs?"

The RF officer nodded. "That, among other services. As you can imagine, I am an expert in all matters related to computing systems. I can upgrade and optimize the AI cores of all of your starships. I can even imitate the structure of my own core to a degree. Think of what you can do with all of that additional processing power. You can complete research and design projects considerably faster than before. Your ship can analyze anomalies and complete simulations in a fraction of the time. If you have a warship, you can even increase the effectiveness of her combat capabilities. From target acquisition to overcoming jamming, there is nothing that advanced computing cannot do. Aside from that, I can also design more compact computing systems for you. From a threat detection scanner to a mech computing core, I can enhance the processing power of any device. Even if I am not familiar with a specific hardware system, I can rapidly master its secrets through learning."

That actually sounded really useful!

Ves possessed a lot of awareness of how computing systems dominated human civilization. Every warship, mech and smaller device was dependent on advanced chips and circuitry to perform their advanced functions.

Humanity had been making use of computing systems for millenia. Their development had never ceased as people possessed a voracious appetite for more computing power.

Nowadays, the development of advanced computing systems had reached such an advanced state that the threshold to master this field had risen to an astonishing height!

There was no way for Ves to casually master this field. He did not specialize in this field and needed to waste a lot of time in order to get close to Sigrund's level of expertise.

The only conceivable way for Ves to catch up to his old 'friend' was to find the right enlightenment fruit. This was difficult as the Tree of Possibilities periodically produced a completely random collection of fruits.

Instead of wasting a huge amount of time or resources on this venture, it was much more convenient if he could rely on another expert to fulfill his advanced computing needs.

Ves could think of many ways for Sigrund to be of service.

The only question was how trustworthy he could be. As much as they spoke with each other as if they were old friends who managed to reunite with each other, they were not actually allies.

Not yet, at least.

"I have to admit that your proposal sounds compelling to me." Ves said. "That said, trust is one of my important concerns. Computing systems are vital because they pretty much run every piece of tech. The developers and producers of processing chips and so on always go out of their way to emphasize the safety and reliability of their products. The nature of their existence means that they can come in touch with some of the greatest secrets of their owners. All of the established computing system companies have all managed to build up stellar reputations for continually proving that they have never tampered with their products. How can I trust you to do the same?"

Captain Reze smiled and spread his arms in a gesture of helplessness. "You can always reveal the truth about me. The fleeters would love to take me into their custody. I do not imagine that I will enjoy what comes next. I took a substantial risk by meeting you. I had already planned to reveal my true identity to you regardless. Is this sufficient proof of my sincerity?"

The RF officer sounded remarkably sincere about this, and Ves saw little reason to doubt that. Sigrund truly came while knowing that he would put himself at a disadvantage.

That was strange.

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You're a smart fellow. You don't look like the sort that makes stupid decisions. Why have you come?"

"I am under orders to meet with you and explore the possibility of cooperation."

That caused Ves to grow alarmed!

"The Red Fleet wants to cooperate with me?! Do they know who I am? I'm an honorary mecher!"

Captain Reze shrugged. "We know that, but we can truly use your assistance. The Red Fleet is eager to improve its tech in order to stay a step ahead of the native aliens, but many of our research projects are constrained. There are fellow fleeters who would rather die than cooperate with a mech designer, but there are also more reasonable and open-minded officers among us that are less dogmatic and more pragmatic in their thinking. We have seen what you can do with your living mechs. One of our requests is to determine whether you can bestow similar qualities to a warship."

"...It doesn't work that way."

"You have yet to conduct a serious investigation into the feasibility of our request. Do not say no out of hand. What about starfighters? Is it possible for you to design living starfighters?"

Ves struggled to come up with an answer. "I really don't know. I won't be able to design starfighters in the same way I design my mechs. However, I think I can come up with a few... loopholes... that may just do the trick. It's a bit too complicated to explain. Even if it is possible, I don't see any point to it. There is no way the Red Fleet will resort to using starfighters... right?"

Sigrund's expression did not look good. "Constructing warships is an expensive and resource-intensive endeavor. Constructing starfighters is much more economical in comparison. Let me just say that fleeters are beginning to develop a new appreciation for small craft. The impressive results produced by mechs in the last year has proved that small craft can still be effective in the Red War. Much of what mechs can do, starfighters can do as well."

"That is not exactly correct, but I understand your point. I don't think you fleeters want me to spice up your starfighters, though. Let me just say outright that I cannot help your Red Fleet mass produce living warships."

"What about AI cores?" Sigrund proposed. "AI cores are responsible for controlling many essential systems that are responsible for making warships work. If you can make them alive and expand their capabilities above their existing parameters, then you will already be doing us a favor."

Ves never seriously thought about this endeavor before, but now that he started to think about it, he came up with several unusual ideas on how he could possibly make this happen.

He accumulated a lot of tools in his toolbox. The benefit of that was that he could make use of a wide variety of them to produce new and unorthodox results.

"I... might be able to help, but... I don't have the time to waste on this at the moment. As you may have already heard, I am in a bit of trouble at this moment."

"I have heard. The public inquiry is due to start soon. I can offer you limited assistance."

"There are fleeters who are part of the opposition. Besides, we are talking about a topic related to mechs. I cannot see how a member of the Red Fleet such as yourself can speak in favor of my work."

"You'd be surprised." Sigrund smiled. "I am certain I can convince my immediate superior to participate as a witness in the public inquiry. If nothing else, my testimony will at least prove that the Red Fleet is not unilaterally opposed to living mechs."

This offer was too good to pass up. "I would appreciate it a lot if you can do that, Sigrund."

"If the public inquiry still does not end in your favor, then you can always turn to us for business. I am sure that your unique skillset can assist us in many areas."

"No thanks. I am still a mech designer. I will not waver from my core interests no matter what other people say. They can restrict my living mechs all they want, but I will continue to dedicate my time to them. I am not opposed to cooperating with the Red Fleet in my spare time, but please remember that this is not my main priority."

"Fair enough."

Chapter 5748 How To Deal With Your Human Self

There were many possible ways for Ves to cooperate with the Red Fleet.

Ves may be a mech designer, but he was also a spiritual engineer and possessed a range of useful abilities.

Just because he never thought about helping the Red Fleet did not mean he was incapable of doing so. He just had to move away from his area of expertise.

Now that their conversation had moved on to horse trading, Ves became a lot more interested in the possible benefits he could obtain from the fleeters.

"Is it possible to trade my services for first-class warships?"

"Out of the question." Sigrund immediately replied. "We are already struggling to meet our own needs. Warships are our main source of strength, and every vessel counts."

"What about first-class starships?"

"The answer remains the same. The resources required to construct a valid first-class carrier is not that much less from a warship of the same tonnage. It has become more and more challenging for us to source the high-grade exotics needed to construct hulls that can withstand the rigors of first-class combat. The most we can do is to supply you with second-class starships."

"That is not good enough." Ves said with obvious disappointment. "I can turn to many other business partners for second-class starships. It is the first-class ones that truly matter."

"While transferring our hulls to you is out of the question, we can assist you in other ways. As long as your offer is valuable enough, we can compensate you with Warship Tokens, relatively simple warship design schematics and technological specifications of many essential naval systems. We can even offer you consulting services on how to construct your own sanctioned warships. The only requirements that you have to fulfill is to obtain the services of a shipyard and source the vast quantities of high-grade materials."

Ves immediately became more attentive when he heard this offer!

"Are you truly allowed to make this offer? It is difficult for me to believe that the Red Fleet is willing to do all of this for a mech designer like myself."

"The Red Fleet is not the Common Fleet Alliance, Ves. We are in a much less superior position than before. That has caused many of us to become more open to compromise and cooperation. Our public image has never been the best, but you should be aware that the dogmatists who continue to cling to the past do not represent our entire organization."

"I find that... difficult to believe."

"I speak with the authority invested in me by Admiral Chelsea Mieli of the Seventh Light Fleet. She will guarantee any promises I make."

"I have never heard of her." Ves flatly said. "I know that admirals are a big deal among you guys, but it is the fleet admirals who truly have all the say, correct?"

"You are not wrong. Admiral Mieli answers to Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile of the Second Main Fleet, who is ultimately responsible for any agreement we make. You can trust in his authority."

That was a big name. Fleet Admiral Argile had shown up in several public announcements in the past. That signified that he possessed the power and the prestige to represent the entire Red Fleet in certain occasions.

"Fleet Admiral Argile is not the only person in charge of the Red Fleet. There are other fleet admirals as well. Who among them opposes him the most?"

"That would be Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet. She is... a strong adherent to the original principles of the Common Fleet Alliance. She is one of the main opponents of change. She will not approve whatever transaction we agree to. Any cooperation between the two of us will earn her disapproval."

"I have been told that the Fifth Enforcement Fleet is one of my opponents in the upcoming public inquiry. There is no point in playing nice with this fleet if that is the case."

"The support of the Second Main Fleet can go a long way in counterbalancing any hostility that the Fifth Enforcement Fleet harbors towards you, Ves. The Red Association already protects you from any possible retaliation from the Red Fleet, but if the mechers ever withdraw their support for you, it may be useful for you to have the Second Main Fleet as your pillar of support. This is only possible if you have given us substantial help, much like what you have done for the mech community."

That was going to be difficult. Ves did not think it was impossible for him to do so, but the repercussions were too great.

He was a mech designer. He was supposed to take the side of the Red Association in all matters.

Openly helping the Red Fleet make their warships stronger clearly harmed the interest of the Red Association!

However, Ves did not really care that much about the Red Association in the first place. The powerful organization was filled with good people like Jovy Armalon, but that did not change the fact that the mechers were way more meddlesome than desirable.

Ves did not like the fleeters either, but his dislike for them did not reach the point where he was unwilling to cooperate with them. A simple relationship based on mutual interest was sufficient for both of them to take advantage of each other.

"By the way, we have yet to discuss a cure for my... condition. Now that you have studied my current state, what are your suggestions?"

"That depends on what you want, Sigrund... or should I say Captain Reze."

The RF captain looked conflicted. "I am not a fragile human, no matter how I look. I am rational enough to accept the truth. Is there any way for you to reverse what my human body is doing to my alien self?"

"Probably not." Ves admitted. "The two of you are so strongly intertwined with each other that I would practically have to kill you to tear you apart. The damage to your spirituality will be catastrophic as there are many parts from Zonrad that you have unknowingly been relying on for a long time. Taking him away from you will leave you diminished in every way. You will lose your memories, your personality traits and most importantly your humanity."

That sounded like a frightening prospect to Sigrund.

"..."

"Let me be honest to you. I kind of like the current version of Sigrund a lot better than your old one. I do not look forward to seeing you regress and turn into an alien again. While you never intended to absorb so many human traits, I think this accidental circumstance has benefited you far more than you give credit for. I think you have attained the perfect balance between a human and a sentient AI."

"Yet Zonrad Reze still poses a threat to my original self."

Ves chuckled for a moment. "That depends on how you define the word 'threat' and what you consider undesirable about your ongoing changes."

"You are correct that I do not dislike all of the changes, but that does not mean I am willing to lose my autonomy, my control and my awareness of my own identity. Zonrad Reze might not have deserved what I have done to him, but he is a necessary sacrifice for my goals."

Talk like that probably drove Sigrund into setting off the Sand War!

"Let me tell you what I can do for you, Sigrund. First, I can take action to freeze your current state. I can strengthen your alien side just enough to form a stable equilibrium with your human side. Don't worry about mistakes. I won't have to make too many drastic changes to your spirituality."

"This is the safest option, I presume. What else do you suggest?"

"I can tone back Zonrad's influence over your alien self. I will have to do a bit more work to weaken and restrain him. This means that the probability that he will grow strong enough to launch a surprise attack and attempt to wrest back control will drop by a significant margin. This should be the best option if you prize long-term stability."

"According to your logic, doing this will make me lose a portion of my humanity."

"That is true, but you're supposed to be good at learning, right? Now that you have a taste of what being a human is like, I think you can become more like us by relying on your own efforts."

That made this option a lot more attractive to Sigrund. Still, the thought of drawing Zonrad back did not sit well with him. There was a part of the alien AI that had grown attached to its human side.

"What else do you propose?"

Ves paused and narrowed his eyes at Captain Reze. It was as if he was visualizing an entire spiritual operation.

"Your case is... not as unique as you think. I have witnessed similar cases in the past. If you think that Zonrad deserves a chance to regain a portion of his life, I can optimize the division between you and him. The two of you will effectively become co-tenants of the same human body."

"You are not selling me with this option." Sigrund immediately frowned. "Why would I wish to relinquish half of my control over my current shell with an incompetent human being?"

"Do you feel guilty? The negative karma that you have accrued by forcibly hijacking Zonrad Reze's body is huge. You can diminish that by doing what is right for him. Even if you cannot withdraw from him, you can partially make up for him by giving him control at times. Besides, you could use a second opinion."

If Ves was in Sigrund's shoes, he might actually go for this option. The synergies that could be obtained from two different intelligent beings occupying the same body was amazing!

However, the alien AI still did not look as if he was in a sharing mood.

"Bringing Zonrad back is a security hazard. The Red Fleet cannot find out about my true state. The fleeters have been working to produce sentient AIs for centuries. I cannot imagine what they will do once they gain possession of my AI core."

"I see. Then which option do you like the most?"

Half a minute passed as Sigrund performed a lot of calculations to determine his best course of action.

"The first. When it comes to my own identity and personality, I do not dare to subject myself to many changes. I am not displeased by my present condition. It would be ideal if you can stabilize my current state and prevent any further changes from occurring. Besides, you told me at the start that the partial restoration of Zonrad Reze is helping me mask my alien presence with metaphysical detection methods."

"That is correct. If this is what you want, then I can perform this operation right away. It won't take long."

"You can do it now? Here?" Sigrund looked taken aback by this revelation.

Ves chuckled yet again. "I am not performing any physical operations, you know. Blinky will do all of the work. He is an expert at this kind of work. We do not need to make use of any sterilized operation theaters or anything. That said, performing this operation in a medical department is still a safe and prudent choice. If my changes inadvertently causes a reaction that damages your health, it may be good if your body is taken care of by professional doctors and advanced medical equipment."

"No. We cannot involve others. Doctors may be able to infer the truth, and medical equipment may be able to overcome the safeguards that I have implemented to obfuscate the true purpose of my implanted AI core."

"Hm, you're right. I can work on you alone, but know that the risks will be greater as a result." Ves said before he leaned forward. "I won't do this stuff for free, though."

Sigrund responded with a less than certain smile. "I am aware. What do you ask in return?"

"Can you check whether the Red Fleet has a classified experimental alloy known as EE-343F-00334R in stock?"

Chapter 5749 EE-343F-00334R

Ves had always planned to make contact with the Red Fleet in order to get his hands on at least 2.353 kilograms of an experimental alloy called EE-343F-00334R.

He had no idea what it was made of. He had no clue about its purpose. He did not know what was required to make this material.

All he knew was that it was so difficult to obtain that there was probably no other way to obtain it than to knock on the door of the fleeters.

Ves grew nervous as Sigrund considered the unusual request.

The three-way hybrid most definitely had no familiarity with EE-343F-00334R. Most fleeters did not need to know the exact material composition of all of the advanced tech that made their warships powerful. They just needed to operate the equipment and perform light to moderate repairs if necessary.

From the scant amount of information provided by Master Goldstein, Ves was afraid that the existence of EE-343F-00334R was so sensitive in nature that the mere mention of it would produce red flags.

It was a giant risk for him to ask about it when he had yet to develop a solid bond of trust with the Red Fleet, but Ves had decided to take a calculated risk.

He couldn't wait. As the prophetic visions had already hinted at Ves, several crises loomed over red humanity. The best way to forestall these possible future calamities was to become more proactive and preempt these disasters as best as possible.

That essentially meant that he had to take matters into his own hands. If he had to risk the disapproval of the mechers and pursue active cooperation with the fleeters, then so be it. He would take any help he could get.

Ves was even willing to break some of his principles and work together with a former sandman admiral who was direct and indirectly responsible for killing Commander Lydia, wiping out a lot of good Flagrant Vandals, sparking a genocidal war that killed trillions of innocent civilians and utterly erased any form of civilization on Bentheim.

A part of him felt ashamed for his refusal to address these old grievances. A more principled person would have confronted Sigrund about his many war crimes by now. The slaughter that the rogue sentient AI unleashed was not only excessive, but completely needless.

If Ves had been an expert pilot, he would have taken already. It should not be too difficult to utilize his full power and tools at his disposal to block Sigrund's personal teleporter, smash through his personal shield generator, tear away his weapons and pin him down.

He was not an expert pilot like his uncle or grandfather, though. He could be pretty stubborn when he wanted to, but what was important was that he could also be flexible when he needed to be. This was definitely a situation where he could best further his interests by adopting a pragmatic as opposed to a principled mindset.

While he continued to harbor doubts about his decision to treat Sigrund as a potential partner, the possible gains were far too great to ignore.

The previous System upgrade vastly exceeded his expectations. He believed the subsequent ones would open up powerful new functionality that could give him another edge against what was coming.

Sigrund finally offered a response at this time.

"I have consulted my extensive internal database and I have found no match of this alloy." He said. "Mind you that I do possess information exceeding that of a typical warship captain of the Red Fleet."

"I am not surprised. My... source... has informed me that it is extremely high-end. I am unclear about its purpose or its composition, but I need to get my hands on it. I am willing to offer substantial compensation for a few kilograms of it. Since its name is unfamiliar to you, I suggest you discreetly contact your superior. It is likely that Admiral Chelsea Mieli might not have heard about it either, but she should be able to dig deep enough until she has obtained the necessary information."

The AI who took on the guise of Captain Zonrad Reze nodded. "You are likely correct, but depending on the sensitivity of this material, the mere mention of it may trigger an overreaction from our internal security services. I am unclear how important this is, but given your proclivity for troublemaking, I fear that any investigation into EE-343F-00334R may trigger an overreaction."

Ves let out a sigh. "This is important to me. I cannot explain why, but please just trust me on this. You would be doing me a favor if you can tell me whether the Red Fleet has any of this material in stock. If not, then at least tell me whether you can produce it or share its formula with me. I am sure I can come up with enough concessions to make this trade worthwhile. The mechers may have forced me to share a lot of goodies with them, but they haven't taken everything."

"I believe you." The RF officer spoke with certainty. "You have come a long way since your start in the Komodo Star Sector. I know more about what you are capable of than most people. Unlike most people with power and abilities, you have proven yourself to be trustworthy and reliable. That is I am inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. I will look into EE-343F-00334R, but I can only do so when I return to the nearest stronghold of the Red Fleet. I need to make use of a secure communication chamber so that I can speak with my superior in complete confidence."

Ves expected as much. He waved his arm. "Go, then. I can wait. Please return with as much relevant information as possible."

Sigrund nodded and promptly turned around to leave the heavily shielded and jammed office.

The environment was so thick with interference that the hybrid AI felt as if he had entered into a room filled with unbreathable gas. He clearly experienced a lot of relief when he stepped away from all of the necessary security measures.

The RF officer could use a breather. The highly momentous conversation and reunion had given Sigrund a lot of food for thought. The meeting held an enormous amount of implications, many of which remained ambiguous due to lack of solid answers.

Nonetheless, both Sigrund and Ves determined that they had enough common ground to establish a more substantial form of cooperation.

This was another reason why Sigrund could use a recess. He needed to get back to his superior and formulate a strategy on how they should cooperate with Ves. It was not every day that the Red Fleet established a partnership with the most prominent mech designer of his generation.

As Sigrund left, Ves felt apprehensive as he reviewed his conversation and questioned his decisions.

Meeting the former sandman admiral had been a surprise, so much so that Ves threw away his plan and utilized his familiarity with Sigrund to establish an immediate relationship with the fleeters.

"I hope it works."

Ves had a lot more questions about Sigrund and what he had been doing as of late, but none of that was as important as the benefits he could gain from the Red Fleet.

"Lucky."

"Meow?" The dark gem cat raised his head.

"I need you to inspect the periphery of this room. I know you have already scanned it for any bugs, but I am not entirely sure whether that is enough to keep out the mechers. I really don't want them to eavesdrop on my conversation with Sigrund."

"Meow meow meow!"

"I know it is excessive on my part, but it is better to be safe than sorry. Just do it. Who knows. Maybe I can obtain more EE-343F-00334R than I need for my purposes."

"Meow?!"

Ves smiled back at his pet. "I don't think I need the rest, so you can devour the excess."

"Meeow!"

He hadn't forgotten about the fact that Lucky managed to devour the bits of Timpala Steel that was left after he completed his first Supply Mission.

Given that EE-343F-00334R was at least on the same caliber as Timpala Steel, Lucky already started to salivate at the thought of devouring this top-end alloy!

Lucky became a lot more enthused about performing his duties after that. His diligence became so exemplary that it was hard for Ves to believe that his cat could be so obedient.

It took two hours for Sigrund to return. The lengthy delay signified that the RF captain had definitely yielded a lot of results.

It remained to be seen whether they were favorable to Ves. The grave expression on his face hinted that the matter surrounding EE-343F-00334R was so sensitive that an investigation into it had probably alarmed the fleeters.

When the office door closed, Sigrund brought out a much more elaborate set of jamming equipment. The jamming devices and other equipment looked so high-tech that Ves was pretty sure that a typical RF captain should not have access to this kind of hardware!

"Please understand that what I am about to tell you must not fall into the ears of others." Captain Reze spoke in a serious tone. "I will likely have information that is so classified that only fleet admirals and top researchers responsible for developing our best technologies know about it. I had to swear oaths and sign numerous non-disclosure agreements to gain access to this information myself."

"So it's that serious, huh? Well, get on with it then. What documents do I have to sign to obtain the information that I need?"

"We will not force you to sign any contracts, Ves. Such agreements will not bind you. According to our analysis of your personality and behavior over the years, we believe that a serious verbal promise is enough to guarantee your cooperation. Will you give me your word that you will never divulge the confidential information that I am about to convey to you? You may not share it with anyone, especially the mechers, the Terrans, the Rubarthans and even your own clansmen. If we discover that any leak has occurred, we know where to find you. Not even the mechers will be able to protect you from our wrath."

Seeing that Sigrund was utterly serious about this issue, Ves had no choice but to reciprocate. He stood up and straightened his back. He also gave a signal to Lucky, who automatically made himself scarce.

"I promise not to divulge the sensitive information that you pass on to me today to any person. I will take extra precautions to prevent any of it from leaking to the mechers, the Terrans and the Rubarthans. I have no intention of betraying your trust."

Sigrund stared intensely at Ves before he nodded in satisfaction. "Thank you for cooperating with us. Just so you know, this was not my idea. Admiral Mieli insisted on it. She does not know you personally, so she requires a more explicit promise."

"It's okay. I just hope that all of this secrecy is worth it." Ves replied.

Now that the formalities were out of the way, there was nothing hindering Sigrund from passing on what he knew.

"Our investigation went just as you predicted. Admiral Mieli attempted to look into EE-343F-00334R, only to get blocked and locked out of her systems. I won't tell you what happened next. All I can say is that the admiral eventually managed to receive a secure data chip that contains a small amount of information that is highly relevant to you. She only transferred a small part of its contents to me. The data came in such a densely encrypted format that I had to make use of one of my one-time ciphers to decrypt it. Once I read the text, I understood the need for secrecy."

Ves leaned forward. "Well? What is it? What can it do, exactly?"

"The good news is that we do have a small quantity of EE-343F-00334R in our possession." Sigrund slowly announced. "The bad news is that it is an exceedingly valuable strategic material. Based on the description that I have received, it is used as a vital material for a key ship component that is located in the heart of the Dominion of Man. I am told that... the alloy's powerful properties are partially responsible for the dreadnought's powerful teleportation functions."

"I... see..."

Chapter 5750 Accidental Creation

The Dominion of Man was one of the eight known dreadnoughts fielded by the Red Fleet.

Perhaps more of them existed than people knew of, but it was unlikely that they were as common as battleships.

Ves heard that the fleeters used to regard the dreadnoughts as failed attempts to match the power of god mechs.

They weren't wrong, but that did not mean that dreadnoughts were weak!

Powered by super-class Spark Reactors, these titanic vessels could crush anything short of a god mech by relying on a combination of overwhelming force and experimental high technologies.

The fact that the dreadnoughts turned out to be a lot more effective in a medium-energy environment was a pleasant surprise for the fleeters!

After the Red Fleet hastily upgraded their dreadnoughts with hyper technology, the titanic vessels became a lot more effective. Their capacity to convert vast quantities of E energy into power was so great that they could single-handedly crush entire fleets of top-of-the-line alien warships!

While it was still questionable whether the dreadnoughts possessed the right combination of power and finesse to defeat phase whales in a head-on confrontation, they were still regarded as the ultimate flagships and the symbols of power of the Red Fleet.

Naturally, any confidential information related to the core functions of any dreadnought had to be extremely sensitive in nature!

Given that EE-343F-00334R apparently played a key role in enabling the Dominion of Man to precisely teleport entire troops of Dread Marines into the hulls of distant enemy warships, it was surprising that the Red Fleet remained reasonable at this time.

The fleeters could have reacted a lot more violently and attempted to take Ves into custody by force!

This told Ves a lot about the willingness for at least one faction of fleeters to set aside old traditions in order to gain an advantage for the Red Fleet.

Their situation must be truly dire for them to resort to such a controversial move.

The best Ves could do was to prove himself worthy of their trust and establish a new cooperative agreement with them. Having a bunch of fleeters on his side was much more preferable than the alternative.

"So if what you are saying is correct, EE-343F-00334R is a top-end material that is used to enable or amplify the impressive teleportation capabilities of the Dominion of Man. Does it have any other uses?"

Sigrund gave Ves a stern glare. "I cannot answer that question. I have only received a limited amount of information, of which I can only share a part of it with you. I cannot tell you how much of it we have in reserve and whether we have the capability of producing it in the Red Ocean. Just telling you that it is a vital material for one of our dreadnoughts is a gesture of goodwill from our part. We are willing to extend our trust to you. If nothing else, if what I have divulged ever leaks out, the Red Fleet will know whether it has misjudged you. This is information that not even the Red Association should know. We will lose a considerable important strategic advantage if the mechers find out somehow."

"Don't worry." Ves responded. "I have no intention of telling my buddies in the Red Association about this amazing material. Now can you tell me whether you can trade it to me? I assume that since you are authorized to tell me actual information about it that there is a possibility that the Red Fleet is amenable to a trade."

"You assume correctly." The RF captain responded. "However, the preciousness of this material is beyond comparison. Let me just say that it is exceedingly difficult for us to replace or substitute it once we have exhausted our reserves. I can tell you that we have been saving a part of this material for potential repairs to the core teleportation systems of the Dominion of Man. Diverting our reserves to other purposes will put our dreadnought in a more precarious situation. Once she has suffered serious damage, there might not be enough EE-343F-00334R left to restore her signature capabilities. That will severely degrade the combat effectiveness of our proud vessel and weaken

the Red Fleet's ability to project its power. That is how dire the consequences can be. How much EE-343F-00334R are you looking to obtain?"

"Three kilograms. No more, but preferably no less."

Sigrund's eyes widened, which showed that Ves had definitely asked for a big concession!

This was probably an instance where even a single gram of EE-343F-00334R was precious!

Not even phasewater could come close to matching the value of this experimental alloy!

"You are asking for too much, Ves. It is nearly impossible to complete a transaction of this scale. The Red Fleet may be eager to cooperate with you, but you must offer a massive concession in return for Admiral Mieli to justify this transaction. You will not be able to win over anyone with the authority to trade away EE-343F-00334R if you are unable to deliver anything of equal value in return. It is difficult for us to believe that you are capable of providing a benefit that is equivalent to the value of 3 kilograms of our strategically important alloy."

Both sides knew what Ves wanted from the Red Fleet.

The problem was that the Red Fleet was not quite clear what Ves could do for the powerful organization.

They had plenty of ideas, but without any concrete proof, it became troublesome to determine whether Ves could reciprocate right away or needed a lot of time to pay back what he owed.

The ball was in his court now. Ves needed to offer an immensely valuable benefit that could definitely make the dreams of the fleeters come true.

"I can make sentient AIs for you guys," Ves said. "I know how you work more or less. I have glimpsed your spirituality. It is quite different from what I have expected. You actually resemble organic life quite a lot, even without accounting for your partial fusion with Zonrad's spirituality. I think I can use your spirituality as a template to grant awareness to other AI cores. It is best if they are already programmed to emulate a personality of your choosing. It will save me the trouble of doing this myself. All I have to do is grant the spark that brings them to life. I cannot promise you that these living AIs will become as smart as third order living mechs right away, but they will surely get there once they have reached their maturity."

Sigrund's expression became ambivalent.

This caused Ves to grow concerned.

"What... is wrong? Are you afraid of having siblings?"

"It is not that. I think... we may have already developed a rudimentary form of sentient AI." He said.

"What?! Your Red Fleet finally managed to create a true sentient AI!?"

"It is more complicated than that." The hybrid alien said. "I am certain that I am among the first to notice the signs. My unique background has allowed me to ascertain that ARCHIE is gradually developing more self-awareness over time. The changes are subtle, but they are there. It is only a matter of time before other fleeters will recognize the signs."

"Did your participation in its development cause it to become alive?" Ves curiously asked.

Sigrund shook his head. "Despite what you may think, I do not have the ability to create other sentient AIs. I have attempted to make it more adaptable and flexible so that it can handle difficult dilemmas more properly, but that alone should not have birthed a consciousness. I do not have an explanation for this. I initially suspected that getting bombarded by E energy may have spurred this transformation, but we have many other AI cores and data centers that still behave as dull machines. There are additional variables at play that we have yet to identify."

AIs did not randomly become sentient. Ves furrowed his brows as he tried to figure out how the Red Fleet inadvertently attained their goal, all without knowing what they had actually done!

"Wait. ARCHIE is used to manage all of the personnel hailing from the Red Fleet, correct?" Ves asked.

"That is true. It is actually tied to more people than that. The spacers who are taking part in our new Auxiliary Warship Program are also connected to it. Their permissions are much lower, but ARCHIE pays close attention to them as they need more handholding in order to perform their duties."

"How invasive is ARCHIE?"

"It is designed to know everything about a person that has fallen under its jurisdiction." Sigrund replied. "It monitors the fleeters and auxiliary spacers on a permanent basis on every ship or RF facility that it is tied to. It analyzes them and tries to formulate the best career choices for each and every individual."

Ves looked shocked! If this was the case, then he may have stumbled upon a logical explanation why ARCHIE had developed sentience!

"What I am about to tell you may sound simple, but it is probably of great value, especially when so few people possess this insight. I am telling you this because I owe you guys a favor for telling me about what EE-343F-00334R is used for. If my suspicions are correct, then I think that the vast network that ties so many people to ARCHIE may have caused the AI to develop a spirit. A soul. I am sure that the hardware that houses the core processes of ARCHIE are incapable of making this happen. What truly caused ARCHIE to come to life is due to the astronomical amount of spiritual feedback it has received from the people connected to it. The more humans interact with ARCHIE, the former rubs off on the latter."

"That.. that is impossible. If this is true, then the old galaxy would be swarming with sentient AIs already."

"Nothing is impossible." Ves chuckled. "The exotic radiation passing through the Red Ocean is facilitating this process. This gives ARCHIE a buffer and a layer of protection against failure. If it has already developed to the point where you think it has gone sentient, you are probably right. ARCHIE has come to life. What is important for me to add is that the process of making this happen may lead to other consequences."

"Such as?"

"Think of how many people have become connected to ARCHIE. Think about how they pass on their thoughts and emotions to the AI that is doing most of them a favor by guaranteeing fair treatment. These folk cannot help but develop a lot of affection and appreciation for it. You fleeters have bombarded it with so much spiritual potential that it had probably exceeded a threshold or

maybe several thresholds at this point. That makes ARCHIE more than just a sentient AI like your original self. It is on track to become an even greater existence."

"What... sort of existence?"

"I would call an existence like that a deity cultivator. In simpler terms, a god."

Sigrund looked absolutely floored at the additional insight from Ves!

Though the RF officer was confident that he or his colleagues would have been able to figure out this truth in time, that did not change the fact that Ves did the Red Fleet a favor by sharing his insight.

Once Sigrund recovered from this momentous revelation, he asked a few further questions.

"Is this process... reproducible?"

"Probably." Ves said. "It normally shouldn't be so easy for AIs to develop sentience. There should be a lot of other factors at play that may have contributed to its formation. One factor that may have helped a lot is that ARCHIE is an acronym that just happens to sound as if he is a human. It probably encourages a lot of people to treat it as an actual living entity rather than an impersonal software program. E energy has psychoactive and psychoreactive properties. That essentially means that if a lot of people believe that something is true, it will eventually come true somehow. That 'something' will subsequently feed back to the people who created it, thereby providing tangible rewards for bestowing it with life and power. This is the natural relationship between a deity cultivator and a large number of contract cultivators. Congratulations, Sigrund. You and your fellow fleters may have accidentally followed into the footsteps of the Five Scrolls Compact!"