

In the face of the relentless, merciless, technologically superior forces of the Rapture, humanity was driven to the brink of extinction. Their only means of fighting off the endless hordes of the mechanical menaces, the Nikke, proved woefully outmatched by the higher class of Rapture, and the enemy had the means to infect and turn the Nikke against humanity. Not even Grimm models, Nikke with far higher combat capabilities than the cheaper and easier-to-make mass-produced models, could secure meaningful victories for long.

In the end, humanity was forced to make a bitter decision: abandon the surface. Unable to evacuate to space or the sea, hiding underground was the only hope to ensure mankind's survival. Massive subterranean facilities were constructed to shelter survivors, develop new technologies, and ultimately build the strength to reclaim the surface from the Rapture. An undertaking that cost more in blood and human life than any currency. Knowing that the process of developing the strength to fight the Rapture was not something achievable with a few decades of effort, the United Forces of Humanity developed androids to oversee the order and stability of these shelters. Unlike Nikke, which have the brains of human females transplanted into mechanical bodies, these androids were operated by advanced artificial intelligence and given the role of judge and overseer of their facilities.

However, of all the underground shelters planned to be built, only one was seen through to completion, the Ark. Thanks to the sacrifices of the Goddess Squad, the most powerful squad of Nikke in history, the Ark was able to seal its bulkheads and secure a future for humanity.

The supervisory AI of the Ark's main unit is heavily guarded. Without her constantly monitoring the resources being produced and consumed in the *mostly* closed ecological system, maintaining the relative peace of the Ark would be all but impossible. Typically rendering judgments and contacting officials remotely, she rarely, if ever, meets with anyone face-to-face. As such, when two of the Ark's three major CEOs were covertly summoned to her facility to discuss a recent development in person, both women arrived promptly, if not slightly off-put by the timing of it.

The youngest and most ambitious of the Big Three's CEOs had arrived first. From the tailored clothes and designer bag she had, she could have easily been mistaken for the spoiled daughter of some wealthy debutante. Having had to postpone some meetings and delegate a few assignments to her secretary, rather than worrying about what she was called in for, she was more annoyed at the disruption to her schedule. "I wasn't told *you* would be here." She said, glaring at the older, taller, curvier woman in a form-fitting white and red suit that resembled a military uniform who soon joined her.

"Nor was I that you would be here, Syuen." Not intimidated by the fairer-skinned girl, the older woman crossed her arms under her impressive bust. "What I have to discuss with Enikk is a sensitive matter."

“Whatever. I just wish she would understand how busy I am. You two can talk *after* she sees me.”

Brushing a violet lock of hair out of her face, Syuen rolled her eyes and turned away from her technical business rival.

“Unfortunately, I am going to need to speak with both of you together.” A calmer, more monotonous voice said as the door to Enikk’s room opened. Despite having a soft dictum, it lacked the gentleness or warmth typically associated with such a low-pitched feminine voice.

“Huh?!” Quickly stomping into the room, Syuen looked at the ashen-skinned android in disbelief while pointing back at the door. “What you called me in here for is *not* something I want anyone to know about yet. *Especially* not that old hag.”

Walking in with more composure than the raven-haired businesswoman, Ingrid’s stoic expression showed a similar unwillingness to discuss confidential business with anyone other than the android clad in white. “Is there a reason you summoned just the two of us and not Mustang or any of the Deputy Chiefs?”

Nodding, while it was difficult for others to see who she was looking at through her semi-transparent veil, Enikk closed the door and looked at Syuen. “The Counters’ commander has recently ventured into two newly discovered Lost Sections, and brought back technology that will have a profound impact on the Ark’s future.” As she spoke, both Ingrid and Syuen’s composesures shifted as they exchanged glances before looking to Enikk once more. “Though you were each only aware of one of these expeditions and not the other, correct?”

“Yes. I had him go investigate one that the Scouts discovered on one of their patrols.” Also recognizing the magnitude of the technology recovered from the ruins of what should have been a sister facility to the Ark, Ingrid saw no point in trying to hide it if Enikk was sure enough about it to confront her.

“However, what he recovered was not a Harmony Cube, but the research of a project that site had been researching to lower the fatality rates of commanders leading squads of Nikke. They didn’t have time to finish it, so I set up a division in ElySION’s Research and Development department to complete the project. I had planned to report it once we got favorable results.”

“Since ElySION contributes to our military forces the most of the three major corporations, I felt no threat in allowing you to produce results before submitting the technology to me.” Casually revealing her awareness of their intentions to conceal the technology they got their hands on, Enikk slowly turned her gaze to an uncharacteristically silent Syuen. “However, in light of the technology that Syuen had... intercepted before the Counters’ commander could officially submit it, I felt that a collaboration of information between the two of you would greatly benefit both of your efforts.”

Looking down on the smaller, lithe girl and crossing her arms under her chest, Ingrid cocked an eyebrow at her. “Trying to hide something for your benefit *again*, Syuen? Did you learn nothing from the vapaus fiasco?”

“Hmph! I have no idea what you are trying to insinuate, but I am not obligated to divulge my company’s secret projects to *you* any more than you are to me. Besides, the ‘Mighty Mite’ project itself is useless to Missilis and I was in the process of turning it over to Enikk.” Turning up her nose at the accusations, Syuen denied any fault or wrongdoing on her part, as usual.

“But the new method of refining Goddesium detailed in the research *has* produced a breakthrough in one of your other projects.” Through her veil, the other women could see the sly smile on the AI’s face as she manipulated the conversation. “Something that would be quite beneficial for the ‘Micromanagement’ project that Ingrid is working on.”

Seeing Ingrid try to hide her interest in this piece of leaked information, Syuen turned her glare on Enikk. “Hey! You can’t play favorites like that! If the key to that hag’s project was the Demigodium, you didn’t need to leak confidential information like that.”

“Did you even listen to what she said? It’s not the new, ‘Demigodium’ was it, that Enikk said would give the Micromanagement project the breakthrough we need, but something you discovered after that.” Thinking with a much clearer head, the older woman was starting to see how the highly advanced AI was orchestrating their entire conversation. To what end? She could only assume it would be a benefit to the Ark and humanity as a whole. “And since Enikk *is* impartial, that must need something in the project I had been concealing from you is crucial for your project.”

Despite how rash and volatile she can be, Syuen was the CEO of one of the biggest and most successful companies in the Ark. After thinking about it for a moment, she begrudgingly nodded and sighed in annoyance at the devious way she was manipulated. “Then the question is, why did Enikk have us come here in person to discuss this?”

With both CEOs now focused on her again, Enikk smiled at how accurately she predicted their conversations going. “Due to the nature of both the ‘Mighty Mite’ and ‘Micromanagement’ projects, my calculations suggest there is a non-zero percent chance of innocent people unduly suffering from their integration into the Ark.” She explained, looking to Ingrid first. “Any new technology will be used to exploit and take advantage of others, however, but I predict it will be within acceptable margins. Syuen’s project, however,” turning her attention Syuen, her tone became much heavier. “Unsuitable for use against the Rapture, as it only targets organic matter, however, it would alleviate the resource shortage we are facing. But, if implemented as you intend, my calculations indicate that it could lead to the complete and total destruction of the Ark.”

“What!? Don’t be ridiculous! Just because... Er, uh... well, n-now that you mention it...” Trying to defend her side project and keep Enikk from ordering her to shut it down, the fact that it couldn’t be used against the Rapture was a huge problem.

“So, in exchange for sharing the relevant information with Ingrid to make the ‘Micromanagement’ project a success, I will allow you to complete your project. With a few conditions, of course.”

Knowing she was in no place to negotiate, Syuen huffed and folded her arms. “Which are?”

“The technology will not be compatible with mass-produced Nikke, you will supply the A.C.P.U., Infinity Rail, and Perlious Seige squads with it, and you will include a kill-switch in each device. I shall even permit you to create one for your personal use, however, if you abuse this privilege or allow someone else to use it...”

“I’ll include a DNA lock on mine and NYMPH-authenticating locks on the others!” Cutting Enikk off, just the fact that she likely knew what she was going to use the technology for and was willing to allow her to make one for herself was more than she could ask for. All the funding she provided out of pocket for this project wasn’t going to go to waste... even if Elysion was going to get their hands on it in a roundabout way. “A-And if someone tries to reproduce the ones provided to Nikke?”

“I shall monitor the distribution of them closely and punish offenders accordingly,” Enikk said, assuring the bratty CEO that she wouldn’t hold her responsible for each and every device made. “And, of course, you will provide one for myself.”

“O-Of course.” Syuen couldn’t think of a reason for such a heavily defended AI, something indispensable to the operation of the Ark, would need such a device. But giving her an added layer of security couldn’t hurt either.

“Okay, this is getting annoying. Just what are you making, Syuen?” Tired of being kept in the dark, Ingrid wanted to know what her squads were going to be outfitted with.

Rolling her eyes, Syuen knew she could only keep it a secret for so long. “For a muscle-brain like you, if I just call it a ‘shrink-ray’, will that get the idea across?”

“Huh? A shrink-ray? Is that it?” Not displaying the reaction Syuen was hoping for, Ingrid reached into her pocket nonchalantly. “I have one here. Want to see?” Pulling out a small, black, cylindrical device, she aimed it at the ravenette and pushed the button on it before Syuen could reply.

A red beam of light shot out of the device and hit Syuen in the forehead, causing her to freak out. “What!? Hey, don’t shrink—!” However, she quickly realized that nothing was happening to her and the older brunette was just smirking at her.

“Of course I don’t have a shrink ray. Though the Micromanagement project does shrink commanders, it’s in special containers that link with the Nikke under their command.” She said, putting the harmless laser pointer away. “It looked like someone also had the bright idea of masking the signature of the

person so the Rapture don't register them as 'human'. Regular Goddesium is too precious and durable, so the containers won't shrink, and the formula for shrinking people wasn't completed."

Composing herself, Syuen glared at the taller woman. "Addressing the impending resource crisis has been one of Missilis Industry's main concerns since before I took over. If we could shrink even just half of the population, that would not only lessen the burden on the Ark's resources but also free up a lot of space. The only problem is strong enough materials, and a powerful, small, power source."

Not wanting their conversations to be overheard and spread through the Ark, Enikk served as a witness to ensure both sides honored their parts of the agreements. Once she let the two CEOs leave, she contacted her sister AI, the more playful Einkk who oversaw the training simulator, through an encoded channel. While they have never met in person, they have exchanged information and contingency plans with each other in the past.

"As for the purpose of the 'Mighty Mite' project, it was intended to allow direct remote control of a miniature Nikke for a human brain to control. Avatars are roughly one one-hundredth the size of full-sized Nikke, making them cheaper and easier to mass-produce, and the connection to the brain is unaffected by Alva Particles." Explaining the purpose of the project, she would need Einkk to come up with a whole new training regime for the miniaturized Nikke when they started making them. "The brain casing to allow one to control the miniature Nikke, hereon called 'Mikke', is incompatible with regular Nikke, and once modified cannot be reversed. It is suggested that Mikke are only used for reconnaissance and infiltration missions that do not require combat. Because the brain is only controlling the Mikke remotely, should the body be damaged or destroyed, a new one can be produced to replace it with no loss of information."

"Hmmm... It sounds good on paper, but what about in practice?" Einkk asked over the secure line. "Like the psychological effects of 'living' in a tiny body, dying over and over again, and coming so close to the Rapture? Of the thousand simulations I just ran, Mikke will have a 917.83% increased chance of experiencing Mind Switches."

"However, they can still be used. Regular Nikke are able to receive a new body so long as the brain is intact, and a Mind Switch doesn't disqualify one from active duty." Enikk replied, using cold, emotionless facts and reason. "The Pilgrim known as Snow White has experienced at least two Mind Switches, and Scarlet at least one. If they break, they will just be trained anew."

After a short silence, Einkk replied with a giggle. "I suppose. I'll design a training course that emphasizes stealth and agility. Since they'll be fragile but easily replicated, is it alright if failure destroys their body? It'll be tougher to create a course that's gentler on them."

“That should be fine. They’ll experience ‘death’ more often than Nikke, so conditioning them during training will decrease the chance of them going through a Mind Switch. I’ll also look into other applications for Mikke other than long-range reconnaissance. With both the ‘Micromanagement’ project and Syuen’s proposal to shrink a part of the population, perhaps there can be other uses for them.”

“Okay~! Bye-bye, Onee-chan!”

As Einkk disconnected the line, Enikk looked over the three new, similar technologies.

Big changes were coming to the Ark. Big changes indeed.