

### Chapter 351 Plantmea

It was only a matter of time before he made these discoveries, but it certainly helped to grasp this concept early. Most importantly, Ves had gathered more clues to break through his perennial bottleneck in achieving a B-graded X-Factor.

"Spirituality is a lot more intertwined in our society than I thought." Ves concluded.

Humans ruled over half of the galaxy with the might of its warships, but they competed against each other with the use of mechs. Every state made it a priority to cultivate talented mech pilots into experts and aces.

That they managed to convert a fraction of mech pilots into the realm of the elites could be attributed to their occasional successes amid countless failures. In the early days of the Age of Mechs, a lot of horror stories emerged that revealed the extent that people went through to enhance their military force.

"I can consider these matters at a later time." Ves shook his head. He still had an alien ruin to excavate.

With the help of his spirituality, Lucky had managed to pry apart the roof of the tiny hexagonal palace. His cat resembled a bear trying to break open a honeycomb in order to steal some honey.

Bits and pieces of tiny crystal furniture dotted the rooms inside. Neither Ves nor Lucky paid any interest in them after figuring out they served as tables and chairs.

Lucky continued to dig through the upper floors, but encountered a lot of resistance from the blue crystals.

At least they weren't indestructible like the transparent crystals. Their slightly lower grade gave them hope that they could uncover something valuable.

"This must be a lesser side influence in the alien society."

The longer he interacted with the alien ruins, the more he understood their society. Ves guessed that the crystal city acted as a capital or a final refuge of some sorts. It would explain the existence of the rune monuments and the effort the aliens had made in creating a portal system.

Ves found it regretful that they hadn't left anything behind in the crystal city. At some point, they evacuated it, taking away anything that hadn't been affixed to the city.

"The aliens sure built them to be tough. They couldn't even dismantle them in their haste to evacuate the city."

He was certain the crystals possessed extremely remarkable properties. Ves had succeeded in deriving their composition and structure with his Vulcaneye. As long as he figured out a way to reproduce it, he'd be able to create an extremely powerful substance that could act as both an armor system and laser propagator.

Even if he lacked the capabilities to reproduce the exact formula, he could still attempt to derive a lesser version if he substituted the rarer exotics with less valuable ones. Such experiments happened all the time.

"I recall that Master Katzenberg from Leemar is a specialist in this area."

Perhaps if he submitted his readings to Katzenberg, she'd be able to come up with a host of different substitutions. However, Ves did not possess a direct channel to the prestigious Master Mech Designer.

"I can always attempt to fumble around on my own. If I haven't achieved any results, I can always pass on the data to someone else."

Data that he couldn't use held no value to him. He might as well sell it or exchange it for something useful, although he would only receive a fraction of its true value.

"Lucky! Go dig the left compartment! I think there's a storeroom there!"

The palace appeared to house an affluent household. It contained a lot of rooms, but contained very little furniture in each. Lucky loomed over the tiny palace like a giant tiger about to engulf the inhabitants. Ves found the dichotomy in scale amusing.

It took Lucky a lot of effort to get past the subsequent layers. Ves even had to call back Lucky before the portal closed before he opened it again. Although he faintly guessed that there should have been a way to sustain the portal, Ves didn't wish to waste any time to figure out the exact mechanics.

Lucky finally broke in what looked like a vault after a few more minutes of anxious digging. The vault room contained a lot of miniscule hexagonal blocks that formed the alien race's version of a resource bar. They were so small in fact that Ves had to employ the magnification function of his hazard suit in order to observe them with his eyes.

"That's it! They should be treasures! Bring it back!"

Before Lucky could do anything, a number of crystals floated from their perches at the sides of the vault. So the palace still retained some defenses after all!

They angrily blinked and hovered around Lucky before unleashing thin beams of light at what they perceived to be an intruder.

Naturally, the noodle-thin light beams passed straight through Lucky's semi-corporeal body and blinked away into space.

Lucky stared at the defense drones with a playful gaze. His tail swished back and forth as he took little notice of the light beams passing through his body.

"Stop wasting time! Take care of them quickly before bringing back those treasures!"

The drones might have been able to threaten a tiny alien, but even Lucky would scoff at them. The substantial difference in size had turned everything made by the aliens into a joke.

Lucky took care of the drones by swatting them from the air. The drones bounced against the walls and floor of the crystal palace before regaining their balance. They continued to fire at Lucky despite their bumps.

This time, Lucky employed a different method. He opened his maw and ate all the drones. The gem cat didn't even chew before swallowing the helpless drones into his matter-converting stomach.

Ves looked at Lucky with a crooked gaze. "Are you alright in your head?"

Lucky ate minerals and excreted gems. If Lucky happened to eat a crystal, would that be considering eating his own...

Thankfully, his cat showed no signs of being aware of what his owner thought. Lucky opened his maw again and gulped the stacks of materials.

"Uhh, Lucky. What are you doing?"

His cat disregarded his transmissions and continued to eat the vault room bare. With a satisfied squint in his eyes, Lucky flew up from the crystal palace and passed through the portal before flying back to Ves. His cat hacked and coughed a little and dropped only a couple hexagonal blocks.

The pinprick-sized materials fell onto his palm. They seemed so tiny that Ves would easily lose track of them if he dropped them onto the ground.

Ves stared at Lucky with a scornful gaze. "You could have left a bit more for me."

"Meow."

Lucky started grooming his body as if Ves didn't exist.

"Forget about it."

Ves retrieved a container on his toolbelt and deposited the remaining blocks before returning his attention to the crystal palace.

He waited until the portal winked shut before opening it again by shooting the exact same sequence. After a lot of nagging, Ves managed to get his lazy cat to return to the crystal palace again and finish his excavation of the abandoned structure.

This time, Lucky failed to uncover anything of value. They hadn't found any books, resources or machines that Ves could use to uncover any benefits.

Overall, besides the vault, the crystal palace contained nothing of value. It was another sign that pointed towards a hasty evacuation.

"Even the aliens that inhabited the crystal palace had to leave in a hurry. Why else leave their vault filled with valuable materials?"

The aliens evidently hadn't been able to empty the vault in time before they had to flee. A vault the crystal builders considered to be almost impregnable turned out to be fairly tedious for Lucky to break into.

It sure felt good to be the giant this time.

"Well, let's try again this time."

Ves took a brief break before he resumed his random activation of the runes. The crystal spires kept being roused and they always attempted to shoot

down Ves and Lucky without fail. The ground became so charred and cratered that Ves had to keep moving in order to maintain a stable footing.

Hundreds of combinations passed by without a diverging result. The aliens really hadn't programmed many destinations in their portal system. Ves wished he could stay here for years and try out each and every combination, but his obligations to the Republic pushed him to cut this trip short.

"The Barracuda is currently hiding in another part of the Joe System. She's scheduled to fly back to my asteroid and check in with me after three more days."

That meant that Ves had to return to the Joe System before then if he wished to avoid a panic among his crew. His disappearance and all of the recent turbulence in the surrounding asteroids could lead to alarming conclusions that would be hard to explain.

Ves practically shot the runes on autopilot while his mind drifted off. He continued to refine his theories on Spirituality. He came up with a lot of interesting questions that needed to be answered.

"What if I can induce spirituality into a mech pilot? Can I turn Melkor into an expert pilot?"

With an expert pilot leading the Avatars of Myth, Ves would have no more concerns about his safety. The power of an expert pilot vastly outpaced their lesser counterparts if paired with a suitable mech.

Ves frowned a bit at that last detail. "Even if I can turn Melkor into an expert pilot, I can't pair him up with a mech that can bring out his strengths. I still have a short way to go before I can advance to a Journeyman Mech Designer."

Still, now that he gained a rudimentary grip on spirituality, he shouldn't encounter any obstacles in his next advancement.

The crystal city abruptly responded differently after Ves shot fifteen different runes for the umpteenth time. The spirals channeled their energies into another portal.

"It's about time, you stupid city! Bring me close to something good this time!"

The portal actually emerged in some kind of peaceful garden estate. The alien aesthetics conformed to an entirely different standard. The crystal city loved to utilize spirals while the crystal palace incorporated a lot of hexagons.

The garden didn't make use of any geometric shapes. Instead, the crystals looked like they'd been dug out of the ground. They took on rough and natural shapes, exactly like the natural unprocessed crystals that anyone could mine from a planet.

Ves called the site a garden due to the abundance of native indigenous flora. Weirdly enough, the plant-like growths looked like they'd been crossed with animals. Their surface was dotted with purple flesh that rhythmically moved according to an unknown pattern. They intertwined the purple crystal houses and structures as if they had married the ruins.

"This might be dangerous."

Ves hesitated on whether he should send out Lucky. The growths crept him out, but he smelled the whiff of treasure inside the houses.

"The alien who lived here must be very powerful."

The crystal city wouldn't have programmed a portal to this destination if someone average lived in this garden. It would have been too much of a waste if the portals led to aliens holding statuses equivalent to gardeners or plumbers.

The more he thought about it, the more Ves hungered to crack open those abandoned houses.

He decided to shoot the growths first and see what happened. He extended the Amastendira and aimed at one of the largest purple growth.

He shot it with a low-powered beam.

The growths immediately went wild. Its tentacle-leafed like branches flailed in every direction as they tried to smack the source that threatened it. One of the branches reached the portal and smacked it from the sides.

The branch parted in half. The tip of the branch fell away while the rest of the growth pulled back its branches in fear. Getting one of its limb cut off resulted in a lot more damage than being hit by a laser.

In fact, the growth hadn't sustained any damage from the low-powered laser beam at all!

Could the aliens have cultivated the growths with their crystals? How could they be immune to lasers?

"If a laser doesn't, what about a cat?"

Ves sent out Lucky through the portal and ordered him to slice apart the growths. His cat did so reluctantly. Evidently, the growths didn't look very appetizing to the pet.

The sheer disparity in size and power had turned the hybrid growth into shredded plantmeat. This time, they uncovered something surprising underneath the growths.

They found the corpse of an alien.

### **Chapter 352 Remains**

The aliens that built the crystal ruins always fascinated Ves. Through his continued proximity to the crystal city, he imagined an increasingly detailed picture of their race.



The crystal builders very likely evolved from a terrestrial planet not too divergent from the terran standard. This meant they likely looked like organisms from the terran animal kingdom. Throughout the galaxy, nature often led to the same solutions to the same problems. That was also why humanoid-looking aliens were remarkably common in the galaxy.

Some radical scientists even believed that some outside force had artificially inflated the prevalence of sexually dimorphic humanoids with two arms, two legs and a head. Of course, no one believed them. The most predominant theory was that the shift from walking on four limbs to walking on two limbs freed up the forelimbs for the usage of tools, which subsequently led to the birth of civilization.

These kinds of humanoid aliens made up a substantial amount of species in the galaxy.

The crystal builders happened to be a variant of the standard humanoid form. As Ves peered over the remarkably preserved corpse through the portal, he noted that it was as small as he imagined.

The tiny corpse possessed a weird face with cavities all around its uneven ball-like shape. Ves couldn't figure out which senses corresponded with any of the cavities. One hole might turn out to be the mouth while the other could be an ear.

Its torso possessed a natural hunch, which meant the alien likely walked around while holding a naturally bent posture akin to primates. Nevertheless, their arms were remarkably short and stubby even for their stature, as if they had atrophied through long generations of neglect. Their legs looked lean and normal, with much wider soles and more bend into them in order to stabilize their hunched posture.

"They look like little puppets."

Another amusing thought sprang into his mind. He imagined a kid playing around with living crystal builders. The kid grabbed two of them with each hand and smashed them against each other, not caring at all how much he hurt the aliens.

Ves shook his head. He couldn't help but belittle these tiny aliens despite their impressive technological achievements. It was human instinct to treat any creature smaller than themselves as toys or pets.

Such assumptions could be dangerously negligent, as some species of small aliens possessed a lot of might.

"Lucky, don't eat the corpse. Bring it back to me!"

Fortunately, Lucky appeared to obey him without any fudging this time. As a gem cat, his favorite food consisted of mundane and exotic minerals. Actual flesh and blood hardly whetted his appetite. Lucky carefully grasped the corpse with his maw and flew back through the portal before depositing it onto his outstretched gauntlet.

"Curious."

Ves had no idea how much time had passed since the alien had died, but it must have been millions of years at the very least. Why hadn't it decomposed?

Ves whipped up his trusty Vulcaneye and meticulously scanned the alien.

He quickly found out why the corpse hadn't broken down all these years. The alien had actually replaced his flesh with a flexible crystal substance. Certain cavities within the body must have hosted the brains and other vitally important organs. They had long been broken down into dust, leaving only an empty shell behind.

"Even for the crystal builders, this must be an extravagant procedure."

He imagined this alien once held a very high status among his race. He might even be the master of the crystal garden.

While Ves would never in a million years wish to replace his body with a mechanical equivalent, he still found this corpse to be of utmost importance. It was a potential treasure in the eyes of those who pursued immortality through mechanising their bodily functions.

The supple, flexible crystals that bent when he lightly squeezed them with his gauntlet also held a lot of value. If Ves could derive its composition and reproduce it in his labs, he might be able to invent a new substance that would be ideal in armoring the joints and other parts of a mech that needed a of flexibility.

"It's likely to be extraordinarily expensive."

From what Ves could gather from the readings of his Vulcaneye, the exotics used in the flexible crystal exceeded the ones used in the solid crystal ruins. Thus, any attempt to derive some value out of the flexible crystal could only be put off until his career had advanced.

Ves put away the crystal builder's corpse and ordered Lucky to dig up the crystal garden for any other treasures.

The portal opened and closed several times. For safety's sake, Ves always called back Lucky to his side of the portal before it closed. Although the crystal city's portal generator worked fine so far, Ves would be a fool to assume that ancient alien technology worked flawlessly after countless eons of neglect.

The crystal garden suffered a very different outcome from the crystal city and the crystal palace. The aliens abandoned the latter two, but the former still held a single powerful occupant. Perhaps a retinue of servants and bodyguards had accompanied the crystal cyborg to their deaths, but nothing of their existence remained in the ruined garden.

As Lucky dug out the uneven crystal structures in the garden, Ves studied the sample of the plantmeat that Lucky had also brought back. The Vulcaneye read out a bunch of data that only exobiologists would understand.

All he knew for certain was that it was actually still alive and that it possessed both plant-like and flesh-like traits. Considering that it had grown over the crystal garden and survived for who knew how long, Ves suspected that it might be some kind of bioweapon.

"A clash between two different alien civilizations perhaps?"

Besides the sample of plantmeat, Ves hadn't found any traces of the threat the crystal builders faced. All of their history was lost to time, and only their most enduring creations remained to prove their existence. So many races rose and fell in the galaxy that Ves hardly shed a tear to the passing of another race.

Humanity was a practical race. They only cared about the benefits. Most of the time, that meant exterminating any aliens they came across and loot the best parts of their technology for humanity's own use.

Ves merely thought of himself as someone who followed that trend as he instructed Lucky to crack open the crystal structures, which held a lot of cultural significance.

The crystal structures of the garden contained a lot more furniture, but none of them interested Ves. It wasn't until Lucky dug into the basement levels of the largest crystal structure that he managed to come across something remarkable.

It was a circular plate the size of his palm. To the aliens, it must have been a large table or piece of art. To Ves, its shape hardly roused his interest. Instead, he focused on the tiny crystals embedded onto its surface.

"Is that the galaxy?"

The embedded crystals on the table depicted the Milky Way Galaxy in a very accurate depiction. It hardly differed from the modern appearance of the galaxy. Ves could actually use the differences between the two to date the table's construction, though he wasn't particularly interested in doing so.

What Ves focused on instead was that the map highlighted a couple of stars with crystals of different colors. They were so small that Ves had to magnify his helmet's visor in order to see them clearly. He realized that the outermost one corresponded to the location of the Komodo Star Sector.

"That should stand for this planet or where the Joe System."

The other miniscule gems spread out over the rest of the Milky Way Galaxy, though most of the colored gems had been affixed in roughly the same 'slice' of the galaxy. This likely meant that the crystal builder's civilization had stretched from the galactic center to the galactic rim!

"Had they once been the dominant race of the galaxy as well?"

The significance of these ruins went up if that happened to be true. Had those portals stretched over thousands of light-years? Was the crystal garden actually located in the galactic center?

That would be a mind-blowing fact if that was true!

Sweat started to trickle down his back as Ves realized the implications of his discoveries. Perhaps he misinterpreted the map, or perhaps the crystal builders liked to exaggerate their accomplishments, but Ves became more determined than ever to keep this secret to himself. He ordered Lucky to retrieve the table.

The crystal garden hadn't turned up any other treasures. Lucky dug up a lot of furniture, but in his eyes it might as well be junk. Still, the table potentially held a lot of value, because when Ves scanned it with the Vulcaneye, he found out that it held a dense amount of circuits.

He intended to decipher their contents later once his abilities progressed.

"Well, that's two ruins down. Hopefully, there's more."

The galaxy map fostered some hope in Ves. It contained a score of colored gems, and Ves hoped that they corresponded to all of the destinations of the portal generator. As long as he played the lottery long enough, he should eventually be able to open a portal to all of those locations.

"Sadly, I'm running out of time." He sighed.

Much of the value derived from these ruins consisted of things that weren't immediately useful to him. He would have to improve his knowledge base by a substantial amount and put in a lot of research before he could profit from his gains.

A potentially massive payoff twenty or so years from now wasn't very useful compared to what he could earn when he went back to designing mechs.

"I'm a mech designer. I design mechs. Researching alien remnants is only useful if it helps me build better mechs."

It only made sense for him to moonlight as a treasure hunter so long as it benefited his designs. If he could readily decipher the crystal builder's technology, then he didn't mind being stranded here for years, although he would likely be forced to subsist on clawed worm meat.

His face crinkled into a disgusted expression. "No thanks."

Over the next two days, Ves resumed his endless lottery draw. He continued to shoot the alien rune monuments like a monkey banging at a keyboard.

If the monkey continued to type a random mash of letters, he'd eventually be able to reproduce an exact copy of Old Earth's classics.

Ves indeed felt like a monkey as he continued to persist in this monotonous task with hardly any rest. He forcibly kept himself awake as sleep would eat a

precious amount of time that he could have used to gamble for another successful combination.

His luck turned out to be awful as Ves failed to hit a successful combination in the remaining amount of time. Every single time he hit a different combination of fifteen runes, the crystal spires would shoot out their light beams at him without fail.

"Seems like I won't be gaining anymore harvests this time." He sighed at the end of his time limit.

His mind had practically become fossilized at the excruciatingly boring routine. Even Lucky hadn't bothered to do anything but sleep at the same spot. Even if a light beam passed through his intangible body, the disturbance wasn't enough to wake him out of his rest.

Ves was ready to go home.

He retrieved the alloy key monument and wondered why the crystal builders had used metals instead of crystals. He also wondered why they made it relatively easy to open a portal to the location of this monument.

"Will it actually be able to bring me back home, or is it some kind of trap?"

No matter the truth, Ves owed it to himself to try the combination. He had already fixated on the runes in question and began to shoot at them in the order depicted by the keys. He chose to read out the runes from left to right and top to bottom.

A bunch of light beams hit him right through the head.

"Okay then. These aliens aren't a fan of reading from left to right."

### **Chapter 353 Belief**

Ves employed a number of different orders, but it hadn't worked. Even if he started from right to left, the crystal city treated him like he was an intruder.

Not willing to give up, Ves began to employ more creative methods of reading out the runes. After more than a score of different combinations, he finally achieved a different result. This time, he started from the center, and radiated outwards in a counterclockwise circle.

The crystal spirals began to focus their energies upwards and generated another portal.

This time, he came across a very welcome sight. A familiar asteroid with a very familiar cave beckoned him back home.

"Yes! That should lead back to the Joe System!"

His exuberance quickly died down once he noticed the portal hadn't grown wider than his head. Same as the other portals, the current one only allowed someone like Lucky to pass through.

"These stupid midgets!"

How would he be able to squeeze through this tiny portal?!

The problem caught him in his throat. He let the portal expire while he furiously churned his mind for a solution for his problem. How could he make the portal large enough to fit his body?

"Wait a minute. What about my semi-corporeality?"

Even if he passed through the portal, if he remained a ghost, it was nothing different than being dead. Imagining himself as a specter who haunted people for their energies scared him to death!

"This son isn't going to follow in his mother's footsteps!"

In order to stave off a panic, Ves forced himself to think in a logical manner.

"First I should break down the problem."



He currently had to achieve two essential goals. The first one should be to regain his corporeal state and the second one was to find a way to return to the asteroid in the Joe System.

Both problems presented seemingly insurmountable obstacles to Ves. He had no clue how to go about the first problem while the second problem was within reach if only if he could master the crystal city's technology.

Ves looked at himself and his somewhat transparent body. He couldn't pick up any object or interact with this alien world in his current state. The botched teleportation had turned him into some kind of energy being that existed in a higher dimension. It was already remarkable enough that he hadn't been torn to pieces or ended up into a dimension of nihility.

His eyes happened to have gazed over at Lucky, who had woken up after some time. His cat currently played with some rocks on the light-burned ground. Lucky's paws glowed with spirituality as he effortlessly crossed the line between tangibility and intangibility.

"Lucky isn't the only one with spirituality here."

Ever since his last eureka moment, the System had updated his Status to reflect his current strengths. It explicitly added Spirituality to his Attribute tab. Although a score of 0.4 looked pathetic, it was already better than most other humans.

"Spirituality and semi-corporeality are related. One should be able to affect the other."

Could he manipulate his intangible state into a solid state? And could he go back to being a ghost?

He began to speculate that energy beings might be holding their intangible bodies using spirituality. It might also even be the reason why Ves and Lucky had survived the initial teleportation process.

If they hadn't possessed this special quality, they might have been phased out of existence!

"This is frightening!"

The thought that he unknowingly dodged an unfortunate fate did not help with calming his mind. His thoughts also spun into several tangents. He recalled the energy beings he encountered before, from the massive devourers to his mother's ghost.

"Is she truly even dead?"

A mix of emotions pressed upon his heart. Ves did not dare continue to follow this train of thought and centered his mind back to his own state.

Right now, he strongly believed he should be able to exert some control over his intangible body.

"Energy beings hold themselves together with their thoughts rather than their flesh. Their flesh doesn't exist in this state. It's all in the mind."

He believed if he brainwashed himself into believing that he was a dog, his intangible body would turn into a dog as well. Not that he had any interest in trying out this particular experiment.

"Let's start with something simple."

His transformation hadn't encompassed his body alone. His hazard suit and his gear had also transformed along with him. This provided him with a convenient way to test his latest thoughts. He retrieved a compact nutrient bar from his toolbelt and stared at it with the same intensity as when he designed a mech.

"Turn solid. Turn solid. Turn solid."

He repeated the same mantra over and over again. He knew that as a fairly logical person, he would have a lot of trouble trying to trick his mind into

believing falsehoods. The best method he came up with was to think of nothing else but the same set of words. Essentially, he tried to override his conscious thoughts with a faulty statement so that it had the chance to become true.

It took more than ten minutes for something to go into effect. The nutrient bar glowed before losing its opacity.

It quickly fell between his intangible fingers.

"It worked!"

His thoughts had hit the mark! Spirituality formed the core of manipulating an intangible object.

Ves gazed down at the nutrient bar that had returned to the material dimensions and waited for something to happen. More than fifteen minutes went by until Ves tentatively became assured that the nutrient bar wouldn't return to its intangible state on its own.

He saw hope now.

Now that he confirmed his train of thought and proved that he possessed the same capabilities as Lucky, Ves tried to perform a bolder experiment.

He wanted to turn his own body back to solid.

However, he stopped his experiment before he began. What if he couldn't reverse the process? That wasn't an issue if he returned to the Joe System, but as long as he stayed on this unknown planet, that would be the death knell for him. By forsaking his special state, he lost any chance of squeezing through the tiny portal.

"I can figure this out later. First, I have to find out if I can manipulate my own size."

He believed that if he could turn turn his body from a ghost back to normal, that it should also be possible to change the shape of his ghost form.

This attempt took a lot longer to produce a result. Ves patiently wished for his body to grow smaller without fail. It was a lot harder to do so because humans weren't supposed to be so small. It went against everything he learned from birth.

Still, as long as he brainwashed himself long enough, he was able to accomplish the impossible. His body eventually flickered before growing smaller and smaller. Lucky stopped playing with his rocks and stared at the shrinking Ves with alarm.

Was his owner trying to turn into a cat?!

"It worked!"

He succeeded in shrinking his body to the size of a doll, but it came at a heavy burden. Almost all his concentration had been allocated to believing the lie he told to himself. If he became distracted in any way, he might not be able to hold his current state.

"It's time to go, Lucky!"

Ves wanted to leave this barren place and return home. He retrieved his miniaturized Amastendira and shot at the correct sequence of runes. Despite its shrunken state, the Amastendira's output hadn't diminished at all.

When the crystal city generated the portal back to the Joe System, Ves didn't hesitate and flew up to the portal over the crystal city. Lucky followed behind him with a fascinated gaze. The cat couldn't get used to seeing a human of this size.

The downside of having shrunked himself was that it took a bit longer than he thought to traverse the distance. Unlike the Amastendira, his hazard suit's

output had scaled according to its size. Ves felt as if he tried to fly out of the atmosphere of a habitable planet. It took an agonizingly long time before he reached the portal.

"Hurry up! The portal will almost close!"

Ves dove through the portal just as Lucky went through as well. The portal winked out twenty seconds later but Ves had already sprawled himself against the asteroid. His intangible form had also returned to its normal size.

"I'm back! Haha!" He celebrated even as fatigue swept over him. The change in stature had really expended an enormous amount of mental energy. Ves had to take a lengthy before he could contemplate his next problem.

Right now, he remained stuck as a ghost. If he ever wanted to return to normal, he had to find a method to turn his body back to solid.

"It shouldn't be too different from turning that nutrient bar back to solid."

He employed the same method of hypnotizing himself into believing his body was corporeal. It actually went a lot easier than he thought, because he essentially didn't lie to himself. He always possessed a fully material body. He just had to reinforce this truth in order to effect a change.

"My body and gear are solid. My body and gear are solid. My body and gear are solid."

The only issue that complicated his efforts was that he also wanted to turn his gear into solid at the same time. It wouldn't do for him to turn his body back to normal, only to die in vacuum as his hazard suit still remained intangible.

Eventually, he succeeded. His body along with his hazard suit and other possessions suddenly blinked back to a solid form. Ves had succeeded into turning back to normal!

Despite his success, he still remained cautious and stood still while he waited for his body to flicker back into ghost form.

One minute. Five minutes. Fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes.

Only after one full hour did Ves become assured that his transformation had been permanent. He sighed in relief and let down his guard. Hopefully nothing strange would happen in the next couple of days.

Meanwhile, Lucky played and floated around the asteroid as if Ves had nothing to do with him. The cat stubbornly remained intangible.

"Lucky! Turn back to normal!"

Lucky pointedly turned his butt at Ves and continued to play with the rocks that had been shaken loose from the asteroid. Ves sighed to himself and gave up trying to persuade his pet to stop fooling around.

Lucky's intangible state didn't come with any downsides as far as he knew.

Ves looked back to the cave entrance and thought about the graser rifle design he had to get back to. It was such a long time ago since he last worked on it that he forgot about some of the details.

"With the insights I've learned from the crystal ruins, I should be able to design a much better rifle."

Even without applying any of the alien innovations, Ves still gained a lot from the Skills and Sub-Skills he acquired from the Skill Tree. They corresponded closely with the inner workings of a laser weapon, and Ves immediately thought of a number of ways to enhance his old design.

The difference between the old design and the improved one would be like night and day. When Ves returned to the cave and studied the design, he shook his head.

"It's so simplistic."

The design became so rudimentary in his eyes that he quickly overhauled the entire schematic. He couldn't bear to fabricate the old design as it possessed a large number of flaws that grated his perfectionist sensibilities.

A mech designer should have more pride in his work!

He vastly improved the graser rifle design in several areas, increasing its endurance while cutting down its weight. It would be able to output a lot more power as well while generating a bit less heat. Its capabilities more closely matched the graser rifle design outlined in the research notes.

### Chapter 354 Purpose

Before Ves could finish the design on his reimagined graser rifle, the Barracuda arrived at his asteroid. Captain Silvestra came as scheduled, but this time she brought a disconcerting message to Ves.

"Did something happen here?" She asked as soon as she established a communication channel with Ves.

Ves knew that the initial teleportation process had been too conspicuous to hide. "An accident happened with some alien relics that had been laying around here."

"I see." Silvestra sounded like she wanted to know more, but her employer had been acting secretly all this while. She refrained from questioning him more. "There's a problem. Whatever happened here has pinged all of our sensors, and if we can pick it up, so can the monitoring equipment scattered all over this star system."

"Has anyone arrived yet?"

"As far as we know, no one has transitioned into the system as of yet, but that might change in the next couple of days. The only reason why a ship hasn't arrived yet is because the Joe System is based around a red dwarf."

The smaller and more pathetic the star, the harder it was to navigate towards it in FTL. Only a couple of exceptions like port systems disregarded this rule.

Ves mentally calculated how much work he had to do before he finished his errand. "I won't be staying here for long. Return the Barracuda to her hideout and come back in seventy-two hours. I'll be ready to pack up and go home by then."

Although Captain Silvestra revealed some misgivings, Ves did not wish to go through the trouble of delaying the completion of his mission. It would be a hassle to find some other desolated star system for him to resume his work in piece.

Once his corvette turned around and left Ves alone on his rock, he thought about his timetable for the next three days.

"It's going to be tight." His face pinched up. "Yet I'm going to have to wrap up this design."

In truth, he set a hard deadline for himself so he wouldn't keep adding more features on his graser rifle. It had already evolved from a rudimentary proof of concept into a formidable weapon of radioactive destruction.

In designing the weapon, he had become much more proficient and familiar with working around laser weapons. The difference between before he embarked to the Joe System and after he returned from the crystal city couldn't be more stark.

His proficiency with regards to light, lasers and crystals had reached an unprecedented level to him. His gains regarding these fields almost rivaled his recent gains in the field of spirituality.

"It's like learning to run before learning to walk. It's the wrong order, but it makes learning how to walk a trivial problem."



After finishing this side trip, Ves gained a lot of confidence in being able to design a workable laser rifle. He also planned to apply some of his preliminary research gains from his studies of the alien remains. This would certainly push the quality of his laser rifle closer to those wielded by mainstream mechs.

In the next two days, he raced to finalize his design. He stopped adding any major features but instead optimized the graser rifle's existing configuration. Ves caught several major flaws that could have led to a bad outcome this way. He also slightly increased the graser rifle's efficiency by a minor step.

Once he finished his final design work, he stood back and sighed. "For a taboo weapon, it sure doesn't look like it now."

He cut down on the bulk considerably. With his increased proficiency in lasers, he found he didn't have to compensate for his inadequacies with the use of buffers.

"Buffers are a sign of inefficiency. An excessive amount of moderating components only add to the bulk while taking up space for more essential components." Ves remembered from his classes back when he studied at Rittersberg. "Buffers also encourage more sloppiness because there is a higher tolerance for errors."

In short, only those who lacked the confidence to design a good weapon added a lot of buffers. Bigger wasn't always better. This rule especially applied to laser rifles. Their mean appeal to mech pilots was that they were light, slim, accurate and low maintenance.

While his graser rifle design hadn't met all of those criteria, it still functioned as a practical weapon that wouldn't fall apart after receiving a few bumps. Ves possessed a lot of skill in increasing the robustness of everything he designed, so he had spent some extra effort into toughening up the rifle's frame.

Once he beheld the entire design, Ves thought that it deserved a weapon even if he hadn't put his full efforts into designing the rifle. He refused to infuse his Spirituality into the design, but that did not mean it deserved to be nameless.

"Let's call you the Tainted Sun."

The Tainted Sun sounded a bit more poetic than he meant to, but Ves cared little of the opinions of others. He wouldn't publish the weapon to anyone to comment on his naming choice, after all.

After wrapping up his design, he proceeded to his 3D printer and began to fabricate the components. Ves brought a handful of old bots to assist him with the work. The lack of gravity on the asteroid helped a lot with handling some of the heavier materials. He processed them all and churned out rifle part after rifle part.

Despite fabricating the graser rifle for the first time, Ves did not encounter any challenge in this phase. He already completed the hardest portion of this mission. With his ample fabrication abilities, he ensured that each and every part came out well within the tolerances necessary to ensure a tight assembly.

Once he finished fabricating all of the parts, he didn't immediately move to assemble them into a rifle. Instead, he inserted an extra step in his fabrication process by scanning the parts with his Vulcaneye.

"This thing's more useful than scanning alien components."

Now that he bought an expensive gadget, he might as make the best of it. The multiscanner possessed far more power than the hulking scanning machines back at his workshop. It was able to detect if his parts had come out crooked or if some of their structure contained cracks or faults.

His prudence paid off as his multiscanner detected a minor structural weakness in the casing of the battery. If the graser rifle fired a lot of gamma

laser beams in quick succession, the battery might heat up and exacerbate this fault. It could have blown up the battery in the worst case.

"Phew. Good thing I caught this problem in time."

Ves went back to his 3D printer and used some spare materials to fabricate a replacement casing for the battery. Once he finished that chore, he proceeded with the final step of his fabrication process.

While he hadn't brought any assembly machines with him, the zero-G environment along with the bots allowed him to assemble the rifle manually. It likely wouldn't have been possible to do so with mechs as some of their components required a lot of force to budge into place, but the largest component of the rifle consisted of its barrel, which was still manageable for him and his bots to move.

It took less than a day to complete the final assembly. Once the last part clicked into place, Ves felt as if he completed a mighty task.

He created a true forbidden weapon.

The thought that he outright flaunted the rules that kept humanity from destroying themselves from within had sunk in deep at that moment. His mentality experienced a subtle change. It was as if the Tainted Sun had marked his soul.

The mark saddled him with an inescapable guilt. His fear of the MTA increased. He would always step on his toes in their presence for fear of being found out.

Yet this ordeal also liberated him from the shackles imposed by human society. He had already stepped out of the box that the MTA had painstakingly constructed around him. From this point on, his perspective on mech design encompassed unconventional solutions.

If Ves had to break a rule to achieve a goal, then he wouldn't hesitate as long as he could get away with it. The important part was the latter half. Everything could come crashing down as long as a single person found out and revealed his misdeeds to the public.

"I have to destroy the evidence."

That included the graser rifle as well as the 3D printer, the terminal and the remaining spare parts. None of them should exist in this galaxy.

Ves retrieved his Amastendira and was about to fire at them before reconsidering. "It's not safe to destroy them with my laser pistol. It also won't disintegrate the remains. Who knows if someone can reconstruct what I've just created from the slag that's left behind."

In addition, he felt that melting the weapon down with his Amastendira was a disgraceful fate for a weapon that he personally brought into reality. He couldn't bring himself to shoot his own creation.

He quickly came up with an alternative plan and proceeded to fabricate a composite fabric with sensor-blocking properties before wrapping it up around the only copy of the Tainted Sun. After that, he packed up his workplace and waited for the scheduled arrival of the Barracuda.

In the meantime, he checked up on Lucky. Ves walked outside the cave and spotted Lucky floating around with a handful of rocks orbiting his form. Lucky resembled a sage as he expertly manipulated the rocks with his gravity manipulation. Sometimes, the rocks passed straight through his form, indicating that Lucky hadn't bothered to turn his body back to normal.

Ves sighed at his pet. "Lucky, it's time to stop fooling around. Who knows if it's safe for you to remain in that state!"

Lucky briefly glanced at his owner before turning back to his rocks. Ever since Ves turned back to solid, Lucky acted like he shouldn't have to listen to Ves anymore. After all, what could he do?

Ves looked at his gauntlets and willed them with spirituality. After five minutes of concentration, he activated his hazard suit's antigrav modules and flew towards Lucky. He swiped his gauntlets towards his cat, only for them to pass straight through his target and knock some rocks aside.

The interruption pissed Lucky off. He yowled at Ves through the communication channel and darted off to the other side of the asteroid.

"Damn cat."

Just like any other major Attribute, Spirituality could be applied in many different ways. His own Spirituality leaned towards observation and the creation of the imaginary. He possessed little experience in other areas such as manipulating semi-corporeality. Lucky was a lot stronger in this area.

Both Lucky and the System benefited hugely from the Glowing Planet. Lucky gorged himself with a priceless amount of Rorach's Bone while the System absorbed the mysterious jewel hidden within the skull of a giant humanoid.

While these fantastic exotics possessed remarkable effects, Ves believed their main value lay in their ability to strengthen the spirituality of an artificial life form like Lucky and the System.

He had to remind himself that they started off as machines. Through accompanying him in his career, they slowly gained the opportunity to become more lifelike. What was the goal of the System? Where did Lucky originally come from, and who designed him in the first place?

"Every machine has its creator. They are all meant to serve a purpose."

The Amastendira came with a brief but informative back story. Its origin story made it clear that the System didn't invent its items out of nowhere. Almost every item that Ves could obtain from the Store or the Lottery already existed in this reality.

Anyone in the galaxy could potentially gather all of these valuable items. Yet that would never happen. Every faction had their secrets. No one wished to expose their trump cards and the secrets to their success.

The true value in the System lay in its ability to gather these wondrous inventions regardless of their ownership and offer them to its user. It directly converged the collective strength of humanity into a single interface.

"How scary."

Some organization must have mastered the production of attribute candies, while another may have unlocked the secret to creating self-resonating gems.

However, despite the System's all-encompassing nature, it very much explicitly lacked things related to Spirituality. This meant that a study into this field had never become systematic enough to be passed around from generation to generation.

This should be his own unique strength.

### **Chapter 355 Tainted Sun**

The Barracuda quietly traversed the asteroid cloud and reached Ves after a couple of hours. The corvette turned around and positioned her rear cargo hatch next to the cave. A number of bots began to retrieve everything from the cave, including the thickly-wrapped Tainted Sun.

Ves kept an eye on his freshly fabricated graser rifle. He was unwilling to let it out of his sight for a single second. Even though he trusted the women he hired to crew the Barracuda, he couldn't account for their curiosity. It was better to forestall any problems by maintaining his vigilance.

A handful of crew members such as Jenn and Ushra helped with securing the cargo. While they locked the containers, they noticed Lucky flying straight through solid matter as if it didn't exist.

"What the?!"

"Intruder alert!"

"Hold on, false alarm girls!" Ves quickly interposed when they attempted to draw their pistols. "That's still Lucky. He's just a little special now."

He quickly came up with a sloppy excuse for Lucky's current state. He spun a tall tale about obtaining a special exotic during the Glowing Planet campaign. Since he was already lying about it, he conveniently added that the whole reason for this trip was to figure out a way to incorporate this mysterious material into Lucky.

"So you turned your mechanical pet into an energy being this way?" Ushra replied in a baffled tone. As the ship's engineer, she possessed a lot more expertise in technical matters, so she wouldn't be fooled so easily. "This is amazing. How did you do it?"

"Trade secret." Ves simply replied.

He figured that Ushra still held some reservations, but he didn't need to say anything more. What mattered was that Ves could use the same excuse to anyone else and they wouldn't be able to refute it to his face. After all, the Glowing Planet yielded a bewildering variety of exotics.

Once the crew finished storing all of the goods, the Barracuda turned to head to the edge of the system. Just before she could fire up her thrusters, Ves called a halt.

"What is it you want, sir?" Captain Silvestra asked as she appeared in the cargo bay as a projection.

"Don't leave the Joe System yet. Head towards the red dwarf in the center of the system. Get close to it as possible without damaging the ship. I want to dump a bunch of cargo into the sun."

The woman looked oddly at Ves before she acknowledged his order. Her projection winked out, leaving Ves alone in the cargo bay. Lucky had already passed through the upper deck and played elsewhere.

Since the asteroid with the cave already orbited fairly close to the sun, it didn't take too long to approach the red dwarf. The corvette still took more than half a day to navigate between the asteroids, though the asteroid cloud had become increasingly sparse the closer they neared the sun.

Nowadays, suns served as the ultimate garbage dumps. It only took a brief trip close to the scorching sun at the center of any star system to dump all manner of garbage that needed to disappear.

However, with the current advances in recycling used materials, only low value bulk materials got dumped this way. The cost of transforming worthless junk into usable materials exceeded the cost of shipping them straight into a sun.

The only reason why someone went through the trouble of dumping valuable materials in the sun was if they had something to hide. Ves did not hide his intention to the crew, but he misdirected them by hinting that Ves had employed a very unique procedure on his cat instead of violating a taboo.

As the Barracuda neared the sun, she started encountering some issues. Even though red dwarfs was one of the weakest suns in the galaxy, it still radiated enough energy to scorch a planet as long as it received all of the energy it pumped out in a single second. Proximity to any star entailed a lot of risks.



Captain Silvestra's projection returned to the cargo bay. "Sir, we've almost reached the threshold. Do you wish to begin the dumping process?"

Even Ves could feel the heat creeping into the cargo bay. He nodded. "Let's proceed as soon as soon as we ready the cargo."

Ves waited for the Barracuda to turn around. She still continued her approach towards the center of the star system with the momentum she had built up, but this time she pointed the stern towards the sun.

Once she finished her maneuver, Ves began to remove the collars and safeties preventing the cargo from being shaken around in the event of a change in momentum. After that, he quickly left the cargo bay and climbed the decks until he reached the bridge.

"Sir." Silvestra tipped her hat at him when he sat in the observer's seat. "Shall we begin the dumping process?"

"Go ahead." Then Ves remembered something crucial. "Ah, wait a bit. Can you check where Lucky is hanging out right now? I don't want him to get sucked out of the cargo bay."

A projection appeared which displayed Lucky's current location. Right now, his lazy cat had broke into the lab and raided some of the spare materials he locked up in the cabinets. Bits and pieces of minerals lay strewn over deck next to his dozing form.

Ves palmed his face. "Urgh. Even my pet is taking up after my thieving mother."

"What was that, sir?"

"Oh nothing. Please check one more time that nothing is out of place in the cargo bay. After that, you may proceed with dumping the entire cargo bay."

"The entire cargo bay? Including the 3D printer?"

"Including the printer."

He'd been ready to say goodbye to his first 3D printer ever since he reconstructed the Dortmund. The capabilities of this generic second-hand model couldn't catch up with his ambitions anymore. Even as a spare device that could be used to fabricate replacement parts, its imprecise mechanisms and terrible output prevented it from remaining relevant to the LMC.

He might as well throw it away in that case.

Ordinarily, Ves would have sought to sell it a desperate mech designer who wasn't too picky about buying third-hand goods, but now that he used it to fabricate the Tainted Sun, he couldn't risk letting someone else get their hands on it. Even if Ves had removed every possible bug and recording routine, he wasn't confident enough he caught everything.

Thus, Ves would rather miss out on the fifty to hundred million credits that he could have earned if he sold it on.

"Goodbye, old companion."

The printer deserved better. It had accompanied him in his first steps on his road to becoming a mech designer. He fabricated the Marc Antony Mark I and II's with this machine. It was a piece of company history that would certainly become a priceless artifact if he become someone influential a couple of decades from now.

Yet his paranoia forced him to put aside his sentiments and prioritize his safety. The rest of the galaxy couldn't find out about the Tainted Sun. It would destroy his career and ruin the Larkinson name in the process.

The Barracuda used its reverse thrusters to continue accelerating towards the sun. Then, the captain ordered the cargo bay hatch to be opened. A bit of air had been left inside the bay, which leaked out into space in an instant. The decompression caused some of the cargo begin moving towards the edge.

Simultaneously, the antigrav modules in the cargo bay removed the artificial gravity that kept the cargo in place. They then exerted a horizontal repelling force on the cargo, pushing them away from the ship at a moderate speed.

Once everything inside left through the hatch, the Barracuda ceased to power her reverse thrusters and began to fire up her main thrusters again. This slowly halted the Barracuda's descent into the sun and pushed her back from the threshold.

Even though the antigrav modules in the cargo bay hadn't exerted that much pushing force onto the cargo, the ship had been accelerating towards the sun at a brisk pace. The ejected cargo had inherited this momentum which sent them soaring towards the embrace of the sun. They'd be burning up within the hour.

Ves lamented the waste, but hardly felt pained by the loss. As the Barracuda turned to leave the Joe System, Ves remained at his seat and kept watching the spinning cargo as they slowly neared the furnace of the red dwarf. He only left the bridge once he personally saw them burning up.

"Alright, you can head back to Cloudy Curtain now. Make sure that no one finds out we've been here."

They might have to skulk through the asteroid cloud and make some detours in their route, but Ves could never take enough precautions.

He left the crew to their jobs and left for his stateroom. Once he entered it, he sat behind his terminal but didn't activate it yet. Instead, he held up his comm and activated his Privacy Shield before running the System.

[Congratulations for completing the Upgrade Mission! A mech designer must strive forth and use any means to improve his designs. A mech designer reveres their own abilities and nothing else. Possessing the means to design

a special mech but lacking the will to make it into fruition is a sign of weakness. The ultimate mech designer must be free and unrestrained!]

"That's easy for you to say." Ves snorted.

He was glad he finished the mission to the System's satisfaction. Even if it carried a moderate difficulty, Ves was still afraid he had fallen short of the System's standards. Good thing he passed.

[Please stand by.]

"Stand by for what?"

A mass of knowledge suddenly thrust into his mind. His calm and serene mindspace instantly fell into disorder as an incredibly dense amount of knowledge poured into its midst. Ves held back his screams as more knowledge than he could ever imagine assimilated within his mind in the most straightforward method possible.

Ves thought his mind had improved to a point where he wouldn't feel any pain from acquiring a new Skill. He was wrong. The Senior-level Physics he waited so long to acquire was so much more significant than he thought. It carried much of humanity's recent advancements in the field of theoretical physics, with a bias in areas directly related to mechs.

Many of the theories directly or indirectly touched upon the wonders made possible by exotics. Their ability to bend the laws of reality allowed for much more extensive observation and experimentation. This led to many conclusions that shook his conception of reality.

Hundreds, thousands of different changes opinions happened within seconds of each other.

"The higher dimensions are countless, and they're not as unreachable as I thought!"

"I made so many fundamental mistakes in designing the Tainted Sun. Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"So that is why the crystal builders are proficient in manipulating light and portals. It's their unique crystals that are at the heart of their technology!"

"I see! This is why those materials are prohibited! They're too dangerous to be circulated. They can annihilate an entire star!"

"So this is how a modern battery works! I understand why they use these materials!"

What was a Senior Mech Designer? As someone who surpassed the level of Journeyman, such a person would have an august status everywhere he went. Even the first-rate superstates respected Seniors due to the wealth of knowledge they earnestly accumulated over many decades.

Ves had to compress all that lifetime of knowledge in a single sitting. It took over twelve hours before the System stopped pouring in a transport's worth of knowledge into his mind. It took a lot more time to digest these gains. Ves only fully mastered one percent of what he gained, and those merely consisted of the easier parts.

"It's going to take a bit longer for me to master this knowledge." He frowned. His face revealed his fatigue. Unlike the last times, his mind simply couldn't handle the profoundness of what he gained. The System did as much as it could to help him digest the materials, but it wasn't a god. "I'm being limited by my mental capacity."

Ves thought about hurrying up the process by ingesting a Transcendence Pill. Without enhancing his Intelligence, it might take months before he could fully utilize his Senior-level Physics.

He thought about how the war went so far and calculated whether he could delay his upcoming design project. He had no doubt the war would heat up in

the next couple of months. By then, the MTA would certainly call him up to contribute to the Republic.

Did he have enough time to ingest the Transcendence Pill and complete another original design?

"It's going to be another gamble."

#### **Chapter 356 Human Limi**

He decided to go through with the gamble, even though he might not obtain the intended result.

The Transcendence Pill he received from the System as a reward from the Glowing Planet campaign came with a very powerful benefit. It could directly break the attribute limit of any of his mental Attributes.

There were two major problems. One of them was that it hadn't mention any way to control the outcome. Ideally, Ves hoped to boost his Intelligence, because it would directly help the speed in which he mastered his new and overwhelming Senior-level Physics Skill.

The other problem related to the amount of time he'd be indisposed. The Pill's description offered a very wide range of time, from just a single day to eighty-eight days of adjustment. In the meantime, Ves would fall into a coma as the Pill did its magic.

"I can't afford to be down for three months. The Bright Republic's situation will certainly deteriorate in that time."

Ves thought about it and figured the main reason it might take so long to unlock his genetic limit. The Pill would be facing an uphill struggle if the person who ingested it possessed a weak foundation.

Most of his mental Attributes scored 1.7 and higher, so Ves had no concerns in that area. However, just to be safe, he spent the last dregs of his DP to

round his Attributes out to its current maximum limit. At his state, Ves had no excuse for leaving his Attributes so low.

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1800 DP

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1900 DP

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1900 DP

[Concentration Attribute Candy]: 1700 DP

[Concentration Attribute Candy]: 1800 DP

[Concentration Attribute Candy]: 1900 DP

"Too bad the Store doesn't offer any Spirituality candies."

If his conjecture about the source of the Store items was correct, then Ves shouldn't get his hopes up. After all, not a single human in the galaxy possessed a deeper systematic understanding of Spirituality.

The candies worked their magic in his body and Ves could feel his mind grow in minute ways. The boost in strength had not been as large as crossing past 1.0, but it definitely brought other benefits. It appeared the closer a human got to 2.0, the more their mental prowess quickened and became more steady.

"It's actually an increase in stability!"

A small weight had been lifted from his mind, and strange enough, the internal energy cycle within his body had also grown a little lighter. Ves rubbed his stomach and chest with a deep expression.

"So this thing that Dr. Jutland has implanted within me isn't purely a physiological matter. It's strongly related to my mentality. Perhaps it's even directly related to Spirituality."

He always suspected something like that might be true, but he subconsciously dismissed it all of this time because of Dr. Jutland's crazy ravings. His

constant rants about the importance of developing the mind over the body sounded crazy back at the time, but now, Ves couldn't help but reconsider his words.

Had the mysterious and rebellious Five Scrolls Compact been on the right track? Why had they fallen out with the CFA and MTA?

A chilling dread ran through his spine. Dr. Jutland appeared to be an outcast of the heretical organization. If the higher ups of the Compact took him a little more seriously, they might have been able to master the phenomenon of Spirituality.

Fortunately, from Jutland's resentment, Ves gathered that the Five Scroll Compact focused most of their efforts on enhancing their physical bodies. They pursued a completely different direction.

"It's not like they can help it. Human science is still biased against things they can't observe."

As long as no one could sense or measure spirituality directly, even the most radical scientists in the Compact possessed no clue.

Still, Ves did not underestimate the ingenuity of the human mind. Like Dr. Jutland, there must be several other hermits and outcasts who might be on the right track, if only coincidentally.

At some point, the secret wouldn't be a secret anymore.

"At least I have a head-start in this field."

The benefit of being a pioneer was that he could reap the benefits first. Ves became more determined to develop his mental Attributes and find a way to grow his Spirituality to even greater heights.



He took the rest of the trip back to Cloudy Curtain to rest his mind. He cleansed his mind of any distractions and attempted to bring it to its peak state.

He shoved aside any concerns about designing a rifleman mech for later. He also halted his attempts to integrate the influx of Physics knowledge.

The Barracuda took a little longer than necessary to return to Cloudy Curtain. Even though she possessed enough capability to hop directly from the Joe System to the Bentheim System, such a straight and obvious trajectory could easily be traced back to Ves.

Thus, Captain Silvestra chose to obfuscate their presence by transitioning to a number of uninhabited star systems before they finally approached Cloudy Curtain without passing through Bentheim.

The monitoring equipment in the Cloudy Curtain System was extremely rudimentary. The captain believed that it wouldn't be able to pinpoint the exact star system the ship had made their final transition.

"Good work, captain." Ves nodded to Silvestra as he stood on the bridge while the corvette made her final descent onto his home planet. "I won't be needing the Barracuda for a couple of months I think, so she should get back to regular duty."

"Understood, sir."

The Barracuda had become something of a status symbol to the executives who needed to commute between Cloudy Curtain and Bentheim. Her sleek appearance and impeccable Coalition pedigree always impressed their business partners.

Once they reached the spaceport, Ves left for his old workshop with his intangible pet in tow. At first, the security escort dispatched by Sanyal-Ablin

looked nonplussed at Lucky's casual ability to pass through the plating of the armored shuttle.

"Hahaha, don't mind my pet. He recently received a couple of upgrades." Ves quickly attempted to defuse their suspicions while trying to grab on to his lawless cat. Unfortunately, he utterly failed at grasping onto Lucky as he floated through people and fixtures with no regard.

The journey back to the old workshop therefore became a little tense. Ves had no doubt the security officers would report their sightings back to Sanyal-Ablin's office, which would then pass on the intelligence back to the Konsu Clan.

Ves had made no attempts to hide Lucky's new state. Even if he could get his cat to obey him, the benefits decisively outweighed the risks.

He had done some studies of Lucky's intangible state with the help of his Vulcaneye. It turned out that Lucky had become as elusive as if he entered the field emitted by the Privacy Shield. Although optical sensors could still detect the mechanical cat, many other sensors ceased to work entirely.

This turned Lucky into a great spy and thief. Ves had become well aware of the implications as Lucky had raided the Barracuda's stores of spare materials bare with impunity.

Thinking about his losses prompted Ves to stare his pet with a vigilant expression. Lucky had better not try to break into the storerooms of the LMC.

"I'm keeping my eye on you."

"Meow?" Lucky responded back, and tried to act cute. He floated down to Ves and partially solidified on his owner's lap. "Meow!"

Ves couldn't help but take the invitation and stroke Lucky's back. He chuckled. He couldn't stay angry at his pet.

A couple of hours later, the armed escort arrived at the outskirts of Freslin. The old workshop looked a little bit less lively since he last visited the place. When Ves exited the shuttle, he met with Carlos who waited on him at the front entrance.

"Carlos, how's it going here?"

"It's largely empty here at the moment. We've already moved most of our operations to the new complex. By the way, you forgot to name it. Everyone's calling it the Complex or the Place. It gets confusing sometimes."

"Let me think about it on the way. First, I want to take a stroll through this workshop one last time."

Before Ves left for the Joe System, he ordered the LMC to pack up and move to their operations to the new complex with haste. Even if the construction project hadn't been finished yet, Ves wanted to hurry up with the move because it was already a lot safer to work from there.

As Ves entered the halls, he instantly noticed the lack of furniture and people moving around. Previously, the office areas of the workshop had been packed with workers. Now, their absence left a gaping void that could never be plugged again.

The old workshop already attained a touch of history in its empty halls. Almost everything from the desks to the monitoring equipment had been removed. Only the old cleaning bots still moved within these halls. The old machines had been left behind because the manufacturing complex possessed a better suite of bots.

After glancing at his old personal office, Ves wandered over to the yard, the empty storerooms and the fabrication hall.

The mech technicians had already packed up the Dortmund and the rest of the main production line and moved them away. The absence of all the large machinery had turned the hall into an empty cavern.

"Just think about it." Carlos prompted. "Almost two years ago, you began your business with a single old printer and assembly machine. I doubt you had more than a couple of million credits to your name. Now, your net worth must have ballooned into the billions."

With his enhanced mind, Ves sensed the subtle thread of envy in the voice of his friend. "It's all thanks to my designs. Without my work, the LMC would have never grown so big at this point. As the first person who joined me, I won't mistreat you."

He felt the need to reinforce Carlos' loyalty. Ves casually handed him a bonus of a couple of million credits, but they both knew that such an amount of money wouldn't change anything.

"You've already been more than generous to me, Ves." He responded as he looked at Ves with a despondent expression. "The money is great, but it's the practice and the books that's truly useful for me. I've been studying under you for all this time."

"How far have you come along?"

"Further than when I started. I've even designed some variants of the Blackbeak in my spare time. Would you like to take a look at them?"

"If you wish."

This time, Ves gazed with interest as Carlos transferred some files to his comm. He projected the design schematics and studied them with his full professional attention.

He knew why Carlos opted to design a variant of the newer Blackbeak instead of the older Mark Antony Mark II design. The latter was an extremely complex hybrid knight while the Blackbeak was one of the simplest mech types in existence.

However, just because the Blackbeak appeared relatively simple didn't mean it contained a lot of complexity. Ves incorporated a lot of subtlety and nuances into the Blackbeak. Those who failed see through these secrets would never be able to trump his original vision.

Ves only took a minute to determine that Carlos had missed the most essential points. His variants all increased the Blackbeak's power at the cost of endurance.

That didn't sound so bad on the surface, but many of the Blackbeak's components specialized in lasting power. To turn that around and force them to perform past their shallow peaks meant that they'd be worn out within months at worst. For a design that Ves intended to last for at least a decade, that was blasphemous.

If that wasn't bad enough, Carlos had also botched the tradeoffs. He traded far too much endurance to squeeze out just a little bit more peak performance out of his variant. If Ves made a casual effort, he could easily double the gains, not that he would ever want to. Carlos opted to pursue a vision that was diametrically opposite to the original intention of the Blackbeak.

As for the X-Factor, Ves generously didn't include that factor in his evaluation. Carlos hadn't been clued into that particular secret anyway.

When Ves wiped away the projection of the design schematic, he turned his eyes towards his friends. "I don't know how to say it, but your work could use a little more maturing."

"That bad, huh?" Carlos replied with a low voice. It was as if he already accepted that he botched his designs. "Can you tell me what I should work on?"

Ves quietly sighed in relief. At least his friend hadn't been in denial and accepted his shortcomings. There was hope for him yet. "Before you design a variant, it helps if you set a vision for it that's compatible with the base model. You can't turn a marathon runner into a sprinter in a single go. Figure out a set of criteria that your variant has to meet that's also not too different from the parameters of the base model."

"Won't that defeat the point of my work? If my variant performs too similar to the original work, what's the point of publishing a variant in the first place?"

"That's not exactly wrong, but it's better to err on the side of caution. Get some practice in first before you begin to deviate further. Try to figure out a way to add a new capability without sacrificing too much performance. For example, the Blackbeak has always been a little bit poor in terms of heat management. If you can come up with a solution with regards to that area, then you can save me a lot of trouble."

Hope sprung in Carlos' eyes. "You can count on me, Ves!"

#### **Chapter 357 Benson**

In truth, Ves didn't think that Carlos could come up with a solution that the LMC could accept. His friend's foundation was still too lacking, and his talent and learning ability was decidedly average. He would never amount to anything in the mech industry unless he ate a lot of attribute candies.

That put Ves to thought. Would Carlos be able to benefit from the attribute candies as well? If that was true, then Ves might be able to nurture Carlos into a welcome and much-needed assistant.

Right now, the LMC depended too much on Ves to do all of the essential design work. If he could offload some of the more trivial tasks such as designing variants of his own designs to Carlos, then the company might be a lot better off in the long term.

"Carlos." He began. "What do you see yourself doing ten years from now?"

"I see myself working alongside you as always." His friend replied with an aspirational tone. "I know it's going to be difficult catching up with your growth, but I'm a hard worker. I know I can do it. Don't forget that I helped build the LMC to its present height as well. It's my baby as well, so I'll work as hard as I can to make it into an ever greater company!"

This reassured Ves. If the LMC ever grew to the point where it needed to bolster its design capabilities with a team of designers, then Carlos would certainly play an important role. His shallow foundation and average talent could always be amended with the help of the System.

Still, Ves wasn't in a hurry to do so. Besides having a lot of matters on his plate, he also had to figure out a way to prevent exposure.

After finishing his tour of the old workshop, Ves boarded the armored shuttle and flew towards the manufacturing complex. An hour later, they had arrived at the immense site, which looked a lot more finished than before.

Jake waited for him outside the landing pads. "Ves! I hope you'll stick around longer this time!"

"If nothing unexpected happens, then you'll certainly get your wish." Ves chuckled back. "Fill me in on how the LMC is doing these last couple of weeks. Has anything changed?"

"There's a spike in orders. The entire mech industry is getting swamped with customers. Every outfit that have earned a killing in the Glowing Planet are eagerly trying to bolster their capabilities. Some of the smaller gangs that

participated in the event have already been robbed and killed by rivals who missed out."

Ves nodded when he heard what had happened. The influx of the nouveau riche had turned the entire Bright Republic on its head. Too many outfits gained an abundance of money, but sustained severe losses as well. They turned into the best kind of targets to vultures looking for an easy score.

"How has the market responded?"

"These newly enriched outfits generally adopt two different buying patterns. The smaller ones with less capabilities are prioritizing delivery speed over quality. They want to take immediate ownership of their purchase and aren't willing to wait for more than day. Quality doesn't matter too much, so the smaller players of the market with readily available stock are having a field day at this moment."

"That sounds great, but it probably doesn't have anything to do with us. We've never been able to build up an inventory of mechs."

The LMC fabricated mechs as fast as they shipped out, so the news hadn't been relevant to Ves. His company had long grown past the definition of 'small player'.

"That's where the second type of customers come in. These are the big players like the major mercenary corps and the Blood Claws. They've all placed a big batch of orders for our products. The waiting list has practically doubled in the last couple of weeks, and it's only growing longer by the day."

He smiled at that. He had anticipated that this would happen. That was why he agreed to take out a major loan in order to finance an expansion in the company's production capability.

"Are the two new production lines up and running yet?"



"It's been shipped a week ago. Chief Cyril took charge and brought them down to the fabrication floor. Last I heard, the chief and his men are still in the process of setting up the production lines, but I'm not an expert in this matter."

"That's fine. I'll go down and help out in person. I know more about the production equipment than anyone else in the company."

"Before you go, Ves, the manufacturing complex needs a name. It's a multi-billion dollar project and it will one day house thousands of employees. It's a great start to a major undertaking of the LMC. It's destined to become one of this planet's most iconic landmarks."

"Landmark, huh?" Ves uttered as his mind drifted off. "Let me think of a name."

When Ves initially planned the construction of the manufacturing complex, he hadn't fixated on a name. He figured he could casually come up with something on the spot, but now he thought that the complex deserved a more considerate name.

The future of the Living Mech Corporation rested on this massive company site. This was the exclusive domain of his company, and everyone who stepped foot here day by day would put their hopes on its prosperity.

Besides serving as a production site for mechs, the complex also featured a lot of fortifications. The walls, turrets, mech patrols and other security features insured that anyone who attempted to attack the complex had to pay a price.

The LMC had signed a more extensive contract with Sanyal-Ablin to insure that the site would not receive any disturbances, either from sabotage or overt attacks. The beefed up contract added to the company's expenses, but with the impending addition of two production lines, it should be able to shoulder the extra burden.

"Since this complex is the center of the LMC, it needs a name that reflects the ideals of the company. How about... the Mech Nursery?"

Jake was absolutely floored at the name. The old man tested the words in his mind for a little bit. "It's an unconventional name. I don't know if it will fit the complex."

Although his COO still held some reservations on the name, Ves didn't change his mind. The more he thought about it, the more the name fit the aspirations of the company.

He wanted to create mechs with life, and what better than to call their place of origin as the Mech Nursery?

Even if it sounded weird, it reinforced the impression that Ves wanted to convey to the mech industry and his customers. His products carried the spark of life, and they deserved to be treated that way.

Right now, Jake reluctantly registered the name through his comm. After signing some paperwork, the complex would officially be known as the Mech nursery. It already churned the old man's stomach.

"Haha, let's go inside now. I want to see what you've done to the place!"

Under the company of Jake and Carlos, Ves proceeded to tour the complex from top to bottom. He visited the aboveground offices first. Most of the floors hadn't been put to use as of yet, but Ves envisioned a time when these empty white halls would be brimming with people.

Modeled after Marcella's office, Ves enjoyed the top floor to himself. The wide open spaces, the gold and brown furnishings and the exquisite furniture all added to his prestige. He would definitely be able to imitate the likes of Marcella and Mr. Chandler of the MTA if he sat behind his imposing desk.

Ves tested the padding of his desk chair and realized that it hid a large number of features that added to his comfort. Lucky also perched at the top of the chair and partially materialized to test out its functions as well. The seat had evidently been designed to accomodate pets.

"I'm very glad with the look and feel of my office. It makes me feel like a successful CEO."

"That's good. We've especially hired a number of renowned interior designers to decorate the offices."

As pleasant as his new office looked, the real work was done below. They left the top office and took the elevator that brought them straight underground.

Ves only briefly toured the underground floors. He already visited them a few weeks ago and besides some additions, they largely remained empty due to a lack of capacity.

Only the manufacturing floor possessed a lot of liveliness. The Dortmund production line had been moved to the first production hall. A number of mech technicians could be seen working on fabricating another silver label Blackbeak.

Ves left the workers to it and visited another hall. A larger number of mech technicians gathered around the brand-new production line.

It consisted of a full set of 3D printer, alloy compressor, chemical treatment machine and assembly machine. They all came from the same company called Benson Industrial Machinery.

Benson enjoyed a significant amount of renown in the Bright Republic for producing lines of fairly excellent mech manufacturing equipment. Chief Cyril had evidently been a fan of them, since he chose to purchase two of their upscale production lines in a single go.

"Chief!"

"Come over here, Ves! Help me with the configuration of this Benson printer!"

Ves figuratively pulled up his sleeves and stepped close to the 3D printer that formed the core of the production line. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know if we missed something, but the printer refuses to work. It spits out a bunch of error codes but the manual only provides us with a brief description."

"Have you called for support?"

"Hah! BIM's support lines are swamped with calls for help. The LMC isn't the only company who decided to expand their production. Our competitors are joining in the race as well, since there's a lot of money going around these days."

Without the influx of customers who had recently gotten wealthy off the Glowing Planet, Ves wouldn't have pulled the trigger and taken out a loan to finance the Benson production lines. The other mech manufacturers must have performed the same calculus and accelerated their expansion plans as well.

"Looks like we need to fix this ourselves. Let me take a look at it."

Ves had bought a fair number of Assembly Skills from the System, so he quickly figured out the root of the problem. The 3D printer and the rest of the machines functioned normally, but they required a lot of connections in between. Without effective communication between the different machines, the production line lost a lot of efficiency.

With the help of Ves, the chief and the rest of the technicians became enlightened about the problem. Once the source of the problem became

known, the technicians could fix it on their own. Ves left the mech technicians to their jobs but pulled Chief Cyril aside for a private talk.

"How effective do you think the Benson production line will perform?"

The chief scratch his stubby chin. "Compared to the Dortmund line? It's a lot more automated, so it's bound to be faster. However, the Dortmund you've retrieved is unparalleled in precision and quality control. I'd say there's going to be a little more waste if we utilize the Benson machines at their full capacity. If you want to achieve the same level of quality as the Dortmunds, then we'll have to cut our production speed by at least thirty percent."

"That's unacceptable." Ves shook his head. Even though he constantly emphasized the importance of maintaining a high level of quality, it didn't come at the cost of common sense. "The silver label Blackbeaks will be fine with a small drop in quality. We can catch the worst faults in time if we scan and double-check each part that comes out of the 3D printer."

"That will slow down our production process as well. Scanning each and every part as they come out is a laborious process, although it's faster than slowing down our overall rate of production."

"Then we'll do so. It's very important to scan our parts for their integrity. I don't want to hear about any cases where our customers died because we haven't been prudent enough to check our own parts."

The chief nodded in acknowledgement. He agreed with the sentiment. "That's a good choice. It will cut into our earnings, but it will give our customers some piece of mind."

After questioning Cyril about how other matters, Ves finally left the manufacturing floor. Once they stepped into the elevator, he decided to go down to the lab floor.

Jake frowned as he stood besides Ves. "Why do you want to enter the lab? We've already visited it."

"I'm about to conduct a very important experiment. I'm sorry about the short notice, but I'll be indisposed for up to three months. I won't be coming out and I won't be accepting any interruptions during this time."

"What?!"

### **Chapter 358 Transcendence**

Ves thought about it carefully. The value of the Transcendence Pill lay in its ability to overcome the human limit without any side effects. It only cost him time, while precious, would never be short in stock.

Therefore, even if the Bright Republic faced tumultuous times, the benefits of the Pill absolutely outweighed the cost. Even if Ves ultimately couldn't finish his second original design in time, he would still be able to use his increased capabilities in other ways.

A special elevator slowly descended many kilometers deep into the earth. It passed through a number of checkpoints and defenses that surrounded the sensitive lab and private workshop floor.

When the elevator doors finally opened, Ves stepped into the lab with Lucky floating behind him. The cat quickly darted away, passing through a number of walls without encountering any hindrance.

Besides Lucky, nothing should have been able to penetrate the thick defenses of the lab.

An uncountable amount of defenses and security measures hid behind the alloy-paneled walls. Advanced electronic defense systems thwarted the intrusion of any bugs and jammed any form of signalling or transmission. A secure but expensive quantum entanglement node formed the only method of communication with the outside galaxy.

Closed air circulation and filtration systems ensured that the entire floor was completely sterile and free of contaminants. A storeroom filled with water and nutrient packs as well as an excellent organic recycling system ensured that Ves would easily be able to last inside the floor for more than a decade.

The way the security systems had been set up made it difficult for Sanyal-Ablin to snoop in on him. A thick layer of signal-blocking material enveloped the entire floor. The only way that they'd be able to receive telemetry was if some kind of miniature bug hitch-hiked on his body or inside his comm.

"Good luck with that."

The System practically monopolized his comm and didn't allow any form of malware or spyware to infect his most important electronic device. As for external bugs, Lucky often snacked on them every day.

Ves even went to the trouble of hiring several other security companies and consultants to supervise the construction of this floor. He even asked the Larkinson Estate to send their own specialist to keep an eye on the supervisors.

All of this had ballooned his expenses, but Ves wasn't short on money these days.

"From now on, this is my temple."

Ves became inspired to construct a private workshop after Oleg invited him into Master Olson's workshop in Leemar. Despite her absence, her workshop carried a majestic air that made it clear that miracles emerged from that place.

Right now, his own workshop was half-empty and rather barren. Much of the fancy machines cost much more than ten times the total worth of the LMC. Ves had no choice but to set aside his intentions of purchasing all of those expensive machines and settle for the basics.

"It's sufficient for now."

He planned to make full use of what he got once he started designing his rifleman mech. Right now, he had a pill to ingest. He left the working area and entered the attached living space.

After freshening himself up yet again, Ves called out to Lucky. "Come over here!"

Lucky floated through the walls and stopped in the air in front of Ves. "Meow?"

"I'm going to be out cold for a time. I don't know how long it lasts, but make sure nobody enters this floor, okay?"

"Meow."

"Hey, don't argue with me. I left a whole batch of high-value minerals inside the storerooms. Feel free to munch on them while you guard over me."

"Meow!"

This time, Lucky appeared to comply with his orders. If nothing else, Ves could always bribe his cat with food.

Once he finished making his final preparations, he took out the Transcendence Pill he received as a reward at the end of the Glowing Planet campaign. The thumb-sized pill carried an organic gold luster, as if it had been condensed by the blood of a god.

"If the System is able to bring out a Transcendence Pill, then someone in the galaxy is able to produce them. How difficult is it to make such a wondrous pill?"

Gene boosts already cost a fortune to produce, and they only provided marginal effects compared to the Transcendence Pill. This tiny object had the potential of transforming the life of anyone who ingested it. The price for this pill must certainly be horrible for any single person to bear.



The depths of the galaxy hid an uncountable amount of powerhouses. Master Mech Designers emigrated from the galactic rim and the galactic heartland all the time in order towards the galactic center

Besides competing for the best technologies and the most miraculous exotics, Ves guessed they also struggled to obtain the favor of organizations that grasped the production of these precious pills.

"There's nothing in the galactic rim and galactic heartland that can keep these Master Mech Designers interested."

The Komodo Star Sector especially had it bad. As one of the most backward star sectors in the galaxy, over two-thirds of the Masters that emerged from this region had eventually said goodbye to their old states and journeyed to the center of the galaxy in order to join the Terrans or the Rubarthans.

Would Master Olson choose to go for greener pastures as well some day?

"She only advanced to the rank of Master a fairly short time ago. She's still too young at a hundred years old."

With a sufficient amount of life-prolonging treatments, a wealthy individual could easily push up to six-hundred years. Many fossils that experienced the violent transition from the Age of Conquest to the Age of Mechs still clung to their lives to this day.

He estimated that Master Olson should take at least another hundred years to shore up her foundation before she made her play.

Once that happened, everything would change. Ves knew that if he tried hard enough, Master Olson would certainly extend an invitation for him to join her expedition to the center of the galaxy.

If Ves was a normal mech designer, he'd certainly look forward to it. But with the System, who knew if he would still be Master Olson's apprentice in a hundred years. Perhaps he'd be able to treat her as his equal by that time.

"If Master Olson is a genius who can advance to Master in a hundred years, then I'll certainly be able to accomplish the same!"

Advancing to Master in a hundred years, how ambitious! Ves even harbored ambitions of reaching such a height well before he turned a hundred years old!

The renowned Star Designer who held the title of Polymath held the record for the youngest advancement to Master. She she took less than fifty years to rocket straight to Master, astounding the entire galaxy in a single feat!

"All of that is still too far away." He sighed and turned his attention back to the Transcendence Pill. "This shall be the next step in my road to ascension."

Ves carefully laid down on his bed and popped the pill into his mouth. He didn't require any water to swallow down the pill. In fact, it had turned into liquid as soon as it entered his mouth.

A rush of energy emerged from his stomach and shot straight to his brains. Before he could even contemplate the feeling, an invisible pillow smothered his consciousness.

An unknown amount of time went by as Ves slumbered on his bed. He completely fell into dormancy, and wouldn't wake up even if he grew hungry or needed to relieve himself. Naturally, he already prepared some bots to take care of those issues beforehand, but strangely enough, his body remained in a state of stasis.

Besides his respiration, almost every other bodily function had paused.

Sometimes, Lucky emerged from the walls and landed atop Ves. His mastery over his intangible state allowed him to materialize completely for short moments of time by now, and he often did so in order to bump Ves from his sleep.

"Meow."

Unfortunately, nothing he did managed to wake Ves up. Sensing the futility of his actions, Lucky gave up on the idea and instead spent most of his time sleeping atop his owner.

As for Ves, his mind had been cast far away from the Komodo Star Sector. The Transcendence Pill had a marvelous effect on his mind. He felt as if he experienced an out-of-body moment yet again, but instead of being brought into someone else's body, his mind and soul had reached an immeasurable height above the galaxy.

His incorporeal senses gazed down at the splendid disk of the Milky Way. The galaxy spun much faster according to reality. Thousands of years went by with each second that passed by. It clued him in that he was looking at an illusion.

Still, real or fake, the unfiltered sight of the revolving galaxy had impressed him beyond belief.

"It's so beautiful. The galaxy is much more vast than I can imagine."

Red dwarfs, blue giants, black holes and more made up the fabric of the constantly spinning galaxy. At the center of it all lay the supermassive black hole that kept the stellar objects together.

Witnessing the wealth and breath of the galaxy through his soul affected him more than he thought. As he gazed down at the galaxy, the galaxy gazed up at him. An immense, primordial energy that spun with the galaxy quietly seeped a tiny portion of its being into his soul.

As soon as that happened, Ves received a mighty shock to his mind that instantly catapulted him out of the illusion.

Back at the underground private workshop, Ves woke up with sweat streaking down his body. His breath became disorderly as his mind and body momentarily fell out of sync.

"It hurts!"

His brains heated up as it experienced an inexplicable transformation. Ves groaned and squirmed on his bed as he tried to endure the pain.

He blacked out once again.

The next time he woke up, he found to his surprise that the pain had subsided. His sweat-stained body had also been cleaned up by the bots that stood by. After Ves tentatively prodded his head, he sighed in relief as he didn't appear to be suffering from any further side effects.

"That was one hell of a trip."

Moments later, Lucky passed straight through the door and solidified his body in order to cuddle against Ves.

"Meow!"

"Hahaha! I missed you too."

From Lucky's urgency, Ves deduced that the Transcendence Pill had eaten up a fair amount of time. He quickly activated his comm and looked at the date.

"Thirty-three days went by!"

That was better than he feared, but worst than he hoped. Just over a month went by, which meant that anything could have happened in between. Before

he inspected his changes, he first wanted to contact Jake and hear from him if anything had happened during his coma.

Since the quantum entanglement node on this floor had been confined to a closed system, Ves couldn't use his own comm to contact the outside world. Ves slowly slid from his bed and shakily walked out of the apartment.

He approached a closed chamber which held a solitary terminal that connected directly to the quantum entanglement node buried just underneath. He connected to the galactic net and entered his mail box.

"Hm, nothing serious happened."

He arranged for Jake, Melkor, Marcella, Calsie and Gavin to send him weekly reports. Although plenty of notable events took place in the past month, nothing directly affected the LMC in any detrimental way.

"A few raids on Bentheim and the surrounding systems... price inflation... shortage of rare exotics... Ah, Melkor finally finished recruiting his cadre for the Avatars of Myth!"

With an abundance of money and authority from Ves, Melkor eventually succeeded in hiring eight capable mech pilots. He also spent much of his allowance on purchasing mechs for them to begin their live training, although the two knight pilots still waited to receive their gold label Blackbeaks.

"That can still wait."

Once he reassured himself that nothing critical demanded his presence, Ves shut down the terminal. Right now, he mentally stimulated his mind and tried to figure out if anything had changed. He resumed the long-stagnant process of integrating the Senior-level Physics knowledge that he succeeded in obtaining.

"It's faster!"

The integration of knowledge happened at least ten times faster! The difference between before and after couldn't be compared. His processing speed had sped up by an entire order of magnitude.

"Yes! My gamble succeeded! My Intelligence has broken through the human limit!"

What did that mean? From now on, Ves would rapidly be able to learn and process all kinds of esoteric knowledge. He could even branch out into fields that shared no relations with mechs, though he didn't plan to do so.

"How high is my Intelligence right now?"

#### **Chapter 359 Second Original Design**

His mouth gaped open as he called up his Status page. Much of it remained the same so he skimmed over them entirely. Instead, his eyes narrowed down on his Intelligence score.

Intelligence: 2.1

"Just 2.1?"

The difference of 0.1 at this level actually produced a sea of change. Obviously, the Attribute scores didn't follow a linear pattern of growth.

For example, someone with an Intelligence of 2.0 wasn't twice as smart as someone with an Intelligence of 1.0. Each increment of 0.1 provided a different amount of improvement.

Reaching a score of 2.1 was a vast gulf of difference, especially when it had reached a stable state. Ves once reached a height of 2.2 in Endurance, and that had transformed his body in many ways.

It was a pity that he gained such strength from Dr. Jutland's insane experiments. Jutland hadn't actually been able to break the human limit, so the abnormally high Endurance actually started to break down down his body.

If the CFA hadn't reverted some of the changes, he would have died when he reached fifty years old.

"It's far too soon for me to die at fifty years!"

Let alone fifty years, Ves believed he could easily last more than five-hundred years!

Once Ves understood his changes, he didn't hesitate to integrate the immense amount of knowledge provided by Senior-level Physics. What previously took months to digest now took up just a week.

For the next week, Ves did nothing but sit behind a desk while casting his mind inward. An extreme amount of theories with regards to fundamental Physics became understandable over time.

Much of the knowledge enabled him to understand and work with various types of exotics. Before mastering this level of knowledge, the only way that Ves could integrate exotics into his own design was if he obtained a readily available license.

For example, the Veltrex armor system with its three layers of armor plating that withstood different damage types came with several ingenious formulas. The research institution poured a lot of resources into developing these formulas that combined several exotics into special alloys that provided a wondrous effect.

Previously, Ves was purely a consumer of these formulas. Now, he gained the minimum qualifications to produce his own formulas.

"Still, it's not that simple."

The Senior-level Physics only provided him with a broad but fairly shallow foundation. If he wanted to develop an actual formula, then he needed to supplement his Main Skill with several Sub-Skills raised to a certain height.

Right now, Ves didn't hold any ambitious of developing his own component designs. Even though it cost him a lot of money or merits, making use of existing licenses saved him a lot of time and energy.

"A mech pilot doesn't have to know how to build a mech. A ship captain doesn't have to know how to build a ship. A doctor doesn't have to refine his own medicine."

Ves believed that it should be enough to focus on his core job of designing new mechs. Even if the System easily allowed him to unlock a myriad of specialties, he did not have any intentions of imitating the Polymath.

"I have my own way of making mechs come to life."

Even without the relevant Sub-Skills, the Main Skill alone provided a lot of benefits to Ves. He easily understood the heart of each phenomenon and became more proficient in handling advanced technology.

In particular, he gained a comprehensive boost in understanding laser weapons. If before he could only design an average gamma laser rifle design, now he would easily be able to improve the Tainted Sun by more than twenty percent!

Once a week went by, Ves fully integrated his long-awaited boost. Now, he directly met one of the criteria to advance to Journeyman Mech Designer. According to the demands set by the MTA, he only needed to formulate his design philosophy and pass some tests before he could officially leave his Apprentice days behind.

"I still have to design a number of original mechs."

The MTA set a strict bar for anyone who wanted to be acknowledged as a Journeyman Mech Designer. They had to design five original mechs. Naturally, the designs also had to meet a minimum performance standard. In



that regard, the Blackbeak already passed the test, so Ves wasn't worried about failing to meet the standard.

Ves first checked his messages again on the isolated terminal. Nothing special had happened although the amount of raids by the Vesians had increased. He figured that the LMC could last a little longer without his presence.

"I've been delaying my next project for too long. It's time for me to make the first step."

He finally felt ready to embark on his next design project. His inadvertent adventure with the crystal ruins had given him a lot of inspiration on how his next design should look like, and he was eager to turn his ideas into reality.

Immediately, he faced an important choice. First, should he collaborate with someone on this project, and second, should he log his every action in detail?

Different from designing his first original mech, Ves faced a lot less constraints this time. He already went through his debut and proved that he could design an original mech without any outside assistance. Now that he gained the mech industry's acknowledgement, he enjoyed a lot more freedom this time.

Ves thought about his gains from the crystal ruins. Once he began to design his mech, it would become obvious that he incorporated alien insights into his work.

"When the MTA checks the logs, they won't care about these matters."

To a behemoth like the MTA, they wouldn't lift their brows if Ves applied some of the principles that powered the alien ruins. His recent upgrade in Intelligence and his acquisition of Senior-level Physics had vastly improved his understanding of the crystal builder's technology. Even if he still couldn't unlock the secret behind the circuits, he still harvested in many other ways.

While Ves had a lot to hide, he didn't mind being stared at by the MTA. Logging his design process would instead insure his claim on his own design and prevent others from accusing him that he stole his design from someone else. That happened more often than anyone thought.

Still, Ves did not entirely wish to rely on himself this time. He knew the challenges of competing directly against the mainstream models and their variants. The market for rifleman mechs was too competitive for Ves to make an impact even with all of his recent gifts.

Ves gently stroked his comm. When the time was right, he'd disable the logs and activate his Superpublish function. He hoped that he could elevate the quality of his design just enough to break into the market.

As for how to explain the jump in quality, Ves could just hand out an excuse that he let an unknown expert make a pass on his own design.

Mech designers with a lot of connections often invited experts to elevate their designs to another level. Most of the time, these experts insisted on being credited by their works, but sometimes they wished to remain anonymous.

In this regard, Ves could easily explain his Superpublish function by crediting an anonymous contributor.

"The only downside to the Superpublish function is that I won't earn any DP from its sales."

This was a very steep price. However, as long as he captured a small chunk of the market for rifleman mechs, the profits would be immense and his prestige would rise well above his fellow Apprentices.

Right now, Ves desperately needed to enhance his prestige and reputation. Otherwise, the Mech Corps wouldn't value him when they eventually called him up to serve the Republic.

Ves moved back to his design project. "Alright, a good design starts with a solid vision."

He aimed to pin down a vision and complete a draft design within a week. After that, he would solicit everyone's opinions before he moved on to turning his draft into a full design.

"I already have a great idea for a vision."

Through his first-hand experiences in the Glowing Planet campaign, Ves acquired a rich perspective on rifleman mechs. As the mainstay of any mech force, they would often be fielded in great numbers.

"Rifleman mechs are rarely sold one at a time to any single customer."

A small-scale buyer like a single-squad mech corps might only ever purchase one knight. As for rifleman mechs, they wouldn't hesitate to buy at least two to four of them in a single instant.

"The market for rifleman mechs is big and profitable. The high volume of sales alone is enough to fight over."

Under these highly competitive circumstances, Ves had to carve out a place for his own design. He set his sights on the upper-premium segment of 60 to 70 million credit mechs.

In the Bright Republic, the vast majority of rifleman mechs sold for fifty million credits or less. The mainstream mechs were no exception, which also made them so attractive in the first place. It wasn't enough that they delivered a higher level of performance, but their pricing also bankrupted many aspiring local mech designers.

Still, the Republic wasn't completely clueless and imposed a number of tariffs and other barriers that made it slightly less attractive to purchase a foreign

mech. The Bright Republic wouldn't be able to host such a lively mech industry if they let the trans-galactic corporations operate with impunity.

"The most expensive mainstream mech still costs only fifty million credits."

Ves shook his head. "It's hopeless for me to compete directly against them at this price point."

The Blackbeak managed to be successful due to his decision to design a rarely-seen offensive knight. Ves purposefully avoided the crowded market for defensive knights and thereby avoided direct comparisons between the Blackbeak and the mainstream knight models.

He intended to do the same with his second original design, only this time he wanted to differentiate his product through its price category.

"With my existing licenses, I can easily clad my rifleman mech with compressed armor. With the help of my improved Skills, I can also beef up the capability of its primary weapon."

As long as Ves managed to control his costs, he believed he could design a very strong rifleman mech that performed a notch above the mainstream models. Perhaps it would lose out in terms of optimization and refinement, but the boost in raw performance would easily make up for that disparity.

"A rifleman mech that costs at least 60 million credits is absolutely a mech fit for a leader."

With a powerful laser rifle and an ample amount of armor, only the best could make full use of these capabilities. It had to offer a certain level of rounded performance in order to appeal to highly-skilled mech pilots.

"I can take some inspiration from the modifications I made for Fadah's mech. Speed and mobility is essential to a modern rifleman mech. This should be my first priority. I can't skimp on this area."

Firepower was a close second, followed endurance and staying power. Since he intended to reuse most of the licenses he acquired to design the Blackbeak, his next design should also be able to last an entire war.

"Armor is only the fourth priority, but that doesn't mean I should neglect it entirely."

It had to be good enough that his buyers would willingly stomach forking over at least 60 million mechs. That meant that Ves wouldn't be able to cover his mech only partially with compressed armor. He had to give his mech the full treatment without weighing it down too much.

"That's going to be a major challenge."

Even assuming he succeeded in balancing the speed and armor of his rifleman mech, he also had to distinguish his mech from the competition in other ways.

"I need a gimmick."

### **Chapter 360 Gimmick**

Ves already worked with gimmicks before. Back when he designed the 3-star virtual variant of the Hoplite, he adapted one of the spear-wielding knight's gimmicks to the Young Blood.

The gimmick consisted of various enhancements to the shield of the Young Blood so that it would be able to bash its shield with greater speed and momentum.

The implementation came with a number of flaws. The Young Blood could only enhance its shield bash for a limited number of times, because the batteries embedded into the shield carried only so much charge. In addition, the components lacked sufficient sturdiness and could easily be rendered inoperable.

"Still, it doesn't matter if the actual implementation is disappointing. It's an attention grabber."

The mere existence of the gimmick attracted a lot of attention. The Young Blood became known as the ultimate shield-bashing knight mech and its existence had been imprinted on countless Iron Spirit players.

The best gimmicks bestowed otherwise normal mechs with seemingly inconceivable superpowers. Meanwhile, the worst gimmicks actually turned out to be a detriment on the battlefield.

No matter the case, a gimmick always attracted a lot of attention, thereby making them the perfect marketing material.

Ves knew that purist mech designers disdained the use of gimmicks. They would rather focus their efforts on maximizing the core performance of a mech. The more a mech designer emphasizes a gimmick, the worse the overall performance of the design in question.

Adding a gimmick to a mech always came at the cost of weight, space, power or heat management. It also raised the price of the mech and disproportionately increased the maintenance burden.

"A good gimmick justifies its existence. A bad gimmick becomes a weight that drags down the design."

Ves did not even have to browse the galactic net to come across countless failed implementations.

For example, one iconic example often bandied about in the mech industry was the Grenadier. Nominally, the designer designed the Grenadier as a Skirmisher. However, it carried a bandolier of high-explosive shells on its torso.

The purpose of the Grenadier was to sneak behind enemy lines and inflict severe disruption with minimal footprint. Compared to missiles, grenades took up a lot less space and weight, and didn't require any launchers either. The grenades also didn't cost a lot of time and money to produce.

Alas, the actual implementation fared much worse than the designer had intended. Almost every Grenadier that got caught got blown up when its opponents focused their fire on the bandolier. The Grenadier might be carrying around a lot of explosive might, but compared to missiles, they lacked much of the preventive measures against premature detonations.

"I also can't forget about the Adaptris."

The Adaptris was a so-called multi-environmental mech. It was a heavy mech that was simultaneously an aquatic mech, a landbound mech, an aerial mech and a spaceborn mech.

The mech designer of the Adaptris piled his mech up with so many systems that it could adapt in almost every circumstance. The logic of the Adaptris was that since it could be fielded in almost every situation, it could be produced and fielded en masse. The advantages of scale would eventually outweigh the inherent inefficiencies in the design.

Heavy mechs always strained the resources and industrial capacity of a state. If the Adaptris could be produced in enough numbers, then the heavy mech component of its military force would become ten times deadlier.

Sadly, the designer had a few screws loose in his head. He somehow succeeded in pitching the idea to a handful of third-rate states, which allocated a huge portion of their limited industrial capacity in producing these gimmicky heavy mechs.

For all their adaptability and theoretical performance, the mech designer hadn't actually designed a good mech. The heavy mechs came laden with

flaws due to the excess of different systems stuffed inside their frames. The most fatal flaw was that they ran out of power up to seventy percent faster than a normal heavy mech!

With countless more examples just like this, the mech industry adopted a wary stance towards gimmicks. If a mech designer wanted to add something special to their mechs, they should better restrain themselves and keep their implementation modest.

Ves did not intend to flaunt that rule. "The only mech designers who resort to gimmicks are those who can't compete the normal way."

Why did crazy designs like the Grenadier and the Adaptris come into existence in the first place? It was because their mech designers faced too much competition!

They couldn't compete against the market with their normal capabilities!

"It's too difficult to compete directly against mainstream mechs!"

The dominant trans-galactic corporations ruled over the galactic mech industry from their headquarters in the galactic center. Design teams numbering dozens Masters and hundreds of Seniors focused all of their immense expertise into perfecting a single standard design at a time.

How could any average mech designer compete against the best that humanity had to offer? Even though the galactic center was tens of thousands of light years away from the galactic rim, any newly published design from the center would instantly reach the rim through the galactic net.

Within a single week, mech manufacturers around the galaxy would instantly produce at least a billion copies of the new design. Within a single month, the number of copies might surpass a trillion.



The amount of demand for the latest mainstream mechs from the most reputable trans-galactic corporation could make any single mech designer die from envy!

Fortunately, many states wouldn't allow these trans-galactic corporations unrestricted access to their mech markets. They adopted a variety of measures, from tariffs to quotas to give their domestic mech industry a chance to survive.

States had to be careful in implementing these trade policies.

If they acted against foreign mechs with a heavy hand, they risked coddling their mech industry into complacency. Without the pressure of outside competition, the state's domestic mech designers faced little incentive to exert their full efforts into maximizing the performance of their mechs.

The difference might not become evident in a couple of years, but this sort of change always took its time to seep into the vitality of a state. After twenty years or more of continued decline, the strength of the domestic mech industry would be a shadow of its former self.

The mechs that proliferated in this state that closed its market to outsiders wouldn't be able to measure up against the mechs of their rivals. Many states ended up grinded beneath the feet of their neighboring states because they disregarded outside advancements.

On the other hand, if a state treated foreign mechs too leniently, then their domestic mech industry would eventually atrophy, crippling its ability to design purpose-built mechs for their mech forces.

This indirectly weakened the state's ability to wage war, because mainstream mechs would always be analyzed to death by the entire galaxy. Their strengths and weaknesses would quickly become clear to all, including any

possible opponents. It would be trivially easy to exploit these traits if an entire mech force consisted of the same handful of mainstream mech models.

"The Bright Republic is in a difficult spot. I can't blame them for opening up their market to mainstream mechs."

The Bright Republic had to square off against the Vesia Kingdom, a larger and more populous third-rate state. It couldn't afford to put too many restrictions on the high-performing mainstream designs that constantly proliferated from the galactic center.

These extremely well-designed mechs provided the Mech Corps and the various private forces that operated within its borders with a readily available supply of high-quality mechs.

Naturally, the Vesians often exploited the well-known weaknesses of these mainstream mechs, but that couldn't be helped. Much more importantly, the pressure of galactic competition separated the wheat from the chaff.

Incompetent mech designers had no place in the Republic. Only the best and most resilient mech designers continued to survive under these circumstances.

"Still, I'm far away from competing against the mainstream mechs in an upright clash. I can only resort to tricks."

Ves already had something interesting in mind. Before his latest trip to the Joe System, he agonized over the problem, but after he explored the crystal ruins, he quietly formed some ideas.

The key to his gimmick lay in the composition of the crystal structures. Even if he didn't understand the circuits embedded into the crystals, he would still be able to attempt to reproduce a copy of the naked crystals.

All of this became possible due to his timely purchase of the Vulcaneye. The crystals bared all of its secrets against the powerful multiscanner.

As Ves studied a projection of the crystal's composition, he put his formidable knowledge and enhanced mind to use. Could he fabricate the crystals by himself?

"It's not possible." He shook his head. "It's too costly."

Coincidence or not, the composition of the crystals from the crystal city utilized exotics available in the Komodo Star Sector. Perhaps that might be why the crystal builders left behind a presence in the Joe System.

However, an unimaginable amount of time had passed since the passing of the tiny alien species. The Komodo Star Sector back then looked a lot different than today. Several of the core ingredients could only be found in the center of the star sector, smack dab in the middle of the Friday Coalition.

"Now that the Friday Coalition is clashing directly against the Hexadric Hegemony over the Glowing Planet, they'll keep all of their high-value exotics to themselves."

Ves also couldn't forget about the drying imports. The surrounding star sectors also became engulfed in war. Few shipments of rare exotics made it all the way to the Komodo Star Sector these days.

"If I can't use the original composition, what about using substitutes?"

Substituting an expensive or scarce material for a more readily available one happened all the time. Ves was no Master Katzenberg, but his breadth and depth of Skills and Sub-Skills gave him the basic qualifications to figure something out.

"If labs contain samples of pretty much every exotic available in the Republic. As long as Lucky hasn't emptied them all, I'll have a good chance of creating an inferior copy."

Ves fixated on the crystals because they formed the key to lowering the bulk of his laser rifle. He already applied some of the insights he learned from the crystal ruins into cutting down the bulk of the Tainted Sun. However, he could have done a much better job if he had some actual crystals to work with. The gamma laser rifle eventually failed to live up to its potential.

"My next laser rifle will be a far cry from the Tainted Sun."

He already gained a lot of experience designing the laser rifle's big brother. Graser rifles demanded the utmost in terms of integrity, tolerance, power supply and heat management. Ves faced a lot less pressure if he designed a regular laser rifle.

"The first gimmick will be to implement as much crystals as possible in the laser rifle."

Ves already envisioned the laser rifle being smaller and slimmer than a standard model. Combined with the reduced weight of his rifleman mech design, the entire package would allow mech pilots to move faster and nimbler on the battlefield. At the very least, its mobility could compete head-on against the swiftest mainstream mechs in the same weight class.

"Still, this isn't enough."

A better laser rifle only scratched the surface. Ves intended to embed a crystal in the frame of his design as well.

A bold idea surfaced in his mind. He imagined a large crystal embedded in the head or the chest of a mech. It would accumulate energy over time, perhaps even absorbing enemy laser beams to charge itself faster. Once its energy accumulated up to a critical point, it disgorged its entire charge in a single powerful light beam.

The idea sounded very fanciful and unrealistic. At the very least, Ves couldn't recall any mech that had used such a gimmick. While many designs did in fact

embed laser projectors directly onto the frame of a mech, only the most expensive second-class or first-class mechs employed such a gimmick.

"Laser projectors are vulnerable and present potential weak points. I'll have to find a way to reproduce a crystal that's both resilient and affordable enough."

Ves turned to his lab and eyed the handful of high quality equipment. This would be the first time he put the capabilities of his lab to test.