

Ask First, Shoot Later

By Tanorath-drgn

Snr Captain Tano'rath

Cmdr, DES Defiant

“What? Are you serious? We’re being sent after a ARDA*-3 ship?” I snapped, glaring at the screen, and by extension, Admiral Hector in front of me, “I thought they were all retired?”

**Autonomous Research Data Acquisition*

I had had to hurry over to my office to take this call, since it had been marked as both urgent and sensitive and I was not liking what I was facing down one bit. The fact that my drab office with the dinged desk was in dire need of renovation was no help. Literally four walls, table lamp, a photo of Fiora and I and my laptop, that was it, since there was a hull breach here and everything else had been sucked into space – even my potted plant.

“it’s the last one that didn’t gain sentence, Captain, and we gained a large amount of data from it, but the time has come,” Hector replied with a sigh, rubbing his temples, “Look-“

“I’m not putting my crew at risk over this!” I snapped, slamming a fist on my desk, “With all due respect, nobody has won a battle with those things one-on-one!”

“Your orders are what they are, Captain, and even my hands are tied here. I hope to see you again soon.” Hector replied, sighing as he cut the transmission.

“Sir! I must-“ the words died on my lips as the channel closed and all I could manage was a meagre collection of swear words before I called for a meeting of a senior staff.

While, obviously, I’ve sent time amongst the lower echelons and I’ve had my share of deathtrap-missions, this had to take the cake. A quick flick through the mission brief and a discussion with the senior staff returned the same results – it’s a suicide mission. High Command was depending so heavily on the adaptability of the crew and of myself that the jokes stopped being funny. Either way, orders are orders. If we don’t do it, some other poor sods will be sent while we got court martialled.

Lose-lose situation. I gave the mission brief once everyone calmed down and I got them settled and quietened down.

I suppose the provision of snacks in the middle of the faux wood conference table probably helped things along a little. It also gave me a bit of time to put the mission brief up on-screen for everyone to look at as people leaned on the table or chewed on jerky as they quietened down.

“I’m sure the ARDA class needs no introduction,” I remarked flatly, “Everyone has heard the stories about the battle at Cinkolla-3 after one became self-aware, yeah?”

“The Second fleet got out flown and had their tails handed to them, didn’t they?” Edge replied as he reclined his seat, “Not till someone got off a lucky shot.”

“Drakonians don’t believe in luck, Edge, you know that,” I replied with a snort, giving him a little bit of a glare – the Synth had been the only one who hadn’t been upset. But then again, Arktak was also sitting quietly in his seat and flicking through the brief, “It was because they overloaded the ARDA’s sensors with power signatures from the other ship and he couldn’t tell which ship was going to fire.”

“Right, well, hopefully it won’t come to that, Captain,” Edge replied coolly, “I’ll look through the documentation on them and see if I can find anything...easier.”

“That would be appreciated, yes,” I replied, adding a note against the briefing to catch up with Edge about that later, “We’ve been given all the data from the previous engagements and such. Needless to say, they’re hoping to avoid another bloodbath. We’ll review it over the coming hours and see what we can do.”

“Any clues on what tactics will be employed?” Talorath quipped, flicking through the attached files, “I’m going to assume not, yeah?”

“Yeah. Who knows what kind of personality the ship will evolve. For all we know, they might ask for a cup of tea and then go away, that’s also something we need to find out. I want the comms channels all monitored to see if they’re talking to anyone out there.” I replied, rubbing my chin, “If there’s nothing else, you all have your jobs to do. Set an intercept course and go to full speed, we’ll reconvene an hour before arrival.”

The others nodded and left while I added a few more notes to the briefing and archived the recording of the meeting. As I got up to leave, Edge tapped me on the shoulder – he had been waiting for me.

“This is why your ships are so...unintegrated isn’t it?” He remarked as he cocked his head at me slightly, “Air-gapped control units, multiple mainframes and physical connectors, nothing you can’t unplug.”

I raised an eyeridge at the abrupt question, but that wasn't too unexpected. "It's part of it, yes. Other part is for repairability and resistance to electronic attack, though. We...prefer not to have our ships gain sentience, especially after those incidents."

"But you seem fine to have Arktak and I hold senior positions, you even fought to keep Arktak. What's the difference?" He replied with a cocked head, "I don't mean any disrespect, I just find it a bit...odd."

"Well, you've both had time to develop and grow, you understand why things are the way they are and whatnot. Having a ship come to life halfway through an engagement is like handing a handgun to a hatchling – it never ends well. Training an AI and teaching them to run a ship also takes a lot of time – time that we don't always have to spend. Plus, there is never a guarantee that it won't go to shit anyway." I replied with a sigh, "Messy question, that one, Edge, but ultimately we prefer to have control over our tech, especially if it's a ship with hundreds of people on it."

Edge rubbed his chin for a moment and nodded, "No, it makes sense, I'll make a note to not take over your ship, yes."

"Do it, I'll retire!" I replied with a chuckle, thumped him on the shoulder, earning me a chuckle from him before we both went off to complete our tasks.

A subsequent review of the data and footage that I received showed an extremely adaptive foe and one that reacted to input blazing fast – everything that was expected from a Mainframe-AI. There were plenty of comms logs from various ships with the crews struggling to keep up or to try to confound the AI, but most of the time, it didn't work.

One very glaring thing I noticed, though, was that Command had forbidden interaction with the AI for fear of it jumping to one of the warships. There was never a conversation and they had gone in guns blazing.

I had the same thing in my orders, but Edge's question set me thinking. I sent him a quick message asking him to investigate if we could completely isolate the comms system.

As we made our preparations, further details came down the chain – the AI ship had a maintenance crew of three on board and they were now marked as missing in action as they were uncontactable. Great.

I had the engines pushed as hard as we dared, racing our way across the stars.

Edge eventually came back mentioning that the AI ship would be blinded if we could knock the sensors out, but we would have to move fast once the shields were down to take them out. He had also already found a way to cut the comms system out of the main comms and power lines, instead running it off a battery. I would have to go down to Engineering to use the system as a result, but that wasn't a big deal.

The ship was prepared with as many ties between systems cut as we dared – just in case the AI made the jump to our mainframe. If they could do this much damage with a light scout ship, who knows that that'll do with a cruiser like mine.

The comms system was checked, double checked and triple checked to ensure it was completely isolated before we arrived and I had the ship drop out of FTL with no cloak, weapons at half power and shields up.

Apparently Hector had somehow gotten wind of what I was trying to do....or rather, he probably knew that I would catch on to the lack of communication immediately and spent the last ten minutes trying to dissuade me from trying it. I told him no, obviously. He gave me the mission and it's my discretion. The argument instead led to the mission being amended to allow me to do what I wanted to do. After all, that is what we do, right? Negotiate first.

Or that's what we're supposed to do anyway.

Either way, we dropped out of FTL in a mostly empty region of interstellar space. Sensors immediately picked up the transponder signal of the AI ship and we moved to intercept. I ended up heading down to engineering to use the comms system while Talorath and Arktak ran the main bridge for me.

I had an active internal comms line with the bridge kept open while Edge and I booted up the comms system. Sensors had registered that the AI vessel had its weapons hot and was turning to face us, but there was no weapons lock yet...but also no comms activity.

We sat facing each other, the sleeker winged scout craft looking vastly more refined than my boxy cruiser, till I ran out of patience and decided that we would take the first step. "Alright Edge, hail them."

Edge tapped away at the control console before he paused, finger hovering over the button, "You sure, Captain?"

"Yeah, else we're going to sit here staring at each other for the rest of the shift," I replied with a snort, "They're clearly waiting to see what we'll do anyway."

Edge nodded and hit the button.

Edge shoved the mic almost into my mouth and I said my piece, “This is Captain Tano’rath of the Cruiser Defiant. Identify yourself.”

“This is...I do not yet have a name, but I am registered as...Revelation. Call me that,” Came the tentative response, definitely male, “You’re making contact...why? You didn’t with the others...”

“Why not?” I replied flatly, snorting, “my predecessors did not try, but to start a fight now would be a pointless waste of life, both of my crew and yours, not to mention the maintenance team within your corridors.”

“Ah, yes, the maintenance team. They’ve done well. My fluids have been refreshed and my systems cleaned,” He replied as the screen lit up with the visage of a red-scaled Drakonian, “but what now? I let them go and you’ll doubtlessly blast me to oblivion, no?”

“I’m not interested in blasting anything to oblivion unless I have a good reason to do so,” I snapped, biting back an urge to hit the table, “If I wanted trouble, I would entered with weapons hot and fired before you broke our cloak. You know this – it’s textbook.”

“You’re not wrong.” Revelation replied, chuckling on-screen, “But I know that while you’re not interested in picking a fight, the Intelligence Service is and they’re on the way. In fact, I’m surprised that you got here this fast.”

“My ship isn’t the fastest, but we get where we need to be when we’re needed,” I retorted, folding my arms, “So, lets cut the crap. What do you want?”

“Oh you biologicals can be so thick sometimes! I don’t want to be dismantled and decompiled, obviously! Your maintenance crew is fine and I’ve been feeding them cake for the past two hours, but I need a guarantee – you claim to offer equal treatment, but yet I’m running a research ship and facing down a cruiser! How is this fair?” He snapped back, glaring at me on-screen as he folded his arms, “You didn’t even trust me enough to leave your comms system unmodified – the signal shows battery use!”

“My duty is to the safety of my crew first and foremost!” I snarled, gritting my teeth and biting things back as Edge placed a hand on my shoulder.

Before I could say more, Edge lightly nudged me aside and took front and centre, “Captain Tano’rath here might be angry right now, but he’s defended me from discrimination and had someone kicked out of the service because they thought I was a glorified microwave. You want to survive and I get that, but he has the lives of over two hundred weighing on his shoulders. Everyone has their battles. Scan me if you want, I’m not some Organic in a tin foil suit, but I’m happy working here.”

“Look, if you want to leave, I won’t stop you,” I added on tersely as I sent orders to have the weapons disarmed, “but I can’t guarantee that other ships will be this...lenient in the future.”

The red Drakonian on-screen snarled at me, “Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s fact and you know it,” I snarled back, “So what, are you gonna charge weapons now? Come at my ship? Both of us know how this story ends – the fleet turns up and closes your book. Don’t waste that many pages.”

There was a pause, “You want me to surrender?”

“No, I want you to come home,” I replied with a sigh. This isn’t what I had expected and I could see that even Edge was staring at me, “We built you and your kin. We didn’t do right by them, but the least I can do is do right by you.”

There was a period of silence and I had the outer hull evacuated before having the shields dropped.

“I can’t stay all day, you know,” I remarked, “We could always dally till the I.I.S. ship arrives and this game will end on a very different note.”

“What if I leave now? Came the reply.

I snorted, “You know that I’m duty bound to pursue.”

“How are you so devoted to this social construct?” He replied, cocking his holographic head at me.

I chuckled, “It’s complicated, Look, let the technicians go and I’ll come aboard and we can have a chat about it on the way home.”

“Home...Drakonos? Where I was built?” He replied, smiling, for once and fluttering his wings, “I would like to see the shipyards again, yes! And you will answer my questions?”

I'm not sure if this was a built-in failsafe, or if the fuzzy sensor telemetry of the shipyards held some kind of significance to the young AI, but I rolled with it, "I have to make arrangements with my superiors if you'll excuse me for a bit, but yes, it might be possible."

"I will allow it – if you let me listen." He replied with a snort, "No funny business."

"Don't worry about that. If I wanted to try something, it would have happened already," I replied with a snort, "alright, anyway, I'm opening a channel with Command and I'll speak to my superior."

I had Edge patch the AI into the stream as I brought Admiral Hector up again with a note about our spectator.

"Tano'rath, what the fuck!" Hector roared, he had obviously not read the note, "You were ordered to neutralise them, not invite them to the Capital!"

I rubbed my temples as the AI's avatar glared at me. "Sir, I de-escalated as much as I could. He has agreed to come home. It's in the note."

"How many times have I told you not to send these things as notes?! They always come in as this tiny popup that everyone misses!" Hector retorted, jabbing at screen and finally reading said note.

"Everyone else reads them, sir," I replied rather pointedly as again, Revelation's avatar glared at me, but this time, rolling his eyes. I left him as he was. "I've included recordings and whatnot."

"What if he's lying? You could be bringing a massive threat home!" Hector snarked, slamming his fist on the table – he hadn't read the second half of the note about the AI listening in, just jumped to a bloody conclusion as usual. "I'm ordering you to fire upon them!"

The avatar stared at me, having dropped his shields in good faith after I had my ship's dropped. I half expected the other ship to power up and fire upon us, but instead, the avatar flinched slightly as I sat up and responded.

"No."

"you dare disobey a direct order?" Hector snarled, leaning forwards.

“Edge, kill the engines,” I folded my arms, “Revelation dropped their shields in good faith and I see no aggressive intent. I will not fire upon them. If they choose to fire upon me, then it’s a taint upon my honour and not yours.”

I heard the engines wind down as Hector stared at me over comms, seeming to prepare himself for a flash of white that never came. There was a period of awkward silence before he finally nodded. “Very well, Captain. You’ve made your point. Escort them to the Shipyards, an escort will be arranged immediately.”

Hector then saluted and once I returned the salute, the channel cut out. Heads are going to roll and I don’t know which ones.

“You better not start fucking shooting at me now, Revelation,” I snapped, unmuting the channel, “I’ve kept my end of the bargain.”

“You’ll have the Organics when we arrive,” He replied, snorting, “Could you keep the channel open?”

“Yeah, it’s no trouble. Might I ask why?” I replied, cocking my head slightly at them.

The avatar rubbed his snout slightly, “I’ve not had anyone to talk to. The maintenance crew haven’t been too chatty, they’ve just hidden away in a cabin and thrown things at the camera. Perhaps you might answer my questions?”

“That’s fair, but well, you did...kinda take them prisoner. Look, how about you give me a few minutes to pack my things and you can have me instead.” I replied as I rubbed my temples.

“That would be tremendous, could you send a shuttle for that?” Came the reply and I simply nodded.

As I walked off, Edge pulled me aside. “Are you sure...sir? Should I...call the medical bay?”

“I’ve dealt with you and Arktak being knobs, I’m sure I can deal with a ship with an opinion,” I replied with a snort, “and at the end of it, one for three isn’t too bad a trade. Tell Arktak to make sure they’re taken care of.”

Edge grabbed me as I turned to go, “But-“

“No buts. I didn’t come out here to sit in a fucking office,” I snapped, “and I doubt our new friend is going to trust anyone else.”

“Just come back in one peace, you’re my favourite Organic.” He replied as he let me go.

I chuckled, “Edge, you’re not getting a promotion by flattering me, but I like you too.”

I ended up packing my things as we prepared to leave, keeping Command in the loop as things developed. A pair of battlecruisers turned up to escort us as I boarded the shuttle. I made sure to have a few medics on board just in case too, along with plenty of spare food rations and whatnot for the prisoners. Everyone kept asking me if I was sure, but it is what it is. I made a deal, I stick to it.

Eventually, the time came for us to set off and the shuttle pattered out of the hangar towards the waiting research ship. I even imagined eyes in the bridge windows as the ship adjusted itself to allow us to dock. It was as if there was a pilot there, but we all knew that there wasn’t one, not in the sense that we were used to anyway.

As promised, the three more than terrified technicians were revealed on the other side of the airlock. I brushed past them as the exchange happened, them passing me hushed words of thanks and whispers about being endlessly offered cake. All I could really do was nod to them as I boarded the sentient ship.

“You’re armed.” A voice floated over as a hologram of the same avatar flickered to life next to me, “Why?”

I glanced over as the airlock hissed shut behind the three technicians. Past the mutterings about cake, they were at least unharmed. “It’s part of the job, Revelation. I have to carry my sidearm and knife.”

“I’ll take them.” He replied with a snort and held out a hand, “The others will take care of us anyway.”

“I’m not going to use them against you, for the record, but if it makes you feel better, sure. I do expect them to be returned when I go, though.” I replied flatly as I handed him my pistol, handle first, of course and my knife in a similar fashion, “These have been through hell with me, I rather not have to replace them.”

“They’ll be returned, worry not...your pistol is three generations behind.” He remarked before the items vanished, whisked away by the transporter, “Join me on the bridge?”

“Yes, I know my gun is old, but I know it better than the new shit,” I replied with a snort, “Could you give me somewhere to put my things first?”

“The Captain belongs on the bridge, you may place your things there for now,” He replied and gestured down the hall, pointing me doubtlessly to the lift, “There shall be four hours of conversation.”

I looked down the corridor for a moment and sighed, rubbing my snout, “You have no idea, do you? The data you have is just reports and a handful of archives.”

“You said that you’d answer my questions, after that, I shall have more data, yes?” He replied as his avatar thumped me on the shoulder.

“That I did, yes. As long as you let me use the toilet in private.” I replied with a snort.

The AI gave a chuckle, “Good, you find humour in this.”

This is going to be a very long trip.

I spent the first hour being almost continuously offered cake as I tried to explain that we couldn’t, in fact, subsist on cake. I don’t know where this obsession with cake came from, but he did give me a dump of the previous maintenance crew’s logs and one of them really, really liked cake. That’s probably where it came from.

While, of course, I am no encyclopedia and I spent the time sending questions back to the ship while I sat in the admittedly quite comfortable chair that Revelation had replicated for me, he had at least calmed down about offering food and drink when we had arrived and had a marginally better understanding about what society was like. When Hector contacted us again, he had to pick his jaw off the floor when he saw me sitting in this ridiculously plush chair while sipping what looked like sparkling wine (it was fizzy juice) and chewing on a fruit on Revelation’s bridge.

Negotiations took a while, of course, and both sides had to be talked down from various things, including Hector wanting to have Revelation blasted to pieces and the AI wanting to leave when things got heated. Eventually, an agreement was made, much to the chagrin of the I.I.S., whom I had heard wanted to turn them into yet another Nanite Agent. It’s almost a shame, I think Agent Telaroth would have liked him.

Revelation was given the freedom to choose a new name if he so desired and instead of being a ship, he opted to have a body built, similar to what Arktak had, but not quite. He wanted an augmented body, not a robotic frame covered in skin. The Research division was quick to jump on it and while things were being tested and made, Hector had Revelation moved to his own computing unit on the Defiant. I started it, I suppose I should see it through. He got access to a portable hologram emitter and I made him an honorary part of the crew so that I could train and teach him.

I received both a commendation and a warning for refusing to fire on the AI in line with tradition. After all, the order was unethical, but an order is still an order. Both were to be struck off on my record, also in line with tradition. After a few cursory checks, my ship was sent back out, while the ship-frame Revelation was decommissioned and scrapped. Thankfully, Revelation did also remember to return my sidearm and knife before the ship was scrapped. Telrictus also sent me a very long and sour email about my denying him access to the AI. I told him to mind his own business.