

The Mech 5831

Chapter 5831 Reasonable Ves

When Gloriana proposed to connect her brain to that of an arche, Ves strongly disapproved of this notion!

It was a harebrained scheme that had a high chance of producing an accident!

"Do you know what you are getting into?!" Ves spoke to the virtual projection of his wife.

"Interfacing with the minds of other humans has always been dangerous, even with all of the advancements that have been made in neural interface technology during the Age of Mechs. There are good reasons why everyone rightfully remains on guard against this crazy action. Even in the best of conditions, there is still an unavoidable chance of accidents. You would be lucky to come away with a headache or other temporary affliction. What I am really worried about is if the reactions are more severe. Don't you understand that you can lose your memories, enter into a coma or outright die?!"

His Gloriana's expression turned serious as she faced her husband's rebuke. That indicated that she at least hadn't lost her rationality.

"I understand your concerns, Ves, but I have to do this. I have made a commitment to master archetech for the purpose of integrating it into my design philosophy. I am tired of learning about it from tertiary sources. None of the sources that I have consulted so far have displayed any measure of true comprehension. There is far more to archetech than is obvious on the surface. I strongly feel that my proposal is the correct way to approach this alien tech base. Doesn't it make sense that to understand technology that is intrinsically designed to interface with the shells of a turtle-like race, we should explore what takes place in their minds?"

"That is some of the most idiotic logic that I have ever heard! Even if it is plausible, that is no excuse for you to interface with the mind of an arche! Everyone who has a slight familiarity in this field knows extremely well that interfacing with different species is much more dangerous than usual. There are fundamental differences between the biologies and thinking patterns of different alien races. On top of that, newly discovered alien races are usually a lot less understood than the ones our biotech researchers have dissected for thousands of years. Not a lot of time has passed since humanity first discovered the arche. I seriously doubt that anyone understands them well enough to reduce the danger factor of interfacing with their minds."

"I will take the necessary precautions." Gloriana said in a voice that did not give Ves a lot of confidence. "I am not as reckless as you. I know how to conduct a proper experiment. I will invite experts from the Larkinson Biotech Institute and the Red Association to assist and supervise my attempt to peer into the mind of an arche. We still have a number of prisoners locked in one of the biomes of the Dragon's Den. Granted, many of them have turned almost catatonic due to their traumatic deshelling, but that should make it safer to interface with their minds. As long as my initial attempts have concluded without any serious issue, I will look into repeating this experiment on a more healthy arche specimen. I need to borrow your MTA merits to redeem a healthy arche from the mechers."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT! YOU ARE CRAZY, GLORIANA!"

The two argued for several more minutes!

Ves found it deeply disturbing that their roles had been reversed this time. It was usually his wife that acted as the voice of reason, and she frequently raised her voice in order to drill through his stubborn mindset.

The fact that he was resorting to the same methods as his wife right now was deeply ironic.

Alas, just as how his Gloriana often failed to persuade her stubborn husband to change his mind, this time Ves failed to get his wife to change her mind.

"I need to go, Ves! There is so much that needs to be done before I can make my first interfacing tech. We cannot fully understand archetech unless we understand the species who created it. One way or another, the secrets of archetech shall be laid bare!"

"Do you know how arrogant you sound?!" Ves frustratingly asked. "Alien technology of this complexity can never be figured out in a matter of months! I have been working with luminar crystal technology for years, but I still don't understand all of its fundamental principles. You are crazy if you think you can solve this issue by poking into the minds of a few aliens. If archetech truly has obscure principles, then the Xenotechnician would have discovered it by now. He is much smarter and more capable of getting to the bottom of this issue than a Journeyman Mech Designer like yourself!"

His wife shook her head. "I am disappointed in you, Ves. Every Star Designer is amazing. I have no doubt about that. They are anything but infallible, though. Star Designers do not possess unlimited attention spans. They have not mastered every tech that is out there, and they cannot devote so much effort on every interesting research topic. You have never allowed the likes of the Polymath stop you from pursuing your own innovations. It is only logical that I do the same. At worst, my research will produce results that are identical to that of the Red Association. This is not a waste of time as conducting experiments in person will allow me to master existing theories more extensively."

"If you truly insist on this crazy endeavor, then at least allow other people to try it out first! There is no way to know whether interfacing with the mind of an arche is safe. If an accident occurs, then at least you have prevented a catastrophe that would have caused our children to grow up without their mother. You don't want to make them sad, right?"

His wife suddenly directed a furious glare at him. "Do not bring our children into this conversation! You have no right to deter me from making essential progress in my quest to create the perfect vessels when I have supported you every time you come up with your dubious ideas! I need to go, Ves. Do not attempt to stop me in any way. The secrets of the arch shall be mine!"

The connection abruptly ended, leaving Ves alone in his office aboard the Tarrasque.

Ves did not feel reassured after hearing his wife's insane rationale. He actually grew even more afraid that she would do something stupid and get herself killed!

He stretched out his hand and transmitted a silent command.

The Larkinson Mandate which had been resting quietly on an ornamental book lectern rose in the air and flew towards his hands.

The ancestral heirloom had clearly grown a lot more powerful in the last year-and-a-half.

Even though Ves hadn't been aware of it, his approach towards its creation had turned it into a genuine artifact.

A sloppy one that did not conform to any of the conventional approaches employed by cultivators, but that did not change the fact that the Larkinson Mandate already came to life as an extraordinary vessel.

Whatever flaws and inadequacies that it originally possessed shortly after its creation had gradually faded as Goldie grew stronger.

Its evolution mirrored that of the Larkinson Clan. It was no surprise that the current iteration of the Larkinson Mandate had become many times stronger than before.

It had turned into a true relic that was intrinsically tied to the clan. Everytime a clansman thought or acted upon anything related to the Larkinsons, they fed the Larkinson Mandate and the powerful life form resting within.

In turn, the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat watched over the Larkinsons and helped them in their own ways.

Ves actually did not know whether the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat were separate entities. They were undeniably connected to each other, but that did not necessarily mean they were two aspects of the same existence.

He decided not to puzzle over this difficult question. He had more important concerns at the moment.

"Goldie."

"Nyaaa!"

The compartment instantly grew warmer and brighter as a radiant spiritual cat emerged out of the purple tome.

Goldie looked as cute as ever as she flew towards Ves' head and nuzzled her cheek against his own. Strong feelings of love and family soothed his nerves and suppressed his fears.

"Alright, that's enough, my dear. I did not call you over so we can cuddle with each other. I called you because I want to tell you that you need to keep a closer eye on Gloriana. I am sure you are already aware of what she has in mind, so I don't need to tell you how dangerous it is. Watch out for her, okay? If her actions lead her to danger, then I need you and your fellow design spirits to step in. You may even need to protect her against herself."

"Nyaaa..."

"I know it is difficult to judge whether her actions are right or wrong, but I don't want her to risk her life when it isn't necessary. You have my permission to employ your full power to pull her back if you deem it necessary. Do you understand my instructions?"

"Nyaaa!"

"Good. I am counting on you. In the meantime, how are my clansmen faring?"

"Nyaa nyaa nyaa!"

"Have you noticed anything weird or different?"

"Nyaaa nyaaa nyaaa nyaaaa."

While Ves possessed a decent grasp of the overall state of his clan, Goldie was much more connected to it than anyone else. The ancestral spirit knew so much about the Larkinsons as a whole and as individuals that she could easily figure trends that eluded others!

"I see."

"Nyaaa nyaa nyaaa!"

"That is good to know."

"Nyaa nyaa!"

"Of course you are the bestest girl! Oh, come over here and let me scratch your head."

"Nyaaaaa~"

The Larkinson Clan was undergoing rapid changes once again. Ves' latest stunts had once again increased its profile and made it more popular than ever.

The Larkinsons keenly took advantage of this by hiring a lot of talents and negotiating better deals.

Everything seemed to be getting better, but Ves did not dare to let down his guard. Red humanity was still in a precarious state. It only took a few major setbacks to drastically worsen the clan's position.

Ves would feel a lot better if his clan gained a few ace pilots and formed its own first-class mech fleet.

"Okay, that's enough scratches for you. I need to get back to work again. Stay vigilant and make sure to spend more time on monitoring the activities of first-raters."

"Nyaa!"

Goldie dove back into the Larkinson Mandate again. The big tome grew warmer and radiated a soft glow that made it look sacred.

Ves briefly studied the decorated cover of the relic and thought about whether it was time to update it again.

"It's too soon."

The Larkinson Mandate acquired a lot of significance. The conscious and unconscious rituals conducted by the members of the Larkinson Clan had caused the item to become more than just a really fancy book.

It had become the symbol and the physical representation of the Larkinson Clan.

There were many interesting implications to this state.

Any changes to the clan reflected back onto the Larkinson Mandate.

In turn, any changes made to the book also radiated to the Larkinsons, if only slightly.

This meant that Ves had to be a little careful on what he wanted to add or remove to the Larkinson Mandate. The stronger it became, the more it affected his clan in a mysterious fashion.

Ves wondered whether this two-way relationship applied to the Sacred Scrolls and their worshipers as well.

This was a highly plausible idea. Perhaps the shattering of the Metal Scroll had utterly broken its hold over all of the cultists that it held under its thrall.

"Interesting theory."

Chapter 5832 She's Too Big

The Bluejay Fleet finally arrived at its destination.

The trip did not take that long, but every day that passed was wearing on Ves' patience.

While he tried his best to remain productive during the journey, he remained concerned about his wife's latest antics.

He also worried whether he would leave this star system empty-handed. This was a serious possibility given that he agreed to conduct an experiment that was unprecedented in many ways.

When the warships of the Red Association entered the star system, it was clear that they were not the big boys in this location.

That honor went to the warships of the Red Fleet.

A massive warfleet had clearly settled into the star system for a few days. Dozens of mining vessels were eagerly harvesting more resources from the local planets and asteroid belts.

Dozens of patrols consisting of frigates and destroyers covered the outer systems.

Meanwhile, a large concentration of cruisers, battlecruisers and even battleships hovered protectively around one of the largest human warships in the Red Ocean.

"When you informed me you scheduled a rendezvous with the fleeters, I did not expect you to converge upon the Dominion of Man." Jovy said in a deceptively mild tone. "Are you aware that this dreadnought has enough firepower to demolish the Tarrasque and all of our escort vessels with a single volley of her main cannons? Even if she is designed to function more as a titanic troop carrier rather than a traditional battleship, none of our defenses, and that includes the secret measures that you are not supposed to know about, can hinder this monstrosity of a warship in any way. We are all completely at the mercy of the fleeters as soon as we enter this star system."

By all rights, Ves should have recognized that he had fallen into a dangerous situation. He hated it when he put his life in the hands of others. His relationship with the fleeters was quite mixed, and he had strong enemies among them who would not mind erasing his entire existence from this reality.

Yet despite all of these factors, Ves did not show any signs of concern.

"Relax. Nothing will happen. The Dominion of Man is a dreadnought that should never be under the control of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet. She is an inherently offensive tool that is fantastic at capturing hostile starships, defensive installations and maybe even entire cities. The dreadnought is firmly in the grip of the Second Main Fleet."

The Tarrasque exchanged a lot of messages with the unquestionable flagship of the fleet.

The mechers who crewed the warships of the Bluejay Fleet displayed obvious reluctance when they received instructions to advance towards the inner system. The more they moved forward, the more the fleeters had the ability to control their life and death.

The tension was clear in the bridge of the Tarrasque. The mechers had no choice but to comply as Ves was keen on meeting his appointment. The Red Association and the Red Fleet were not at war with each other, and it would be foolish to start a scuffle during a time where every human needed to form a united front against the aliens.

Ves actually enjoyed the fact that his decision to meet up with the fleeters caused a lot of consternation among the normally confident and unflappable mechers.

It showed that they were still human like everyone else. No amount of transhuman augmentations could protect them against the fury of overwhelming firepower.

While the Bluejay Fleet cautiously closed the distance to the dreadnought that had played a pivotal role in capturing an intact Tide Station during Operation Night Jazz, Ves manipulated a projected screen and sought out one warship in particular.

"There she is." Ves grinned.

The Babylon Excavator was easy to overlook since there were so many other cruisers in the neighborhood, but the reconnaissance cruiser was clearly a lot different from every other RF vessel in the star system.

Knowing that Sigrund would be around to guide him while he visited one of the most powerful assets of the fleeters, Ves relaxed and waited for the trip to finish.

Hours passed by. Before the Bluejay Fleet was able to come any closer, the fleeters commanded it to a stop.

A fast frigate flew alongside the Tarrasque and commanded Ves to transfer aboard.

"This is the end of the line for our ships." Rear Admiral Gori Tensen announced from his command seat. "None of us are permitted to proceed any further. The fleeters have given us stern warnings of what might happen if one of us crosses the line. Professor Larkinson, we have readied a shuttle for you. We will not lower our anti-teleportation safeguards just to make the transfer more convenient. You will have to transfer to their vessel through conventional means."

Ves shrugged. "That's okay. Can I take Lucky along?"

"The fleeters have made it clear that they will only permit a single person. No pets allowed."

"Damn. No wonder those guys are so stiff and serious all the time." Ves grumbled.

He was at least allowed to carry all of his gadgets on his person, not that it would make a difference.

Phase lord or not, the Dominion of Man was one of the top warships that humanity had ever created.

Although the Common Fleet Alliance eventually deemed its dreadnoughts to be failures, that was just because the arrogant bastards were aiming way too high.

As Ves transferred to the fast frigate and gained permission to enter a small observation chamber, he patiently waited until the comparably tiny vessel came closer to the massive construct of metal and fire.

"Amazing."

Seeing her up close with his own eyes granted him a much more profound impression of the famous dreadnought.

There was no comparison between seeing the Dominion of Man in reality as opposed through a live feed.

The lower the distance, the more Ves was able to observe the exceptional properties of this marvel of human naval engineering.

There was nothing about the Dominion of Man that screamed failure to Ves. The humongous hull that was made out of the finest defensive alloys developed by the human race were supposedly designed to withstand direct attacks from god mechs.

The immensely thick hull plating had most definitely grown even tougher than a few years ago due to being refitted with hyper technology.

So much high-grade hyper materials had been added to the 18 kilometer long hull that Ves wondered how long other RF warships had to wait their turn to receive their hyper tech upgrades.

Whatever the case, it was clearly worth it, because the Dominion of Man absorbed so much E energy from the environment that it had virtually formed void in her immediate surroundings.

No other warship or mech could wrestle any E energy while they remained in proximity of this titanic vessel. That was how powerful this dreadnought had become!

As the fast frigate deliberately slowed down in order to give Ves a scenic tour of the exterior of the pride and joy of the Red Fleet, Ves gazed down at the massive letters that proudly proclaimed the name of the dreadnought.

DOMINION OF MAN

Even the lettering had been made with the highest quality materials that the fleeters could muster. There was so much force and power behind this label that it seemed to empower the identity of the massive warship.

In fact, when Ves utilized Blinky to study the spiritual characteristics of the dreadnought, he realized that she had already begun to transcend her existence as a material existence.

The broadcast of Operation Night Jazz had turned the Dominion of Man from a semi-secret existence into a universally recognized symbol of the Red Fleet!

Even if the Dominion of Man had to share the attention of the public with seven other massive hulls, there were still billions if not trillions of humans that regularly hoped that the most powerful troop ship in human hands would protect them all from the threat of the native aliens.

The power of collective human belief was so strong that it had affected the hull of the Dominion of Man in mysterious ways.

Unfortunately, it fell short of producing any noticeable improvements. Blinky observed the warship's spiritual signature closely, but did not detect anything too obvious.

It was as if the Dominion of Man tried so hard to become a totemic existence for red humanity, but far too little had been done to make it happen.

The problem was two-fold.

First, red humanity has not worshiped the dreadnought long enough.

Second, the amount of accumulation needed to transform one of the biggest warships in the Red Ocean was immense!

It was like trying to form a planet by having everyone donate a grain of sand every day.

Even if trillions of humans contributed to this noble effort, it would take decades if not centuries to form a small planetoid at this rate!

In the end, most humans were too weak to increase their contributions. The population of red humanity was also terribly small relative to the titanic size of the dreadnought.

Ves shook his head. "This is clearly an inefficient process."

He wondered what he could do to speed up her transformation. The Dominion of Man was an impressive warship and one that could play a vital role in the Red War. Anything that made her stronger would be helpful.

Before Ves could analyze the dreadnought further, he received a notification from his current ship.

[Docking is imminent. Please stand by while our frigate docks inside the primary hangar bay of the Dominion of Man.]

The Dominion of Man was just so enormous in scale and volume that a frigate was able to enter the massive dreadnought's hangar bay without needing to squeeze between any cramped spaces!

Multiple other full-sized vessels had already been resting inside this huge, city-sized bay.

As the frigate finally touched down on the deck, a projected line came into view that guided Ves to the exit hatch.

Once he stepped out of the frigate, he was graced by a small welcoming party consisting of armored marines and a few officers.

It felt a bit lackluster compared to the grandeur of the Dominion of Man. Hundreds of other fleeters working in the enormous hangar bay merrily performed their work duties as if nothing special was happening.

It was clear that the fleeters did not wish for his arrival to attract too much attention.

That was fine with Ves. He already earned enough acclaim to last him for years. There was no need to paint an even bigger target on his back.

"Captain Reze! You're here!"

The AI in the guise of a human officer smiled at Ves. "You have broken countless protocols on how you are supposed to step aboard a dreadnought of the Red Fleet, but we are forgiven towards invited

guests such as yourself. Walk with me. The captain of this fine warship has requested to meet with you as soon as it is convenient."

"Ah, okay."

The small procession moved to the exit, but would take quite a while to exit the hangar bay considering how huge it was. The dimensions of this ridiculously huge dreadnought were so excessive that it might take an entire day to move from one end to the other end of the hull!

Naturally, there were more convenient means of getting around. The main corridors were so tall and wide that several mechs could easily move through them without issue.

All of that space was needed because a huge amount of personnel moved through shuttles and land vehicles.

As Ves and his fleeter escorts boarded a specially marked shuttle, he finally gained an opportunity to chat with his old 'friend'.

"So are we proceeding with the original plan?"

"We are." Captain Reze responded with a small nod. "Not many officers have been informed why you are here, but those who are aware of the plan have expressed serious doubts and misgivings about your planned 'experiment'. Do not be concerned. The admirals involved are adamant that you be allowed to make the attempt. My fellow colleagues will grumble, but they will abide by their instructions. I only hope that you do not cause a destructive accident. Any significant damage you produce that compromises the performance of the Dominion of Man is a grave crime."

"Uh, okay. I will make sure to be careful."

Chapter 5833 The Pride of the Red Fleet

The Dominion of Man was one of the prides of the Red Fleet.

From the beginning of her conception, the fleeters envisioned the dreadnought to function as a flagship of an entire galactic naval armada.

Almost no expense had been spared in her construction and incremental upgrades, and it showed.

The massive passageways, of which even the secondary ones were wide enough to fit entire mechs, were all reinforced with the toughest first-class alloys that were commonly used to clad first-class multipurpose mechs.

The fleeters did not merely invest in purely practical measures.

As a ship that was originally envisioned to become the standard bearer of a human superpower, the Dominion of Man also contained a lot of inspiring artwork.

The interior of the unique vessel adopted a general color scheme of blue, gold and black.

Yet what truly shifted the atmosphere inside the hull were the innumerable amount of individual artworks.

The best painters and sculptors raised among the spaceborn clans interpreted the grandeur of the human race by creating masterful works of art that decorated practically every compartment and corridor.

Ves only had to swivel his head around his neck to view bombastic vistas of ancient battlefields.

Clever use of geometry, angles and perspective distortion created exaggerated visions of both ancient infantry battles and immense space battles where hundreds of proud battleships utterly crushed their alien equivalents!

Sculptures depicted a seemingly endless variety of great human heroes of the past. Each of them contributed to the rise of the human race in one way or another, though Ves distinctly noticed the lack of mechers and Compact cultists among the honored chosen.

The immense interval volume of the Dominion of Man, which was the equivalent of dozens of cities stacked on top of each other, meant that millions if not billions of individual art pieces decorated the spaces of the dreadnought.

Ves even had the illusion that the Dominion of Man actually functioned more as a titanic museum that glorified the superiority of the human race!

The effort was worth it in his opinion. Each and every crew member that passed through the halls felt uplifted by all of the inspiring and heroic sights.

None of the sculptures and paintings depicted anything negative. Defeats and difficult philosophical dilemmas were entirely absent. The artworks were all geared towards making the fleters who crewed the dreadnought feel as righteous and confident as possible!

It made them all feel special. Not only did their pride swell the longer they served on the dreadnought, they also started to form a clique of their own that set themselves apart from the rest of the Red Fleet.

The most notable fleters who carried themselves with obvious confidence, discipline, dedication and above all pride were the famous Dread Marines.

Nobody knew how many of them served within the seemingly endless bowels of the Dominion of Man. Armchair theorists generally speculated that the titanic vessel was able to field 200,000 to 3 million Dread Marines at any time.

No matter the quantity, Ves had little doubt that the Dominion of Man had enough infantry forces at its disposal to capture entire warfleets with plenty of soldiers to spare!

It was not just the quantity of Dread Marines that made the vessel so formidable. It was the impressive individual combat power of each elite soldier that donned the iconic armors developed by some of the brightest minds among the fleters.

Mere first-class suits of combat armor could not compare to the bulky and intimidating black armors worn by the Dread Marines.

Even if they were not deployed in the field, the large number of Dread Marines stomping through the corridors radiated such menace and danger that it made sense why so many passageways were built so large.

The Dread Marines needed the space.

While their individual configurations varied a lot, they generally came in three overall sizes.

The Light Dread Marines were already a little taller and bulkier than regular infantry soldiers who donned suits of heavy combat armor. The former were only 'light' in the sense that they were the weakest of their kind.

It was clear that the main reason why they lacked so much bulk was because they were primarily tasked with squeezing through small and cramped spaces.

There was no chance that the Light Dread Marines could navigate through the interior of a puelmer warship, but they should be able to navigate through other small vessels without too much issue, especially considering that their armor was highly modular.

Medium Dread Marines were probably the mainstays of the marine force attached to the dreadnought. They were noticeably larger and a lot bulkier than their lighter counterparts. That allowed them to carry a lot more modular weapons and equipment, thereby making them stronger in almost every way.

There weren't as many Heavy Dread Marines stomping around, but each one was a sight to behold.

They were so much larger than their medium cousins that they practically reached a size that was commonly associated with demimechs!

Anyone else would have classified these enormous humanoid metal constructs as vehicles or even mechs, but the fleeters clearly rejected this truth.

The massive 'infantry' suits were so immense that they could never be lifted by human power alone. Massive servos and other machinery enabled these bulky constructs to move at a ponderous but momentous pace.

What they lacked in speed and agility, they made up for it with hard power. Their weapon hardpoints, their exceedingly thick armor and their sizable power reactors ensured that they would never falter in a head-on confrontation with other conventional forces!

Ves even believed that a squad of Heavy Dread Marines possessed the means to defeat a single first-class multipurpose mech!

This was amazing as the soldiers who manned these demimech-like constructs clearly did not control their suits through a neural interface.

Ves grew so curious at how the infantry soldiers controlled these bulky and complex suits that he couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer.

"How are these soldiers able to control these bulky suits?"

Captain Zonrad Reze continued to smile as he stood on a floating platform that continued to bring Ves and his escorts deeper into the dreadnought.

"It is a combination of methods. The soldier only needs to move his limbs slightly in order to trigger specific programmed actions. The AI-assisted movements and actions of the Dread Marines are highly adaptive to the circumstances and almost never fail. If a Dread Marine is required to execute a more complicated task, then he can employ his specialized cranial implant to transmit more detailed instructions to his Dread Armor. It takes years of training to make the troopers convey their

intentions at lightning speed. This is how they are able to control their iconic equipment as if it is an extension of their bodies."

While the efforts of the fleeters clearly enabled the Dread Marines to close the gap with mechs, there was still a small but perceptible difference in fluency and control.

The differences may be small, but they could make a critical difference in the heat of battle. This was why Ves judged that demimechs should readily be able to outduel Heavy Dread Marines in equal confrontations.

Of course, it was unlikely for Dread Marines to attack any mech force with equal numbers. The former were so much greater in quantity that it was not even funny.

Unlike with the case of mechs, Dread Armors did not need to be piloted by potentates. The fleeters had the luxury to recruit the best and most exemplary soldiers from a nearly limitless supply of manpower.

It was impressive. Dread Marines came close to substituting mechs. While Ves surmised that Dread Marines mainly excelled in landbound combat and boarding actions, they were also capable of fighting space battles so long they equipped themselves with the appropriate flight modules.

Not that Ves expected them to do so. They were so comparatively small that most of their weapon systems simply lacked the punch and penetration power needed to effectively overcome the external defenses of warships.

"Dread Marines are not meant to replace mechs." The secret sentient AI explained to Ves. "They are explicitly meant to be employed as heavy infantry. While the Dread Marine Corps clearly stretches that definition, this is all necessary to turn them into the most effective boarding troops of human civilization. They are trained and equipped to capture all manner of human alien warships, space stations, planetary strongholds and even entire cities if necessary. They are the masters of urban combat and the crushers of aliens. Their mere appearance is often enough to demoralize enemy alien spacers to the point where they lose all desire of resistance."

The Dread Marines were not only designed to excel in infantry combat. Their tall and bulky shapes, their dark color scheme and their overall menace enhanced their intimidation factor by a noticeable degree!

No matter what sort of alien species confronted them in combat, pretty much every species aside from the phase whales would definitely hesitate to tangle against them. The dread they exuded transcended human sensibilities.

As Ves continued to study Dread Marine after Dread Marine as they traversed the corridors in neat and steady columns, he picked up other traits that set them apart from other marine forces.

Though it wasn't obvious to most people, Blinky's senses were sharp enough to sense a tiny spark of fire burning within their massive shells.

Every Dread Marine carried this extraordinary spark in the locations where their power reactors were supposed to be located.

This single observation had many implications.

While small and relatively weak, the spark was exceedingly high in quality. It exuded a strong sense of heat and power, so much so that any hostile spiritual entity that dared to attack the Dread Marines would probably regret their attempts!

Whatever the fleeters managed to do somehow allowed them to grant anti-cultivator protection to their Dread Marines.

This was clearly not a coincidence.

The source of these small but surprisingly potent sparks of flame was obvious.

Blinky clearly sensed that each and every spark maintained active connections to a much larger source that was located in the exact center of the immensely large hull.

Ves did not need to spend any time to figure out that this must be the super-class Spark Reactor that allowed the dreadnoughts of the Red Fleet to reign supreme among all other warships!

The fact that the fleeters brought Ves in the direction of the distant Spark Reactor was definitely not a coincidence.

He had always aspired to study a real Spark Reactor up close ever since he viewed the dreadnoughts in action.

Their amazing performance during Operation Night Jazz made it abundantly clear that the Spark Reactors were not just technological marvels.

Ves and Blinky were able to feel it as their floating platform came closer to the center of the Dominion of Man.

The massive dreadnought carried an immensely powerful spark that it was surprising that it did not go out of control and start a conflagration that could engulf the entire dreadnought!

While Ves had encountered a lot of different extraordinary phenomena, he had never experienced anything comparable to what he was able to sense from a distance.

The lower the distance, the more Blinky felt threatened by the massive and practically divine spark of heat and flame. The companion spirit instinctively felt that his death was all but certain if he happened to touch it directly!

The Star Cat certainly did not dare to siphon even the tiniest mote of spark energy or whatever it was called. The spark would probably ignite everything and start an unstoppable blaze that could burn down the entire Blinkyverse!

"Damn."

"Pardon, professor?"

"Oh, it's nothing, captain. I am just thinking about how awesome these Dread Marines are. My passion lies with mechs, but that does not stop me from appreciating how devastating they can be when put into action."

Captain Reze smiled with pride. "The Dread Captain will be pleased to hear your compliment. The Dread Marines are only a part of what makes the Dominion of Man so effective. The Rubicon Spatial Transfer System is the main delivery vehicle that is responsible for inserting them directly

inside warships and other sensitive areas. If you are lucky enough, you may be given a tour of this vital system."

Chapter 5834 The Dominion of Man

The lengthy journey from the primary hangar bay to the interior of the Dominion of Man did not end at the compartment that held the legendary Spark Reactor.

Much to Ves' disappointment, the floater platform stopped and lowered itself to the deck just before an incredibly expansive command center.

He seriously doubted that the massive compartment where hundreds of officers and specialists manned different stations served as the main bridge.

Regardless, the space clearly served as a vital control center that monitored and directed a lot of different functions of the huge dreadnought.

The command center was not only notable for its size. The grand artworks that decorated the tall bulkheads also captured his attention.

The masterwork did not depict an armada of warships.

It did not show the portraits of the grand admirals who founded the Common Fleet Alliance.

It displayed no violence of any kind.

Instead, the fleeters had brought together the absolute best painters, sculptors and gemstone cutters that they were able to muster and tasked them to work together to create a magnificent vista of hope and inspiration.

The centerpiece consisted of a family of humans wearing the most exquisite garments.

None of the figures wore any fleeters uniforms or possessed any military bearings, but each of them clearly exemplified different aspects of the human race.

The father was tall, athletic and unquestionably masculine. The way he looked forward with his broad chin and his unwavering eyes made it seem as if he was driven by endless ambition.

The mother looked incredibly beautiful and matronly. She exemplified the feminine and more gentle side of humanity. Her expression conveyed a fantastic balance between thoughtfulness and affection.

The two children that stood before their parents conveyed a strong sense of progress and potential.

The boy still possessed the immaturity of youth. Yet his age did not prevent him from taking pride in his species. He looked ready to step into the footsteps of his father and continue his dream once he could go no further.

The younger daughter possessed a precocious appearance that emphasized her youth. She looked so cute and adorable that no doll ever created could exceed her cuteness. Her innocence was so striking that she was able to evoke the protective instincts of any human individual.

Together, this model of a human family stood on a piece of idyllic land that displayed farms, grasslands, cattle and crops.

Nothing looked out of place. Everything looked just right no matter the subject.

Each and every element was carefully designed to fit into an aesthetic masterpiece that somehow made everything fit together.

This included what lay below the lands. Hidden from the sight of the humans standing above the ground, a huge amount of decaying corpses and broken skeletons of many different alien species rested down at the bottom.

Many of the species happened to be recognizable. The Seven Apex Races along with the thirteen major races of the Red Ocean all featured prominently among the dead and buried bodies. The huge phase whale skeleton looked especially prominent among all of the smaller remains!

All in all, the artwork conveyed a very clear meaning and theme. There were many subtle touches that Ves could spend days on analyzing, but on the surface the inspirational piece exemplified the values of human superiority.

Nobody who saw this magnificent work would fail to come away with a renewed drive to expand human space and defeat the aliens that sought to engineer the downfall of human civilization.

Even though there was not an explicit spiritual component to this magnificent artwork, a part of Ves couldn't help but resonate with the overall message and aspirations conveyed by the artists.

"What... what is it called?"

"The Dominion of Man." A firm male voice sounded from behind.

Ves turned around and faced one of the most decorated fleetier officers he had ever seen.

The gilded uniform not only looked highly ceremonial, but was also cut in a way to convey absolute authority over the hull. Nobody would be able to mistake him as anyone less than the master of one of humanity's dreadnoughts!

The tall and broad-shouldered man looked like he was in the prime of his life.

That was an illusion as Ves could clearly sense plenty of signs that he had lived for at least a couple of centuries.

Regardless, the man truly looked as if he did his exalted position justice. He wore his uniform like he was born to it. He held his arms behind his back in a posture that looked as if he was always ready and composed for anything.

The only feature that looked off-putting was the very obvious external module attached to the side of his skull. A part of his neatly groomed brown hair had to be shaved away in order to accommodate this sizable expansion to his undoubtedly powerful cranial implant.

As Ves beheld the Dread Captain of the Dominion of Man, the powerful fleetier in question took a good look at the legendary Devil Tongue and all-around troublemaker of the mech industry.

Captain Reze took a single step forward and tactfully introduced the two men to each other.

"Professor, you have the honor of meeting Dread Captain Volkert Argile. He is the appointed sovereign of the Dominion of Man. He is the first born son of Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile. He is also an elder of the Argile Spaceborn Clan. Having witnessed over 280 standard years, he has continually refused further promotions that would have propelled him into flag rank in order to

excel in all aspects related to single warship command. The Fleet has recognized his unending dedication and granted him the privilege of commanding one of its eminent dreadnoughts."

Well, that was definitely an imposing introduction.

Ves did not know what sort of protocol he should follow, so he defaulted to making a short bow.

"I am pleased to meet you, Dread Captain Argile. Your warship is the most magnificent spacefaring construct that I ever had the pleasure to board. I am grateful for the opportunity to witness some of the best that the Red Fleet has made. This dreadnought is a priceless asset that will definitely help to cement our civilization's dominance in the Red Ocean."

The Dread Captain liked what he heard. He demonstrated that he wasn't a stuck-up bastard by slightly relaxing his posture while showing the barest hint of a smile.

"Introductions are not necessary on your part. I know who you are, or as much as the Red Fleet knows of you. I am aware that your interactions with our current and predecessor organizations have not been universally positive. Let me reassure you that we have invited you to one of our crown jewels in good faith. I will not tolerate any instances of provocation or impropriety from our crew towards our guests. I hope that you have not seen any cause to issue any complaints during your brief stay aboard our dreadnought up to this point."

"Your crew has been a model of professionalism. I do not feel unwelcome in the slightest."

That was mostly because every spacer and Dread Marine was preoccupied with their own tasks. They hardly had the time to gawk at the visitor who clearly wore a different outfit from the other fleters.

The Dread Captain gestured Ves to follow before turning around. "As much as I wish to explore your opinions on the Red Collective and other integral subjects, time is at a premium. Let us head inside one of my offices."

They crossed the huge command center and entered a large and exceedingly opulent office compartment.

The Dread Captain had definitely personalized it to his taste. Paintings of past and present Argile flag offices hung on the bulkheads. Hunting trophies of fierce and deadly mutated beasts were spread out here and there. Exquisitely crafted scale models of all of the warships that Volkert Argile had the privilege of commanding proudly occupied an entire display case.

It was a pity that Ves hardly had any time to admire all of the pieces. He and Sigrund sat on one end of a large and thick wooden desk while the Dread Captain sat on the other side.

The master of the Dominion of Man soon retrieved a secure data pad and slid it over towards Ves.

"Captain Zonrad Reze of the Babylon Excavator has already signed the confidentiality agreements, but you have yet to do so. Please read through the documents and sign them as promptly as possible. Our discussion cannot proceed any further unless you agree to all of the terms."

Ves picked up the data pad and rapidly scanned through all of the NDAs. While the punishment of violating the agreements were harsh, the terms were pretty normal otherwise. The fleters just wanted to make sure that he remained silent on the secrets that made the Dominion of Man so powerful.

Once he signed the contracts, Dread Captain Argile did not delay in explaining why the Red Fleet invited Ves to this dreadnought.

"We need your assistance."

Ves blinked at that. "Really? Ah, my apologies for being direct, but from what I have seen the Dominion of Man is a warship that has been designed and built to near perfection. She is the most powerful vessel that I have stepped aboard and nothing that I have seen suggests that anything is less than optimal."

The exalted captain smiled with pride when he heard that. "We have indeed gone above and beyond to ensure the Dominion of Man deserves to be regarded as a pillar of red humanity. It is regrettable that my dreadnought is being tormented by unexpected... issues that debilitate her performance. We have tried our best to compensate for these complications, but I am afraid our best scientists and engineers have failed to adequately solve the problems that affect the very root of my ship."

This was a much bigger deal than Ves expected!

He found it difficult to believe that the fleeters struggled to handle their own creation. The Dominion of Man was one of their finest creations. Surely they had the knowledge and the competence to bring the Dominion of Man back in line.

However, given that Dread Captain Argile did not hesitate to make a humiliation admission in front of a mech designer, it was clear that the issues that plagued the Dominion of Man fell outside the Red Fleet's expertise.

Ves had a few ideas why the fleeters looked forward to his visit.

Perhaps this was why it had been easier than expected for Ves to negotiate a deal with the Red Fleet.

If not for the Dominion of Man's predicament, it would have been a lot harder for Ves to visit one of the most valuable warships in the Red Fleet's possession!

"I am not opposed to lending you my expertise, captain." Ves carefully said. "However, I cannot promise that I can solve your problems."

"We are aware that you are subject to limitations. We do not ask you to do the impossible. We only ask you to do your best, professor."

"I will try." Ves responded with a smile that did not look all that confident. "Can you tell me the nature of your dreadnought's problems?"

"It is best if I show you first. The agreements that you have just made with us should permit you to view the center of our concerns."

Everyone rose to their feet and left the office.

They all boarded a much more ornate floater platform and rode it for a time.

They passed through several checkpoints, each of which grew successfully stronger and better defended.

Once they passed through the final set of blast doors, they entered a space that was not too far from the incredibly powerful Spark Reactor.

The place looked like an immense data processing chamber at first. The fleeters installed so many crystalline processing banks that Ves could almost feel the sheer force of their calculations.

Yet the potent processors paled in comparison to the immense force of calculation that took place inside a mech-

sized sphere of solid metal!

This was more than just a processor array or an amazingly powerful AI core. It radiated extraordinary power that felt both familiar but also disturbingly mutated in many ways.

A squad of Dread Marines standing before the huge sphere manually enacted the process of creating an opening.

Once a gate slid open, the Dread Captain gestured for Ves to follow him inside.

"Be careful and do not make any special actions. Just look and see."

As Ves, Sigrund and Volkert Argile passed through the gate, they all stopped and looked around the hollow interior.

What they saw caused the expressions of the two visitors to grow pale and shocked!

"Are those... brains in vats?!" Ves asked in shock as he temporarily lost all decorum! "No wait... these aren't normal human brains. I've seen so many of them that I can distinguish a few of their characteristics. None of them are cloned. I don't think any of them are less than a century old. What is more, their ability to receive, process and transmit data is clearly way above the norm."

His eyes suddenly widened as he made a shocking conclusion.

"Have you guessed the truth, professor?" Dread Captain Argile asked.

"These brains... are taken from potentates. What... what are their genetic aptitudes?"

"A- and higher. We only employ the best for our experimental organic AI core array."

Chapter 5835 Unforeseen Circumstances

The 'AI core array' that governed the operation of many of the essential systems of the Dominion of Man was more horrifying than Ves imagined!

He was already aware that the fleeters tended to invest heavily in AI core research. The Common Fleet Alliance never made it a secret that they had been trying to chase after the holy grail of sentient artificial intelligences.

Due to this unreasonable obsession, the researchers who dedicated their lives and careers to this goal tended to get really... creative.

Many researchers had already tried and failed all of the usual solutions. When no sentient AIs became forthcoming, they started to explore less conventional solutions.

Ves easily figured out that he had come face to face with one of the demented outcomes of these failed experiments.

The brains did not contain any coherent intelligences as far as he and Blinky could perceive.

This was despite the fact that he was pretty sure these brains used to belong to real people who had all lived for over a century!

The fact that they were all derived from potentates with the highest aptitude for piloting mechs made the sight extra horrifying to a mech designer!

Where did these brains come from? What did the fleeters do to convert them into organic AI cores? How did their performance diverge from conventional computing cores?

Ves had so many questions in his mind that he did not know where to begin.

Captain Zonrad Reze meanwhile looked just as taken aback, but for different reasons.

Despite the fact that he was a fletcher, Sigrund exhibited a visibly worse reaction to this macabre sight. He had rapidly counted the amount of brains that the fleeters had stuck inside a vat and chained them together to form a unified computing array.

While not all of the individual brain units were visible due to various structures blocking his sight, the captain of the Babylon Excavator estimated that the fleeters had stuffed over a thousand brain vats in this space!

"You have questions." Dread Captain Argile broke the silence.

"I do..."

"You may ask. I cannot provide you with all of the answers, but I shall do my best to offer sufficient clarification for you to be of service."

"Thank you, captain. These brains... are they taken from deceased mech pilots?"

"No. I can promise you that not a single of these extracted and preserved brains are taken from mech pilots."

Ves immediately let out a sigh in relief.

Volkert Argile smiled at Ves. "The providence of these brains are all sourced from deceased officers of the Common Fleet Alliance and lately the Red Fleet. The donors of these valuable organs were all descendants of the spaceborn clans. When they have reached the age of 10, we test their genetic aptitude as any other human in order to determine their genetic aptitudes."

"Ah. I see. Given that you fleeters have always despised or looked down on mechs, I take it that your mech academies aren't exactly popular."

"That is indeed the case." The fletcher nodded in confirmation. "To any other human, being told that you not only have the qualifications to pilot a mech, but possess stellar talent for this vocation is a dream come true. Every year, many newly identified potentates feel as if they have won the lottery and go on to throw themselves into mechs as if they are gods in the making. I find it pitiful that so many young and ignorant children feel the need to throw aside their humanity and turn themselves into inhuman gods, while completely overlooking the abysmally low success rate of advancing to the highest rank."

Ves tried his best not to comment on Dread Captain Argile's obvious inhuman appearance.

After all, not everyone chose to massively boost the capabilities of their cranial implant by installing an external add-on that covered a part of their skull with a metal device!

"So there are fleeters who resist the temptation of starting glorious careers as mech pilots and go on to enter naval academies?"

"Every self-respecting scion of a spaceborn clan will do their utmost to follow the proud traditions of their ancestors." The member of the Argile Spaceborn Clan said with pride. "Piloting mechs is taboo in our world. While we are not categorically opposed to employing mechs when they are useful, many of them are either piloted by our more... deviant members or by those who originate from friendly states, of which there are few. Regardless, there are many potentates within our ranks that have gone on to man the guns or take control of the helm of a naval vessel without ever taking advantage of their mech piloting talent."

What an incredible waste!

Ves was sure that any member of the mech community that discovered what the fleeters were doing with their own potentates would probably go mad with grief!

How many heroic mech pilots could the fleeters have fielded if they did not unreasonably stigmatize the mech piloting profession?!

How many more god pilots would human civilization command if all of those elite fleeters received full support in stepping onto the path of godhood?

Ves had encountered many instances where people and organizations clearly ignored the objectively best choices and decided to engage in stupid behavior because of the need to abide by their beliefs.

This was probably the worst case of principles leading people into engaging in monumentally stupid behavior that he had ever encountered in his life!

Not even the Vulcanites who tore apart the original Vulcan Empire due to an argument over whether their god was a human or a dwarf could top the fleeters in terms of sheer idiocy!

Ves really wanted to slam his head against the side of this sickening brain chamber until he had created a dent!

Instead of giving into his frustrations, he controlled his emotions and tried his best not to call the fleeters stupid for preventing the birth of many potential high-ranking mech pilots.

"I... understand the cultural factors that have led the descendants of the spaceborn clans to pursue naval careers. Why make use of their brains in this capacity after they have died?"

"Neural interface technology encompasses more than enabling a person to connect with a machine for the purpose of piloting the latter." Volkert Argile explained before waving his arm around the interior of the giant sphere. "The Brain Trust is a radical departure from prior AI core research, but its working principles are remarkably simple. The goal in developing this construct was to discover whether we can develop a powerful AI core array that can not only regulate the systems of a warship of the Common Fleet Alliance to a far better degree than anything else, but also promote the birth of a sentient gestalt personality that is formed out of a combination of all of the fletcher officers who utilized all of these brains in the past."

Ves widened his eyes. He quickly understood the overall logic behind this crazy experiment.

"I see! Utilizing the brains of former living human individuals might give you a better shot at creating a sentient AI than through other means. After all, they have already formed sentient

consciousness in the past, only they were human instead of anything that primarily runs on math and logic. If this first step is a success, then you soon have to worry about whether the precious sentient AI is cooperative. This is anything but guaranteed as it is completely uncertain whether it will stick to its original programming. In order to increase the probability that the newly born artificial entity is favorably disposed towards the Common Fleet Alliance, you deliberately harvested the brains of upstanding officers who served with distinction when they were alive."

Sigrund also added his own piece. "Loyalty is one part of the equation. Competence and specialization is another part of it. All of the organic nerves that have been chained in this large array have spent decades if not centuries on performing many vital duties related to running first-class warships. They are literally hardwired to efficiently solving many problems related to the operations of our vessels. Even if their original owners have died, their neurons will still retain much of their original 'configurations'. This should theoretically allow these converted AI cores to excel at intelligently solving many problems that previously required manual intervention from an officer."

"That is a highly insightful observation, Captain Reze. I expect nothing less from one of our rising experts in the field of AI research. As a specialist who has recently participated in the development of ARCHIE, what is your overall evaluation of our Brain Trust?"

"It is... a novel and unconventional approach towards solving one of our long-standing problems." Sigrund said. "Despite all of the favorable factors, the probability of success is not high. Human brains are not only geared towards spawning natural human sapience, but they have already completed their work after their owners have reached the end of their lifespans. Trying to salvage more use out of them by converting them into AI cores is an inventive idea, but I am afraid that all of the bioengineering that took place after their extraction has damaged the very factors that are capable of generating true sapience."

Dread Captain Argile nodded. "That has been our finding as well. Do you have anything to add, professor?"

"I am not sure whether these 'organic AI cores' are fully up to the task of running a ship as large and complex as the Dominion of Man." Ves voiced his doubts. "A-grade genetic aptitude or not, the brains are still human in essence. They are grown to support human logic and emotions. At most, they can process pure data a lot better due to their amazing genetic aptitude, but that is still a divergence from their original purpose. No matter how much you have modified them after you plucked them from the skulls of deceased fleeters, you will not be able to go too far with this. They are still human in the end."

"Our researchers originally disagreed with your theory, but recent events have caused us to... reconsider our assumptions."

The mood inside the Brain Trust grew heavier.

"What... happened?"

The captain of the Dominion of Man paused for a few seconds before revealing the truth.

"The organic AI cores may appear calm and docile at the moment, but that is not always the case. Ever since Red Cabal has plunged us into the Age of Dawn, many of our systems have experienced progressively stronger changes and mutations. Much to our relief, many of them have turned out to

be neutral, negligible or benign. Our Spark Reactor has grown the most after the Great Severing has occurred. Our Brain Trust on the other hand has grown less reliable."

"What's the problem?"

"The organic AI cores... have a tendency to grow sentient."

"Wait, isn't that a good thing? The Dominion of Man will gain a powerful sentient AI that will be able to optimize her systems far better than one that can only simulate human thought patterns."

The powerful captain shook his head. "The reality is different from what you have imagined, professor. Constant exposure to E energy radiation is causing each individual organic AI core to... restore portions of the original personalities of their prior incarnations. That is not to say that our deceased officers are being raised from the dead. Instead, completely new personalities are coming to life that have inherited random traits of our eminent officers. This might not necessarily be a problem, but what is troubling us is that the 'sentient AIs' not only emerge randomly, but cannot work together in any fashion. When multiple of them begin to interact with each other as human-like personalities as opposed to pure processors, they quickly conflict with each other. The greater the quantity of spawned personalities, the more our Brain Trust begins to glitch."

That... sounded incredibly freaky to Ves!

"How come this Brain Trust hasn't already transformed into a madhouse of the living dead?!"

"We regularly reset and mindwipe the corrupted organic AI cores. The Brain Trust is designed so that we can remove a small portion of them without affecting the overall performance of the AI core array, but this is only a stopgap measure. We cannot keep wiping these valuable organic AI cores. Not only will each reset inflict permanent damage to the neurons, but they are becoming better at spawning new rogue personalities. The Brain Trust is rapidly turning into a liability at this rate."

So that was why the fleeters needed help.

Their crazy experiment had screwed them over!

Chapter 5836 Uncomfortable Truths

5836 Uncomfortable Truths

The fleeters had worked themselves into a predicament.

The Brain Trust, their unique and experimental organic AI core array, was starting to transform into a liability.

Due to the unexpected new variables that had come into play, the precious brains taken from a large variety of fletcher officers spontaneously began to spawn new and fractured intelligences.

If this took place back in the old galaxy and during the Age of Mechs, the researchers working for the Common Fleet Alliance would have celebrated this occasion with great enthusiasm.

This was because their dream was coming true!

Even if the Brain Trust as a whole was not designed to accommodate multiple different personalities at once, the fact that just one of these brains-in-a-vat had spawned something akin to an 'artificial intelligence' represented a massive breakthrough in their ambition to develop true sentient AIs!

Unfortunately, the Brain Trust was no longer part of an active research project anymore. Instead of occupying a well-

equipped lab where the fleeters could control almost every variable, it had been integrated into the heart of a strategically important dreadnought.

Dread Captain Volkert Argile explained the truth without any obfuscation. As much as it shamed him to admit this grievous error to an outsider, the Red Fleet needed all the help they could get at this point.

"The shipwrights responsible for selecting the Brain Trust as the primary control system of the Dominion of Man did so with the assumption that it was a failed experiment. The research team that had worked on this organic AI core array has tried long and hard to generate sentience in these preserved brains, to no avail. The researchers must be regretting the fact that they have all chosen to remain behind in the old galaxy. Their lifelong dream is coming true before them... yet they are too far away to witness this transformation."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Shouldn't the Red Fleet have plenty of other researchers who would be glad to restart this research project?"

The old captain shook his head. "The Dominion of Man is one of the most important bulwarks of the Red Fleet. The Brain Trust may have failed to generate a sentient AI, but it can still function as an excellent organic AI core array despite the fact that it is deemed a failure. That is not to say it is entirely irreplaceable. Our dreadnought has incorporated many redundant AI cores throughout the entire length of her hull. If the Brain Trust is compromised in any fashion, our proud vessel will still be able to fight with only a slight decrease in combat effectiveness. We can even replace the Brain Trust with a more conventional AI core array if necessary."

The obvious question to that was why the fleeters hadn't done that already.

Ves was not stupid. There were more layers to this deal than he expected. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. He already picked up a few clues that told a different story than what was obvious on the surface.

"I think... you have not been entirely forthcoming with me, dread captain." He spoke as he swept his gaze around the interior of the spherical Brain Trust once again. "Any sane shipwright would never choose to install a failed experimental product that essentially consists of a daisy-chain of over a thousand salvaged brains of deceased CFA officers into one of the largest human warships ever built! Its reliability is dubious and there is no telling how the brains will change over time. I bet that there is a really critical reason why the original designers of the Dominion of Man opted for a solution as crazy as the Brain Trust over a more solid solution that is based on plain old inorganic circuits. The only logical reason why you haven't already disconnected this malfunctioning set of brains is because it provides essential value to your dreadnought. What does it do that makes you reluctant to label it as a lost cause?"

Mentioning the fact that the Dominion of Man wouldn't suddenly lose control or shut down if she lost access to the Brain Trust was a calculated move.

Volkert Argile likely wanted to reduce Ves' bargaining position by making it sound as if the Red Fleet still had alternatives.

However, the move backfired because Ves was not as naive as he looked. He had become involved in way too many convoluted plots and schemes to stop at the surface level.

He looked pointedly at the master of the Dominion of Man and started to connect several different threads.

"I have a theory." Ves spoke. "Let's see whether I got this right. The Dominion of Man is one of the most important warships of the Red Fleet. This is a fact. Her captain is the firstborn son of Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile. Despite your illustrious qualifications, your appointment must not have been easy to arrange. The amount of ship captains who competed with you to earn this coveted assignment must have been intense. Even now, there are still a lot of rivals and enemies who would like nothing more to dislodge you from your post, but they have never succeeded because you managed to run this dreadnought in an impeccable manner. Am I correct so far, captain?"

"I am pleased to hear that you think highly of my captaincy."

"Well, I am sure that maintaining a record that is close to spotless is vital to maintaining your grip on the Dominion of Man. I am sure that your current position also aligns with the interests of the Second Main Fleet, Fleet Admiral Argile and possibly the Argile Spaceborn Clan. All of that will become threatened as soon as your enemies have obtained an opening that allows them to question your position. I can imagine that the failure of a critical control system such as the Brain Trust may turn your position shaky, especially when it plays a vital role in the functioning of other important systems. If the Brain Trust falls, you may fall with it. This will not only add a shameful mark on your record that might end your chances of succeeding your father one day, but also weaken the grip of the Argiles in the Red Fleet."

This single incident had massive implications. There were so many powerful interests tied to the resolution of this problem that it could change the balance of power of red humanity!

Though Dread Captain Argile did not exhibit any behavior that Ves was on the mark, that was a suspicious sign in itself.

"Admit it." Ves spoke as he took a step forward. "Your career is on the line. More importantly, your father's reputation and prestige is at risk. If his son somehow bungles his responsibilities, I bet that Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson and her toadies will not hesitate to take advantage of your misfortune. The need to prevent this outcome is why I am here. For whatever reason, your people believe I may have a way of preserving the Brain Trust so that it will no longer present a liability to the Dominion of Man. As long as the dreadnought's performance remains the same or improves, your career and your father's interests will remain secure."

The two fleeter captains remained silent for a time.

Eventually, Sigrund chose to betray the much more senior officer.

"I warned you that Professor Larkinson is wiser than he appears." Captain Zonrad Reze said. "It is part of the reason why he is the right candidate. I advise you to be honest with him. So what if he becomes aware of how important it is for the Brain Trust to function as intended? The price you have to pay to him is trivial compared to the price of failure. You should set your priorities straight."

Ves smirked. Sigrund sure came through this time.

Both of them looked at Dread Captain Argile in expectation.

Even though it was the most logical course of action, it was still difficult for the Argile to bring himself to admit the truth. It went against his instincts as a fleeter to spill uncomfortable truths to an outsider.

The old man eventually made the necessary choice.

"Very well. You are... more accurate in your predictions than I anticipated. I will not bore you with explaining the intricate alliances and competing interests in our Red Fleet. It is indeed true that my captaincy will come under serious question if the Brain Trust has deteriorated to the point where it must be replaced. All of the replacements that we have prepared in case this scenario occurs are inferior. The reason why that is the case is that the Brain Trust is able to manage the difficult calculations and inferences needed to operate the Rubicon Spatial Transport System."

Ves widened his eyes. "Isn't that the critical system responsible for precision teleporting Dread Marines across vast distances and inserting them directly inside the hulls of enemy warships?!"

"It is also the unique system that relies on EE-343F-00334R to amplify its teleportation capabilities." Sigrund confirmed. "I am not aware of every piece of high technology that the Red Fleet has at its disposal, but I am certain that there is nothing comparable in our arsenal. The Dominion of Man is of such critical importance to us that it utilizes the best of the best. There is no excuse to employ an inferior teleportation system for one of our dreadnoughts. The Brain Trust is an excellent complement to the Rubicon because there are favorable aspects about the organic AI cores that cannot be replicated by more conventional alternatives."

That was a highly informative explanation. It was so helpful to Ves that Dread Captain Argile couldn't help but gaze at his fellow fleeter with obvious suspicion.

Whose side was Sigrund on? The captain of the Babylon Excavator was clearly weakening Argile's bargaining position with these uncomfortable revelations!

"Please refrain from divulging any further confidential information, Captain Reze."

"I am doing what is necessary to foster cooperation between the two of you." Sigrund innocently spread his arms. "I am not your enemy, Dread Captain Argile. Admiral Chelsea Mieli and the Seventh Light Fleet is counting on the continued support of the Second Main Fleet. It is not in my best interest to see you falter. In my humble experience, I have seen many potential problems spin out of control due to misunderstandings and lack of disclosure. As tempting as it is to withhold critical secrets, this is not the time to play games. I advise you to be honest and open to Professor Larkinson. According to his record and an analysis of his past behavior, he has always been more receptive to those who are transparent in their goals and intentions."

Dread Captain Argile clearly agreed with Sigrund in a fashion, because he did not call his guards to drag the insolent officer of the Seventh Light Fleet away.

"I understand now why you have been permitted to participate in this sensitive meeting. You are not only here because of your expertise in AI systems." The older man remarked before he turned back to Ves. "My apologies, professor. I shall be more forthcoming now that it has come to this. It is true that we need help. Our analysis has indicated that you have the potential to be of service to us. Before we can proceed any further, I must ask you a vital question. Now that you have observed the Brain Trust, do you believe you can solve the ongoing problem and stabilize our primary control system?"

Ves slowly grinned. "Oh, I can definitely resolve this issue for you. I have several ideas on how to tackle this problem. I have to say that your analysts have come to the correct conclusion. My expertise is just right to handle this kind of affair. There are two issues which we have to determine."

"Explain."

"We both need to determine how far you want to go to permanently solve this problem. This will largely depend on your risk appetite. How far are you willing to go to realize your ambitions?"

That caused Dread Captain Argile to frown.

"What else?"

"How much are you willing to pay to command what may possibly become the strongest warship in the Red Ocean?"

Chapter 5837 The Right Building Blocks

5837 The Right Building Blocks

The mood inside the Brain Trust changed when Ves spoke.

With a few sentences, he had taken all of the initiative. There was no way this conversation could proceed without the two fleeters deferring to his words.

It felt nice to be able to gain a measure of control in this situation. Ves certainly did not want to get taken advantage of. In his experience as a leader, he had found that the best way for him to avoid getting exploited was to engage in it himself!

Dread Captain Volkert Argile did not exactly look pleased with how quickly he had lost control over the rhythm of this conversation. They were all standing in the heart of a dreadnought that was completely under his command. This was his homeground, yet now that Ves understood that he held the most important cards, the fletcher had no choice but to play along.

"Please enlighten us with your ideas." The centuries-old man requested. "Our own scientists and engineers have formed possible solutions, but none of them seem reliable enough for me to agree to these measures. I hope that your proposals are able to inspire greater confidence."

Ves smirked at that. "Then you should be happy to hear what I have to say. Since you have been gracious enough to tell the truth, I shall reciprocate and do the same. I have come up with three different solutions, each of which have very different implications. The first one is the most straightforward one. It also happens to be the least riskiest option. I have already determined within the first minute of entering this so-called Brain Trust that it is well within my capabilities to cease the individual brains from spontaneously forming random sentient personalities."

"Is that truly the case?"

"Hahaha!" Ves confidently laughed! "Who do you think I am? The previous public inquiry has made it abundantly clear that I excel at creating life in objects that are not necessarily supposed to be alive! I know more about this field than anyone else, and that includes Star Designers! Is it too much of a stretch to believe I am unable to do the reverse? Solving this problem is incredibly simple. I merely have to remove the variables that enable these brains from spawning new life. I can do it right away without any further preparation if necessary. The only annoying part is that I will

have to alter the individual brains one by one. Since there are easily over a thousand stored inside this chamber, this will likely take all day."

Both Dread Captain Volkert Argile and Captain Zonrad Reze blinked in surprise.

They had different reasons to believe that Ves just happened to possess the right expertise to solve the problems related to the Brain Trust.

In the eventuality that he was not capable of solving the problem, he almost certainly possessed contacts who might have a better shot.

Neither of the two expected that it would be that simple!

"How certain are you that this proposed solution will turn the Brain Trust into a stable and reliable organic AI core array again?" The Argile heir asked with a hint of excitement in his tone.

"I won't say 100 percent, but it should be pretty close." Ves remained confident as he answered the question. "This is really child's play. If you are still afraid that the brains might circumvent my initial solution and mutate into a living monstrosity anyway, then I can add extra countermeasures if necessary. I am sure that Helena will do me a favor if I ask nicely."

"How do you estimate the risks of failure and complications?"

"10 percent or less. I am not doing anything too complicated. You can consider it as the metaphysical equivalent of picking up a plasma torch and cutting off a few critical components inside the brain units. It is much easier to destroy than to create."

"Thank you for your clarification, professor. That is a clear enough analogy."

Dread Captain Argile seriously considered whether he should request Ves to employ this solution right away. It would instantly solve a headache as well as a potential threat to the Argile power base.

"Let me be honest, captain. I do not prefer this solution." Ves quickly said. "It is not only boring, but it is also a huge waste. Look around you. Look at all of these brains. They all possess genetic aptitudes that would have turned their original owners into talented and powerful mech pilots beyond comparison. To allow these fleters to ignore their potential as mech pilots is already a huge missed opportunity. I really cannot stand it that you guys keep limiting your use of these brains. They still have a lot of potential, and I just happen to possess the means to draw it and help you derive much more benefits out of their existence."

"How?"

Ves grinned wider. "It's quite simple. I have the means to make the original experiment succeed. If I understand correctly, you fleters originally wanted to combine the brainpower of all of these 'organic AI cores' and form a powerful sentient AI that can run gigantic warships like the Dominion of Man a lot better than conventional AIs. If that was your original goal, then I can realize it by applying my expertise. I will probably need Captain Reze's help to modify the programming of the brain units in order to account for the possible changes, but I believe I can definitely merge all of the life potential of these brain units into a single cohesive entity. If my idea works out as expected, I will be able to create the first true living warship!"

That was a bold claim!

Neither Argile nor Sigrund believed in it easily, but Ves expressed so much confidence that they had to take the possibility seriously!

"Risk factor?"

"Moderate." Ves honestly replied as if he was talking to a client who was looking to commission a custom mech. "This goes beyond my first proposal. Instead of trying to sever the possibility that life can form, I will do the opposite and promote it as much as possible. All of the brains here must contribute to this great effort. The most difficult challenge is to coordinate and unite their collective transformation. I have never done anything like this before, but I believe it is possible in theory to unify them in a way that causes them to form as different elements of the same whole. If I can make this happen, it becomes possible to create a single coherent shipboard AI that is both sentient and controllable."

It was difficult for the fleeters to determine whether Ves had what it took to make this happen without any complications.

"So the main source of your confidence is that you believe it may work in theory?"

Ves nodded. "I have never done anything like this before, so I have no past cases to draw lessons from. However, I am fairly confident that I can turn the Brain Trust into the control system that it was always meant to be. What I am uncertain about is whether you can expand it after I am done. It may be that you won't be able to add more brains to this construct as they are not part of the initial gestalt entity. I am also wondering how extensively you can change its programming after it has come into being. I can program it myself at the start, but how it will develop after it is born is largely dependent on how it is treated and what it is exposed to. You will need to raise your new shipboard AI as an impressionable child. Treat it well, and it shall turn the Dominion of Man into an unstoppable dreadnought. Treat it poorly, and it may abandon you when you most need its power."

That was not exactly welcome news. The fleeters always found it important to maintain full control over their own technology. Most technological devices were supposed to behave exactly as instructed. It would be difficult for them to get accustomed to a new reality where they needed to consider the feelings of their warship.

Dread Captain Argile looked hesitant about this option. It was not as solid as the first plan, but it was actually what he initially expected when the Red Fleet invited the developer of living mechs to the Dominion of Man.

"What is your third idea?"

Now that was a big one.

Ves exuded a lot more passion and enthusiasm as he finally had an opportunity to explain his most ambitious idea!

"This is a big one, so brace yourselves. My brief tour through your dreadnought has inspired me. All of the artwork expresses the Red Fleet's common goal of making the human race rise to a position of supremacy. The will of the crew is constantly endeavoring to make this come true. Furthermore, trillions of humans who have witnessed the Dominion of Man capture a Tide Station during Operation Night Jazz have come to place their faith in your dreadnought. It is remarkable for me to see how much weight and meaning your majestic vessel has gained in our society."

"Where are you going with this, professor?" Dread Captain Argile asked in a vigilant tone.

Ves waved his arm. "I see an opportunity! There are a lot of building blocks that happen to fall into place. First, your Brain Trust is primed and ready to form a powerful metaphysical entity. Second, the Dominion of Man is an incredibly powerful dreadnought. Third, much of her power is derived from her extraordinary Spark Reactor. Fourth, the Dominion of Man is slowly turning into a totemic existence as she is gathering the spiritual feedback of an innumerable amount of humans. Fifth, your dreadnought's name and mode of operation is intrinsically tied to the concept of human supremacy. Sixth, I am the only person who can combine the preceding factors together and produce a result that has the potential to strengthen red humanity to a notable degree."

Of the two captains, Sigrund was more familiar with Ves and his unusual work. He figured it out first.

"You... are you being serious, Larkinson? You will be dealing with forces beyond your power and understanding! You are talking about creating a god that embodies the spirit of human supremacy!"

"Is that true, professor?!" Dread Captain Argile reacted with astonishment!

Ves continued to grin. "I admit that the risk factor of this plan is greatest. I still favor it, because the potential gains are by far the greatest. The Dominion of Man is the perfect candidate for this transformation. If there is one thing that modern humans do not lack, it is their unflinching belief in the strength and superiority of their race. If we can take advantage of this trait and use it to empower a powerful new ancestral spirit, we can essentially create a new god-like entity that will help protect our race during these trying times! The best part about this is that this spirit will not randomly wander off and do its own thing, but will remain tied to the Brain Trust!"

"That does not sound reassuring. What good will it do to anchor this dangerous 'god' to one of our most important warships?"

"There are lots of benefits!" Ves responded. "It will not only allow your Red Fleet to remain in direct contact with this entity, but its growth will also spur on the growth of your dreadnought! The more powerful the ancestral spirit becomes, the more difficult it is to defeat the Dominion of Man in battle! Her rise in combat performance will far exceed that of the other 7 dreadnoughts! I even theorize that it might just fulfill the original goal of creating them all. As long as the Dominion of Man continues to embody the spirit of human domination, she may ultimately gain the power to win a fight against a god mech!"

This was his boldest claim yet! It was so important to the fleeters that Dread Captain Argile could not help but lower his instinctual resistance towards this risky plan!

Chapter 5838 The Spark

5838 The Spark

The three possible solutions that Ves had dropped onto the lap of Dread Captain Volkert Argile were so impactful that the meeting ended shortly afterwards.

It couldn't be helped. Not only did Ves present three very different approaches to resolve the same problem that had plagued the crew of the dreadnought, but he also claimed he could produce results that far exceeded what the fleeters expected from the eccentric mech designer!

Perhaps they should have known better. Ves had a well-known track record for consistently exceeding people's expectations.

The problem right now was that Ves had given the captain of the Dominion of Man a choice rather than a solution.

There was so much riding over this affair that not even the designated commander of this powerful dreadnought dared to make a choice!

This matter was too sensitive for Volkert Argile to share with his command staff. He trusted many of his subordinates, but the Dominion of Man was not an exclusive possession of the Second Main Fleet or the Argile Spaceborn Clan. Who knew what sort of secrets might get passed on to his rivals within the Red Fleet.

This was why Dread Captain Argile quickly suspended the meeting and retreated so that he could confer with Fleet Admiral Argile over a secure communication channel.

Before the old man left so that he could request the input of his even older father, Volkert Argile issued an instruction to Sigrund.

"Captain Reze, please give Professor Larkinson a tour of our Spark Reactor and Rubicon Spatial Transfer System. He is not allowed to access any technical data, but you can let him take a look at our most powerful systems. Perhaps his observations will help him refine his ideas. If we proceed with his second or third proposal, then it is essential for us to determine whether our primary power source and vital teleportation system are at risk."

That was a sensible idea.

This was how Ves and Sigrund found themselves before the guarded entrance that led to the compartment where the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System was located.

As one of the most powerful and effective transportation devices developed by the Red Fleet, the security measures here were no weaker than at the Brain Trust!

Fortunately, the authority of Dread Captain Argile was so strong that both of the visitors were permitted entry despite the fact that it was not customary for people like them to gain access to such a critical system.

In truth, the visit was much less exciting than Ves thought. The Rubicon Spatial Transfer System actually consisted of an integrated network of different modules that all happened to fit together to produce powerful results.

Each module and sub-module was wrapped up in many layers of metal. The largest ones were the size of frigates. They looked both imposing and frustratingly indecipherable as their gunmetal gray surfaces betrayed nothing about their specific functions.

The engineer assigned to serve as a guide did not help much either. The man clearly objected to the need to divulge any information about the Rubicon and consistently refused to answer any questions.

It was of little concern. Ves did not visit this place in order to decipher the principles of this amazing technology. He was not capable enough to steal the Red Fleet's most cherished trade secrets.

His true motive for visiting this highly protected bay was to get close to whatever module contained the super-class alloy known as EE-343F-00334R.

Ves hoped that he would be able to sense this extraordinary material if he came in close proximity to it. Perhaps the Mech Designer System might react to its presence and transmit a signal.

Nothing happened. Much to his disappointment, Ves and Blinky failed to sense anything that immediately stood out to them. The top-class modules contained plenty of powerful hyper materials and energetic exotics, so much so that Lucky would probably be driven mad if he had the luxury of visiting this section of the Dominion of Man.

Alas, the location of EE-343F-00334R remained elusive. Ves could not even confirm whether the dreadnought contained a single gram of this material.

There was no hope of him gaining access to this exceedingly rare and precious alloy until he had concluded his deal with the Red Fleet or rather the Argiles.

A part of him regretted the decision to present multiple solutions to the Dread Captain of the Dominion of Man.

If Ves had managed to restrain himself and only share his first plan, he would have received permission to sever the possibility of life from forming in the Brain Trust and work towards completing his end of the agreement by the end of the day!

The probability that he would receive the promised amount of EE-343F-00334R in exchange was almost assured.

The only possibility that the transaction would get botched was if the fleeters broke their agreement and refused to honor their commitment, either because they did not have it in the first place or because they intended to screw him over from the beginning.

Neither of these scenarios seem likely. Ves was way too important nowadays, and he was not as vulnerable as before.

There was no obvious benefit for the Argiles to turn hostile against him. Doing so would only further the interests of their rivals within the Red Fleet.

Aside from that, Ves was pretty sure that if anything happened to him, the Destroyer of Worlds and the Evolution Witch would most certainly raise hell on his behalf!

Both god pilots had made it clear in their own ways that he enjoyed their backing and protection.

Few people should be stupid enough to challenge their commitment.

In any case, there was nothing more for Ves to explore in this guarded chamber.

"I suggest we depart since none of the scientists and engineers are willing to answer our questions." Siggrund advised.

"Good idea. I think I will be able to make a lot of important observations once I get close to the legendary Spark Reactor."

Ves came up with a lot of theories on the nature of the Spark Reactor ever since he first learned about it. Now that he had stepped aboard the Dominion of Man, a few of them became a lot more plausible than before.

However, Ves refrained from forming a definite conclusion until he came close enough to get a much better look at the true nature of this highly potent power source.

For whatever reason, Ves started to feel more apprehensive as the floater platform brought him closer to the center of the dreadnought.

It did not escape his notice that there were fewer personnel around him as he neared this all-important section.

The amount of Dread Marines on patrol and on guard increased by a noticeable degree. They all kept a close eye on Ves and Sigrund.

Unlike the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System, Ves could clearly feel the presence and the might of the Spark Reactor.

In fact, it was so strong that he and Blinky actively had to hunker down and raise their spiritual guards in order to withstand the growing pressure!

It was as if Ves willingly walked up to a blazing inferno! Anyone sane would have turned around and run away a long time ago, but he refused to do so because he wanted to figure out the true nature of the Spark Reactor!

"Are you well, professor?" Sigrund asked with clear concern.

"Ah, I'm okay. It is just that the Spark Reactor is making me feel a lot hotter than normal." Ves said. "Does it have this effect on every mech designer?"

"I am not privy to the answer. I advise you to retreat if you are unable to cope with the conditions. It would not serve any of us if you become sick or injured because you happen to be susceptible to the invisible radiation produced by the Spark Reactor."

"No! I am not retreating!" Ves firmly spoke! "This super duper reactor is an unavoidable variable in both my second and third plan. I cannot ignore it if I want to implement any of my more ambitious ideas. Besides, the Spark Reactor is not actively seeking to burn me down. I just happen to be more sensitive to its energies. I think I can employ a few measures that can mitigate its harmful effects. It would be helpful if you can inform the Dread Marines not to do anything drastic."

Ves did not do anything foolish like activate his spatial barrier or call down one of his design spirits. Both of them had a good chance of getting burned if he brought them closer to the powerful spark that kept the Dominion of Man running.

He instead tried to rein in his spiritual senses and compress his Spirituality as much as possible.

This was difficult to pull off since he was not accustomed to doing this. Blinky especially struggled to close off his senses since he often tried to do the opposite. Ves had always benefited a lot from his companion spirit's powerful sensitivity towards spiritual energy.

Though Ves did not look like he had done anything on the surface, he somewhat managed to decrease his sensitivity to the point where it became significantly more tolerable for him to remain in the presence of the Spark Reactor.

"Okay. I am alright now. Let's pass through the remaining gates. This should better be worth it. I don't think I will come close to another Spark Reactor anytime soon."

It took a lot more time than Ves wanted for the pair to get past the final security checkpoints.

Dread Marines and a multitude of fixed defensive hardpoints guarded the main entrance that led to the Spark Chamber, as it was called.

By the time the Dread Marines finally became satisfied that Ves and Sigrund could pose no conceivable threat towards the main power source of their dreadnought, they were finally allowed inside, though a squad of Medium and Heavy Dread Marines shadowed them on a constant basis.

Annoyances aside, Ves immediately felt it was worth all of the hassle for him to enter the Spark Chamber.

The massive reinforced bulkheads encompassed a chamber that was large enough to fit an entire destroyer with plenty of room to spare!

All of this room was clearly necessary because the main components of the Spark Reactor required this much space in order to fit inside the Dominion of Man!

"It's... it's huge!" Ves gasped in genuine amazement.

"It is hot as well, even though the temperature inside this compartment is only 0.2 degrees Celsius higher than the standard ship temperature setting."

That surprised Ves. Sigrund's spirituality was much weaker and less developed. For him to be able to experience the metaphysical heat radiated by the powerful spark of flame that was locked inside the starship-sized Spark Reactor was remarkable!

Sigrund was clearly not the only individual who became affected by the extraordinary spark of flame.

The Dread Marines betrayed no signs of discomfort, but the engineers who all wore hazard suits for whatever reasons occasionally behaved as if they were working on a particularly hot day.

At this point, Ves did not dare to stare too directly at the spark that was buried inside the massive layers of metal and components.

He tried to study this extraordinarily powerful phenomenon with only a fraction of his normal sense.

It was just enough for him to perceive more details about the spark that he would have otherwise missed if he was further away.

Ves froze.

If his diminished senses did not deceive him, the spark did not take on the shape of a star, a burning candle or a simple round circle.

Instead, it took on the shape of a human figure that consisted entirely of flame!

Ves had no idea what this remarkably powerful entity was supposed to be, but he had a strong feeling that it was alive!

The discovery that the Spark Reactor was actually powered by a living entity of sorts was so massive that he almost lost his restraint!

What was going on?! Who or what was he looking at?! Was it even safe for the Spark Reactor to draw power from this mysterious entity?!

Chapter 5839 Creating Monsters

5839 Creating Monsters

Ves became stumped by what his spiritual senses managed to perceive.

While it was difficult to glean too many details when he tried to dull them as much as possible, he sure as hell could not miss the distinctly humanoid shape of the 'spark' resting in the center of the Spark Reactor.

Ves suddenly had an illusion that the Spark Reactor was not as complicated as its immense size suggested.

The starship-sized contract appeared to be nothing more than a giant prison, regulator and power siphon!

Its main purpose was to do nothing more than to contain and exploit this mysterious spark entity!

A lot of thoughts were racing through his mind right now. There was very little data for him to pursue, but what few observations he made through his suppressed spiritual senses already blew up a lot of assumptions about the Spark Reactor!

He never imagined that the fleeters, who abhorred cultivation and metaphysical phenomena of all kinds, would actually resort to powering their precious dreadnoughts by drawing energy from a fire entity!

Regardless of the severe violation of their own principles, it was clearly worthwhile for the fleeters to develop the Spark Reactor.

Part of the reason why Ves felt so discomfited even if he was standing hundreds of meters away from the center of the Spark Reactor was because the flame entity was just that powerful.

Ves initially thought that it was a True God or equivalent due to the sheer concentration of power locked inside his insubstantial body. He could feel that the flame entity possessed a fiery domain that exuded so much power that it spilled out into the environment.

This was the sole source of energy of the Spark Reactor!

Yet as Ves continued his observations, he picked up several clues that showed that this flame entity was not as dangerous as it seemed.

For one, it was abnormally young and undeveloped. Its life was incredibly deficient because it was devoid of any markings that came with experience.

This gave Ves the impression that the flame entity had remained dormant since its creation. It had never really woken up and done anything that could have shaped its life.

Another notable clue was that the flame entity did not appear to possess any consciousness. It was not asleep, so much as it was a dummy that lacked anything more than the bare necessities to keep its domain coherent and stable!

It was as if Ves was looking at the spiritual equivalent of a clone. Perhaps he had come close to guessing the truth, because he could not think of any other explanation of how the flame entity came to pass!

If this was true, then the spark wasn't as threatening as it initially appeared. The flame entity locked inside the Spark Reactor certainly possessed the raw power to destroy starships and burn humans into ash.

Not even Ves believed that his incarnations, his design spirits or his true body could withstand the fury of a hostile fire god!

However, Ves was not looking at a real deity. At most, he was looking at the lobotomized clone of one. The living spark may have inherited or copied much of the power of the original, but the lack of any coherent consciousness or personality prevented it from being channeled!

Ves briefly grew concerned about whether E energy radiation might have caused the living but directionless sparks to spontaneously develop new personalities. It had happened to the organic AI cores of the Brain Trust, so why should the sparks be exempt from this effect?

It took several minutes of careful observation for Ves to feel a little more relieved.

He had no idea whether the fleeters would be able to maintain the status quo, but right now it seemed that the sparks were not making any progress on this front.

Either the flame entities were so deficient that the possibility of mutating into an actual living entity was too low, or the Spark Reactor incorporated highly specialized safeguards that suppressed such activity.

Ves guessed that both of these conditions were valid. The fleeters certainly wouldn't have employed an extraordinary power generator as dangerous as the Spark Reactor without implementing multiple redundant safeguards!

Since the Common Fleet Alliance built at least 8 dreadnoughts and equipped them all with Spark Reactors, the organization definitely possessed the confidence to harness the power of these thoughtless entities.

Ves still had many other questions.

Where did they come from? How were they made? How many of them existed in the Red Ocean?

As Ves studied the flame entities a bit more, he failed to obtain any clues that could offer any further clarification.

He could only make a few unsubstantiated guesses.

So far, he only came up with two probable answers.

The first possible explanation was that the fleeters and possibly the mecheres managed to capture a powerful True God-level qi cultivator with a fire domain.

Instead of killing this exceedingly dangerous Compact leader, the fleeters instead kept him prisoner and literally leeches his extraordinary power to create defective clones of himself.

The second possible explanation was a lot more profound. A long time ago, Sigrund himself told Ves that the MTA and the CFA managed to capture the Fire Scroll during the Great Betrayal.

What happened to the Fire Scroll after the Age of Conquest came to an end?

Ves sure as hell did not believe that the mechers and the fleeters were content to leave such a powerful relic unused. It was even more unthinkable for them to destroy it like what happened with a few other Sacred Scrolls.

He knew the mechers and the fleeters well enough that they were hungry for power and always sought for ways to expand their might.

While it still remained unclear to Ves what exactly the Big Two had done with the Fire Scroll over the years, Ves guessed that he may be looking at one of the use cases.

Perhaps the fleeters had figured out a way to induce the Fire Scroll to create flame entities that possessed the raw power of a True God but lacked the personalities to properly control and direct their domains.

It sounded crazy at first. How could an artifact, even one as mythical as the Fire Scroll, create True Gods on demand?

Ves did not think it was as impossible as it sounded. He had started off his career with a fraction of the Metal Scroll but managed to rise up to become a tier 3 galactic citizen in record time!

The Polymath not only advanced to the rank of Star Designer in record time, but managed to amaze the entire mech community by the breadth of her knowledge and innovations.

If the two of them were able to accomplish this much while only having access to a remnant of a Sacred Scroll, what more could a completely intact one accomplish?

This also caused Ves to think about what would happen if he completed a succession of Supply Missions in the near term.

He was getting closer and closer to satisfying the Mech Designer System's appetite by feeding it with Yondu Milk and EE-343F-00334R.

It was not clear how much functionality these two super-

materials would be able to restore, but it was a possibility that completing two more Supply Missions would bring the System a lot closer to the functionality of a complete Metal Scroll!

Ves did not dare to assume that completing all five original Supply Missions would allow his fragment to form into a whole Sacred Scroll.

He did not think that these key materials were enough to recreate an artifact that by all right could match the Kingdom of Mechs in terms of power and capabilities.

Perhaps the System would impose another set of Supply Missions afterwards. Only this time Ves would have to secure much greater quantities of extremely rare and powerful materials!

He hoped that wouldn't happen. He did not like to be ordered around as if he was an errand boy.

"Are you doing alright, Professor Larkinson?" Captain Reze asked with clear concern.

"I am still okay. I don't have any desire to come closer, though. Let me stay for a few minutes. I almost got what I came for. Being able to see the Spark Reactor from this distance has been very fruitful. I can already see that I need to modify a few plans to account for the actual state of the Spark Reactor."

Ves was not lying. He truly had to adjust his plans to prevent his potential solutions from either subsuming, destroying or maybe even 'waking' up the living sparks that were supposed to remain silent and unmoving!

A part of him briefly entertained the idea of granting the fiery entity inside the Spark Reactor with an actual personality, but he quickly got rid of this dangerous notion!

As much as he wanted to make the entire dreadnought alive, it was far too dangerous to override all of the decisions and precautions made by the fleeters!

"Is there anyone around here that can give us an explanation of the Spark Reactor?" Ves asked.

"I can approach a few of the engineers, but do not expect any answers out of them. It is doubtful that they know more than the subsystems they are assigned to maintain, and they are probably restricted from divulging any useful information regardless."

Sigrund was right. Every engineer he spoke to had been less than forthcoming. Just because Dread Captain Argile allowed the guests to visit the Spark Chamber did not mean that the Dominion of Man was ready to offer up every secret!

The only way for Ves to gain answers was to ask Volkert Argile directly.

This would only happen if Ves came up with good reasons why he needed to know a specific secret.

Seeing that there was no way for Ves and Sigrund to gain anything in the Spark Chamber, they soon turned around and left.

Ves gradually experienced more relief as he put more distance between himself and the Spark Reactor.

As much as he wanted to study the living spark for a couple of hours, it had become progressively more uncomfortable for him to draw back his awareness for so long.

He was sure that his mother probably mastered a few cultivation techniques that enabled her to do this a lot better.

Once the pair of guests entered a spare lounge where they were allowed to wait until Dread Captain Argile got back to them, Sigrund couldn't help but ask a question.

"What is your impression of the Brain Trust?"

"It is... macabre... but effective."

"Do you think more Brain Trusts should be made?"

"Hell no!" Ves vehemently denied. "Only the fleeters would do something as outrageous as harvesting the brains of extremely talented potentates and converting them into organic processors. Outside of the Red Fleet, every other individual who is gifted with A-grade genetic aptitude will almost certainly be mech pilots. No matter whether they have stepped on the road to godhood or not, each of them are eminently honorable soldiers and warriors. They deserve to be treated with respect, in life and in death. They deserved to be buried or cremated with the honor they deserve."

"Isn't that a waste of resources?"

"It is." Ves plainly admitted. "However, human decency comes first. No matter how bad the Red War can get, we all need to cling to the humanity that we possess. Once we start putting cold hard logic over the principles that define who we are, we will become nothing but monsters in the end."

"Maybe it is not enough for us to remain 'human'."

"I don't believe that. I will not begrudge the fleeters for resorting to desperate measures, but I think that there is always a better alternative available. We just have to work hard enough to create the impossible and give human civilization a better alternative. My third plan... is meant to be such a solution. That is the reason why I favor it so much."

"What if you end up creating a monster in the end?"

"Then I at least hope that it has retained enough humanity to direct its aggression towards the aliens."

Chapter 5840 Many Concerns

It took another hour for Dread Captain Volkert Argile to call Ves and Sigrund back to one of his offices.

The fact that it took so much time for the master of the Dominion of Man to summon his guests said a lot about how much arguing had taken place behind the scenes.

Of course, the impeccable dread captain did not exhibit any sign of that. He continued to comport himself as a man who led one of the most powerful warships in the Red Ocean.

If Ves had his way, he would turn into the most powerful one beyond any comparison by the time he was done.

As Ves and his fletcher friend took their seats, Volkert Argile went straight to the point.

"I have spoken extensively with Fleet Admiral Argile and his closest experts. They have analyzed your descriptions and conducted their own investigations. It is of their opinion that while you have the capacity to fulfill your promises, the outcomes of your second and third plan are anything but certain. Has your visitation to the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System and the Spark Reactor given you any reason to revise the estimated success rates of your plans?"

"I haven't been able to learn much due to lack of information, captain, but the Spark Reactor was not what I expected. Its... unusual properties have forced me to adjust my plans, but nothing else has changed."

"I see. Absent any goals and motivations, the fleet admiral favors a middle ground solution. The potential reward for activating the Brain Trust and encouraging it to form a singular, loyal and controllable sentient AI is a significant breakthrough for the Red Fleet. If the outcome of your second plan can transform the Dominion of Man into the most effective dreadnought among the 8, then that is more than worth the risk of failure. At worst, we will implement our contingency plan and forcibly remove the Brain Trust and put a conventional AI core array in its place. I am willing to put my own career on the line, but I will not fail my responsibility and risk the safety of the Dominion of Man herself."

That was the most rational course of action the Second Main Fleet could take. The risks were not too high while the potential gains were significant enough to boost the Second Main Fleet and the Argile Spaceborn Clan.

Even if an accident occurred that caused the Brain Trust to be scrapped, but the damage was not too catastrophic.

Dread Captain Volkert Argile might be forced to fall on his sword, thereby harming the prestige of the Argile Spaceborn Clan.

Reputation mattered a lot in the Red Fleet, but Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile was more than capable of taking the hit. There were still plenty of ways for him to make up for this blunder.

Ves would feel bad if this happened. Volkert Argile was rather decent for an old fletcher, and did not deserve to be dismissed for circumstances that he was not responsible for. Nobody knew the Brain Trust would mutate like this after the Great Severing.

"I have a feeling that this is not what you guys really want." Ves spoke up. "I can recognize an ambitious streak when I see one. I am quite familiar with it, you see."

Dread Captain Volkert Argile smiled. "I suppose you do. As outlandish as your third plan sounds, its promise is too great for us to dismiss it due to its elevated risk factor. My father has consulted numerous experts, including those who are versed in more esoteric fields. Their opinions vary wildly, but they do see promise in the possible creation of a super existence that embodies the spirit of human domination. If it functions similarly to your so-called design spirits and ancestral spirits, then there is a basis of truth in your claims. There are still many concerns."

"Ask away, then. I cannot promise you that I have all the answers, but I will do my best to provide reassurances."

"What is the benefit of creating this ancestral spirit to the Dominion of Man, the Second Main Fleet, the Red Fleet and red humanity as whole?"

That was a big question.

"Well, if the Dominion of Man serves as the container, the physical avatar or whatever of the hypothetical ancestral spirit, then your dreadnought will receive an insane amount of empowerment. This depends heavily on how I will do so, but you can expect your vessel to turn into a true living warship. Her ability to derive power from both her Spark Reactor and E energy radiation will grow by an astounding degree, but the presence of a serious guiding intelligence will enable her to channel those raw energies in much more sophisticated and effective ways. Over time, the hull and every material component of the Dominion of Man will slowly transform into a high-level artifact and maybe more. Constant exposure to the domain of a True God-level entity does that to stuff. Your Dread Marines and your crew are not exempted from this effect."

"Are you suggesting that every person serving on this vessel will become indoctrinated by this entity?"

"Yes." Ves honestly said. "Before you object, this may not be a bad thing. There is great potential for the servicemen of the Dominion of Man to develop a symbiotic relationship with the ancestral spirit. In exchange for worshiping it and serving it, the True God can bestow power to your spacers,

thereby allowing them to grow stronger in a way that enables them to perform their duties more effectively."

Both Argile and Sigrund looked horrified by this scenario!

"This... is unacceptable, professor." The dread captain plainly said. "The Dominion of Man must remain under my control. We will never relinquish control to a strange and inhuman entity."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I can help you with that. There are certain measures that I can take that can reduce the ancestral spirit's influence on the crew. I can also alter the entity's personality trait and make it more amenable to the Red Fleet. Furthermore, the fact that you and your crew continue to control the physical body of the entity gives you leverage over its existence."

"That is not enough. It is the understanding of certain experts that when gods grow powerful enough, they have no need to remain attached to a physical shell."

"That is true, but you can bind the entity to the Dominion of Man by making it attractive enough to stick around. There will be many benefits to doing so. Access to the Spark Reactor is one of the greatest benefits."

"You are talking as if we must treat this entity as an equal partner." Dread Captain Argile frowned. "It would be more reassuring if we are able to subjugate it in its entirety."

"The third plan won't happen if that is what you want." Ves disapprovingly said. "My expertise lies in promoting synergy and mutual growth between humans and living mechs. I have done so with great success, and I think I can adopt a similar approach to the Dominion of Man. I will not pervert my design philosophy just to give you greater control. Besides, such attempts will either backfire horribly or cause its potential to be diminished. I have learned over many years of working that it is best to seek earnest cooperation. The entity does not have to be your enemy."

That still did not satisfy Dread Captain Argile. Many other fleeters would probably react much worse if Ves presented them with these complications!

Seeing that this issue could turn into a potential deal-breaker, Ves quickly mentioned the other possible benefits of enacting the third plan.

"Earlier, you asked me how the creation of a powerful new ancestral spirit will benefit others. I can tell you that while you and the Second Main Fleet will not be able to enslave the entity, your close contact and proximity with it will give your people a lot more opportunities to befriend and cooperate with it. More importantly, I think that the creation of this entity will help red humanity enormously. It will convert the extremely widespread belief in human supremacy into a useful resource that can rapidly fuel the entity's growth. Since all of those beliefs will shape the mindset of the ancestral spirit, it is obliged to act on its principles and do whatever it takes to protect human civilization in the Red Ocean. It won't be able to fight like a god pilot, but it can help our people in many other ways, such as boosting their growth. It will do everything in its effort to promote human dominance."

Though this answer was still a little vague, Ves was not in a position to provide more concrete details.

He still didn't know everything Gaia and the Superior Mother were up to these days.

"I am beginning to understand what you see in this ancestral spirit." Dread Captain Argile thoughtfully said as he juggled all of the facts. "There are many red humans who can influence this possible god. If we account for the total population of second-class and third-class humans, then the population of fleters is rather miniscule. There is a great chance that the new ancestral spirit will become beholden to the masses."

"Is that a bad thing?" Ves smirked. "The powerless are most in need of help. You and your fellow fleters will already benefit enough from its existence by having direct access due to crewing the Dominion of Man. Personally, I think it may be for the best if the ancestral spirit becomes the servant of red humanity as opposed to the Red Fleet alone. This will allow it to harvest a huge amount of spiritual feedback, allowing its strength to develop so quickly that it will become a worthy protector of our race. The huge feedback to the Dominion of Man will also strengthen her hull and systems, thereby making your dreadnought a lot stronger than it should. That is the most direct benefit to enabling your 18-kilometer ship to act as its physical vessel."

"Can you create this ancestral spirit without involving the Dominion of Man?"

Ves nodded in admission. "I can. I am actually blaming myself for not thinking up this idea sooner. I can pick other physical anchors or I can dispense of it entirely. However, the potential of this spirit won't be as strong if I do not use your dreadnought as its physical vessel. There are a lot of special conditions that make this potential living creation synergize with the Dominion of Man. They fit so perfectly with each other that it is far too wasteful to reject this opportunity. I think we both know that red humanity is not going to fare well in the Red War. We need all of the power boosts that we can get, and this situation has the potential to do that in a massive way."

Dread Captain Argile started to look as if he was increasingly more willing to support the third plan. Unfortunately, he couldn't entirely set aside his many misgivings.

"What if the ancestral spirit becomes corrupted?" The dread captain pressed. "What if it loses control or turns against red humanity? What solutions do we have to deter the entity from rebelling, or putting it down once it does?"

Ves smiled. "I have already mentioned that you can employ a number of carrots to encourage it to play nice with you. There is also a really big stick that you can use to bring it back into line. I am pretty sure that any god pilot has the ability to kill it if they are within reach. I think that the Huntsman excels at this. I am sure that he will take action himself from the moment the new ancestral spirit has turned against red humanity. This is because such an event poses a threat to our civilization as a whole, not just the Red Fleet."

It did not take a genius to determine that the fleters would not be happy if they had to rely on the help of a god pilot to bail them out! It would be a massive humiliation if the fleters proved to be unable to clean their own mess!