

The Fall 856

Chapter 856: The Final Frontier

"You look like a fledgling apprentice about to get his first batch of materials," Karunthel grinned upon seeing Zac's excitement.

"Of course," Zac said with a wide smile. "We used to say that Space is the final frontier. How can I not get excited at the idea of exploring it in a personal ship?"

"The final frontier?" the spider-golem hummed. "I like that. Of course, I'm not sure how true that is what with the outer-"

"Ahem," Rahm interjected, dashing Zac's hopes of learning of some more restricted knowledge.

"If need be, I can get almost any quantities of any readily available material in the Sector," Zac added as he got back to the topic. "But rare treasures might be a bit tricky with the time constraints."

"Understood," Rahm nodded. "Do young master have any specific requests?"

"First of all, the ship needs to have strong protection against spatial turbulence because I will regularly pass through spatial storms and wormholes," Zac slowly said. "And since I will be hunting invaders, features that can enable me to ambush enemies would be great. Finally, the ability to escape from pursuit."

"Brat, that's a lot," Karunthel snorted. "If a ship excels at everything, it will no longer be Middle D-grade."

"Whatever you can come up with," Zac smiled.

"Well, you have picked up quite a few good things," Karuthel nodded. "We should be able to make some decent alloys with it, though the attunements are a bit... We'll have to check our database."

A moment later Rahm and Karunthel walked to the backdoor of the office while Zac stayed behind, praying that they had some blueprints that would work with his somewhat one-sided stockpile of pilfered materials. It wasn't that his materials were bad, but most crafts had pretty stringent requirements. There was no guarantee that the Creator's heritage would mesh well with his items, considering a lot of the raw materials were either life- or death-attuned.

Most of the D-grade items in his possession were ultimately from the rings he looted in the Void, and they had all presumably belonged to Hegemons native to the Twilight Harbor. Therefore, over a third of the materials had one of the two attunements or some sort of mixed affinity, including more than half of the peak-quality items.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the two emerged again, and Zac almost shot up from the sofa.

"Well, while your materials are decent, not too many of them are useful for creating Cosmic Vessels," Karunthel said. "But we did find a few alloys in our databases that would work. However, after filtering out all the designs that don't fit within the scope of the quest, the shipyard's level, your materials and requirements, there are only three viable options left."

“Are you kidding?” Zac said. “Three is great. I was worried there would be none.”

“How could that be?” Karunthel snorted. “That would be an affront to our name. Do you know how many designs we have accumulated over the eons? Neither do I, but it’s a lot. And most designs come in different variations depending on the desired attunement and equipment. With the materials you have collected, your vessel will either have to have a slight Death-attunement or Life-attunement.”

“Slight attunement?” Zac asked curiously.

“Your quest does not allow for an attuned vessel,” Rahm explained. “Therefore, the base framework will have to be unattuned. From there, we will upgrade the vessel by adding attuned alloys, arrays, and systems, thus upgrading the vessel to Middle D-grade.”

“Can the vessel be both? Life and Death-attuned, that is?” Zac ventured.

“Not possible,” Karunthel snorted. “You want me to build a Chaosengine, brat? That’s the stuff of legends. We can isolate certain sections and flood them with whatever element you want, but we cannot integrate both life and death into the framework of the vessel. The two elements would clash, causing all kinds of issues we have no way of solving.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded, disappointed but not very surprised.

He had hoped to see if the Creators had some solutions to the fusion of Life and Death, but it looked like he was overthinking things. Even if their faction had some solutions, it probably wouldn’t be a readily available Middle D-grade design.

“The first option is a scout-class vessel spanning 300 meters,” Rahm continued as a screen appeared in front of Zac. “Its speed is the greatest among the three, and it has serviceable anti-detection technology, which can help with both ambushing and escapes. However, its shielding and weaponry are the worst of the three.”

Zac looked at the sleek silver ship with golden lines and runes covering its surface, its design somewhat resembling a catamaran built for speed. Apart from the image, there was also a list of features of specifications, including everything from arrays to cargo hold and personnel capacity.

From the description, it looked like its defensive arrays weren’t meant for battle, but rather to withstand any odd environments the crew explored. Therefore, its shields were effective against sustained environmental damage, but they could only take a limited number of direct hits from enemy attacks. It also didn’t have much in the way of fighting back, though its scanning equipment and drones seemed very impressive.

“The second one is my recommendation,” Karunthel eagerly continued as a second screen appeared. “A somewhat unknown variant on a popular destroyer model.”

Zac looked at the design, and he felt a palpable pressure from the imposing pitch-black monstrosity. This ship looked a lot like a normal boat, except a heavily fortified metal castle was placed on its stern.

“Strong shields, strong weapons; a mobile fortress,” the foreman laughed. “No need to run from your enemies if you can just blow them up. Unfortunately, we can’t bring our more advanced weaponry to the frontier, but even these old designs pack quite a punch.”

Karunthel wasn't joking around. If the description was to be believed, the destroyer had no less than six weapons platforms, ranging from a literal Deathray meant to destroy or at least incapacitate ships. Even if the targets survived, they might get forcibly converted into zombies. There were dozens of array towers, unmanned attack drones, and even a planetary bombardment system.

Even its bow was a massive blade empowered with some sort of array, allowing the owner to run straight into their enemies. The shields were powerful as well, and they should have no problem withstanding the spatial turbulence in the Million Gates Sector.

"So what's the catch?" Zac said, his eyes gleaming.

"Of the three, it's the slowest and least maneuverable," Rahm said. "The scouting vessel has various escape protocols, while no such things are installed on this vessel. Any decent scanner will also pick up its powerful energy signature."

"Can I install escape protocols and cloaking technology later?" Zac asked.

"We are already pushing the limits by offering you these designs," Karunthel said. "We will not be able to make any further adjustments except for repairs. Besides, all these systems and arrays are working together in a delicate balance. If you start replacing parts, you'll quickly run into various issues. Pushing through spatial tears and shifting dimensions is no joke. If you muck about without knowing what you're doing, you might find yourself disintegrated when you make a jump."

"Oh alright," Zac nodded with a shudder, scrapping any idea of cramming the ship full of addons after getting his hands on it.

"You should be careful about hiring outside mechanics as well," Karunthel said. "If they're useless, they'll probably end up getting you killed. If they are any good, they'll notice that the vessel is not from around these parts. Cosmic Vessels are too complicated to hide their origins like the simple ships we've built for you thus far. At least for me and the other craftsmen sent here."

"I'll be careful," Zac nodded. "What about the third model?"

"The final vessel is a journeyman-class cruiser," Rahm said, showcasing the third vessel.

The third option looked a bit like a hollow pyramid, where the tip was the front of the vessel. Halfway up a large viewing deck could be seen, while there were multiple slots for weaponry. Out from the hollowed bottom three large pillars stuck out, presumably the motor this model used.

"Sorry, journeyman?" Zac asked as he read through the specs.

"The previous vessels were targeted at or specially designed for factions setting up a proper armada, from small fighters to planet sized command-ships," Karunthel explained. "Thus, these models are more specialized in nature. Journeyman ships are normally sold to powerful wandering cultivators or as private vessels for elites. They are all-rounders that you generally don't see in large-scale wars."

"Jack of all trades, master of none," Zac muttered.

"Exactly," Karunthel nodded. "This model is quite flexible. We can make it either life-or-death-attuned, and the modular design gives you some freedom to prioritize which aspects you want the ship to focus

on. For example, you can swap out turrets for more energy storage and shield-generators, and so on. On the other two vessels, the design is mostly set.”

Zac looked at the specs for a long time, unable to immediately decide which he wanted. Each one of them had its strong points, but the situation in the Million Gates Territory was simply too unpredictable.

“No need to make your choice right now,” Karunthel added. “There is a lot of work to be done, and we can start by putting together the components used in all three models. Think it over so you have an answer by the time you return with the worldeater. That way, we can begin manufacturing the moment the shipyard is upgraded.”

“This is a list of the required materials and labor cost for each respective vessel upgrade,” Rahm added as he handed Zac an information crystal.

“Alright,” Zac said, immediately grimacing upon seeing that all of the vessels were priced in the millions of D-grade Nexus Coins, even after the rebate from getting the basic framework from his quest.

It was no wonder most D-grade cultivators were locked to their planet or planet cluster. A single vessel cost more than raising dozens of Hegemons in the Zecia sector. For example, Zac knew that Ogras’ grandpa’s networth, including his gear, was only counted in the low thousands of D-grade nexus coins.

However, Karunthel’s words made him think of something. “Will the size of the shipyard increase after getting an upgrade?”

“Of course,” Karunthel nodded and turned to his second-in-command. “What kind of platform will we get?”

“A D-grade Shipyard in this situation will roughly take up 52.2 times the area,” Rahm said. “With your requirements for privacy and camouflage, it would increase to 57.8.”

“Almost sixty times larger?” Zac exclaimed as he glanced at the massive warehouse outside the window. That thing was bigger than any building he had seen pre-integration, and they wanted something more than fifty times that size? It would swallow up the whole coastline of his island.

“The production platforms for Cosmic Vessels are quite complex,” Karunthel shrugged. “We need to set up everything from foundries to array furnaces, tempering lakes, and the actual construction lines.”

“You will be able to move the compound freely within your domain upon the upgrade,” Rahm added.

“And it is not water-locked any longer. With Port Atwood having become a capital, you can place us on any island in the archipelago. However, placing the foundry on a Death-attuned island will accrue a steep conversion charge since we do not use that kind of energy.”

“Alright, no problem,” Zac quickly nodded. “I’ll check what’s available. But I might have to put you guys on the ocean floor if you need even more space in the future.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Karunthel laughed. “C-grade shipyards and higher are strategic resources involving many secrets of the Iliex. Those platforms are almost exclusively kept inside the inner worlds of our Master Craftsmen or inside private realms. If you actually manage to upgrade the shipyard again, we’ll just transform the island you gave us to a private residence.”

“Oh, right,” Zac nodded. “And how long will it take for you to put together the vessel?”

"The Boundless Heavens will be helping out with the quest, so not too long. Two months outside our temporal arrays at the most," Karunthel said. "Oh, one more thing. Get a worldeater with a strong soul. The stronger the soul, the better the vessel will be."

"The worldeater's soul will be used for the vessel?" Zac asked with a slight frown.

Between the cursed sword he snatched in the Tower of Eternity and [Love's Bond], he knew all-too-well the complications that came with the fusion of souls and items. Even if it had worked out for Alea so far, the path was fraught with issues, and it went against the natural order. So infusing a soul into his Cosmic Vessel didn't seem like a very good idea.

"Don't worry, we won't use some dumb animal as a Tool Spirit," Karunthel laughed, clearly understanding Zac's concerns. "But it will be a component for one of the central arrays. A strong soul will mean the quality of the core is higher, which will allow for smoother energy transfer. That will improve everything from shield durability to speed."

"So it's enough if I just get the core?" Zac asked.

"Nope," Karunthel said. "The Boundless heavens wants you to catch a live one, so that's what you'll have to do."

"Alright, I'll get the beast as quickly as possible. I'm heading out within a couple of days," Zac said, but just before he stepped out of the reception hall, he turned back and asked one final question. "Have you ever heard of a powerful faction of fire cultivators called the Tayns?"

"That's... Not something we can discuss," Karunthel exclaimed, so shocked by the name that he actually took a step back. "But you need to be careful. Some things are better left alone, alright?"

"Alright, I'll see you later then," Zac slowly nodded and walked out.

The two Iliax looked at their customer as he disappeared among the trees in the distance.

"Crazy brat, don't tell me he's mixed up with those maniacs?" Karunthel muttered. "Is this why...?"

"Doubtful," Rahm said. "Mohzius Tayn has guarded his wife's throne for millions of years, rarely stepping out, and his disciples are busy causing havoc elsewhere. More importantly, these models... It breaks convention. What happened in that meeting?"

"I argued for an upgrade," Karunthel grinned.

"Is it worth it? Is he worth it?"

"I guess?" Karunthel nodded after some thought.

"Can we even build them?" Rahm asked. "The restrictions."

"They will be temporarily lifted," Karunthel lazily said. "And the components that are out of my league will be transported."

Rahm turned toward Karunthel, his normally wooden aura fluctuating from shock. "Reslam will forcibly expand our authority? What did you agree to for him to pay such a price?"

"A section-head isn't powerful enough for this," Karunthel snorted. "And Reslam wouldn't do me any favors no matter what price I paid, not after I raided his stockpile. This is an order from higher up. For some reason, the leaders really want a certain type of scanner on this brat's ship."

"A specialized scanner?" Rahm muttered. "Should we tell him?"

"We can't, strictest orders," Karunthel said, and Rahm silently stared at his foreman for clarification.

"Don't look at me like that. I like the brat as much as you," Karunthel as he looked down at Rahm.

"That's why I bartered for them to upgrade his options if they wanted me to do this. Considering how easily they agreed, they must be looking for something extremely important. The price to make the Boundless Heavens look the other way will be tens of times greater than the cost of the vessel itself.

"I guess some scary bastard has made a deal with the Chapter of Creation to implant this thing. With the brat mentioning the Tayns, they seem like a strong contender. Not even the Allfather would dare say no to them. Of course, it could be someone else looking for something in this area, and we're the only ones around who can help."

"This... This is not our way," Rahm slowly said. "What if he's harmed as a result?"

"Whatever those bigshots are looking for, it's out there whether we install the scanner or not. Hopefully, the improved design will help him survive whatever lurks in the dark."

"The final frontier..." Rahm muttered. "Just what are they expecting to find in this desolate corner of space?"