

Mech 3691

Chapter 3691 Question of Morality

With hundreds of troopers stepping aboard the evacuation ship, the pakklaton and voribugs were unable to pose any significant threats.

The humans quickly moved to secure the power reactors, the warp drive and any volatile substances stored inside the relatively fragile vessel.

Due to their speed and decisiveness, the panicked and despairing pakklatons did not have time to perform any major sabotage actions.

While there were still crazed pakklatons that sought to ruin numerous important ship components, their efforts were too rudimentary to compromise the entire hull.

The only annoying part was that the various boarding parties always had to maintain their guard in case the voribugs made an appearance.

The aggressive, voracious insects seemed to possess a special hunger towards living creatures and always launched attacks when their numbers grew large enough.

Every infantry soldier aboard the alien vessels learned first-hand why all of the other intelligent races in the Red Ocean hated the voribugs! There were just too many of them and they never stopped coming!

"I can't imagine what will happen once the voribugs spread to the Milky Way..." A Crosser soldier remarked.

"The Big Two would never allow that to happen. They maintain tight control over the greater beyonder gate."

"Heh, do you think that will be enough? Let me tell you that as long as someone records the genetics of these aliens, they can breed them from scratch in an artificial lab. Sooner or later, someone crazy enough will unleash them onto the Milky Way!"

This was quite a scary prospect!

While the residents of the Red Ocean had spent eons getting accustomed to living with these space pests, the occupants of the Milky Way were largely unprepared!

While it was not that difficult for first-raters and second-raters to keep the voribugs at bay, a lot of third-raters would definitely suffer because their means were much poorer!

"If we can think about it, so can the MTA and CFA." A mech officer stated. "Leave this problem to the big guys. Focus on our mission. Our only job is to sweep this ship of any threats."

As the humans made more progress in taking control over the alien evacuation ship, the progress of Ketis and her band of elite Swordmaiden soldiers had slowed.

It couldn't be helped. Ever since she and Ves agreed on subduing the aliens whenever possible, it took a lot of time for the human invaders to persuade the panicking and hysterical pakklatons to drop their resistance.

The inability to communicate with the cawing bird-like aliens led to a lot of frustration and misunderstanding.

While the other infantry squads had little choice but to resort to lethal violence in order to clean up the resisting pakklatons, Ketis had another option.

A swordmaster's combat prowess was unimaginably greater than the typical foot soldier.

Through repeated encounters, she fully showcased her transcendent skills, her incredible might and her amazing control.

Whenever armed pakklaton soldiers in their light alloy armored suits attempted to attack the Swordmaiden soldiers, Ketis stabbed her Bloodsinger out in a precise fashion, causing her weapon to release sharp energy darts that disabled all of the integrated weapon mounts while also demolishing their flight modules and possibly their power systems.

The affected pakklaton soldiers all crashed onto the deck as their combat armor turned into coffins!

It was easy enough to pacify the crippled and disoriented alien soldiers after that. The pakklaton soldiers clearly never fought against an existence akin to a swordmaster.

To be fair, most human soldiers had never encountered a transcendent warrior either. They wouldn't fare much better if they collided against Ketis on the battlefield.

While Ketis was content that she was able to leverage her strength to prevent avoidable deaths, her heart and mind came under an increasing amount of turmoil.

Having witnessed Joshua procrastinate over his moral dilemma, Ketis was not unaware of what she was going through.

Every expert pilot faced a test at some point in their careers.

Resolving it would release a part of their mental shackles and allow them to condense their will further.

Failure could cause the expert pilots to stagnate as their will and convictions were no longer as firm as before.

Ketis never imagined that she would face her own test so soon. Although these dilemmas sounded rather trivial from the outside, they were still incredibly difficult to solve by the affected individuals themselves.

This was because they could not blindly rely on other people's advice to clear the fog in their minds!

The answers to their dilemmas had to come from themselves. The solutions needed to conform completely to their personalities, their life choices, their reasons to fight and most importantly their principles.

Every expert pilot was different, so each of them needed to come up with their own answers. No single response could resolve everyone's doubts.

The same applied to Ketis. As a swordmaster, she was driven by her need to excel as a mech designer. She sought greater power not just to protect herself, but also gain deeper insights into the truths and mysteries behind swordsmanship.

As long as she mastered the sword, she could transfer her gains to her mechs, allowing her products to surpass those of other swordsman mech designers!

This was a fine motivation and one that carried her quite far. Ketis and Sharpie steadily grew stronger over time due to this influence and it appeared that they would not slow down anytime soon.

However, that was before Ketis decided to take part in this battle.

It was easy enough for her to go along with the flow when she was observing the attack on the pakklaton refugee fleet from afar.

Even when thousands of pakklatons died as a result of the damage inflicted by the Larkinson Clan's mechs, Ketis never felt any remorse. The aliens of the Red Ocean were doomed since humanity entered the scene.

Now that she faced the pakklatons up close, it was no longer possible for her to maintain her ruthless stance.

The bird-like aliens might not be human, but they were not that different from people like her fellow Larkinsons. They exhibited love, duty, fear and despair. They created a

society that resembled human society. They weren't guilty of any heinous deeds that could justify the extinction of their entire race.

The aliens here weren't pirates. The majority of pakklavons on the ship were clearly civilians and many of them juvenile at that. These innocent avians who hadn't even grown feathers yet did not pose a threat to anyone in their current state.

She couldn't bring herself to slaughter the pakklavons in an unscrupulous manner.

Of course, she wasn't silly enough to extend the same courtesy to the voribugs.

She hacked her sword and cut the persistent insects in half. She swept her Bloodsinger again in order to release an energy wave that wiped out all of the voribugs approaching from the front.

Although the voribugs were unworthy opponents to her, killing them provided her with an anchor for her will.

There were still aliens in existence that did not deserve to live. The voribugs were space vermin that made everyone's lives difficult. They only left destruction in their wake and possessed no redeeming qualities.

The turbulence in her heart calmed down as she immersed herself in cutting down these mindless bugs.

"Why am I struggling?" She asked herself. "What is making my sword hand so shaky all of a sudden?"

Once she arranged her thoughts and reflected on her recent thoughts, she understood that the problem didn't lie with her ambitions.

She was still as firm as ever when it came to fulfilling her dream of becoming the best swordsman mech designer in existence!

With the Monster Slayer Project and the Second Sword Project nearing completion, she looked forward to how many mech pilots she could delight with her new products.

The Monster Slayer would be her first commercial mech design! Once the landbound swordsman mech entered the market, Ketis would finally be able to feel what it was like to compete against other market players!

The Second Sword on the other hand would be her first real contribution to the Swordmaiden Mech Legion.

Once the Swordmaidens piloted the new swordsman mech she designed exclusively for her fellow sisters, she could finally take over the mantle that once belonged to Mayra.

With all of these developments taking place in the near future, Ketis did not wish to become engulfed by her own problems.

She needed to overcome this hurdle in order to smooth out her progression.

After a bit of thinking, she understood what she had been neglecting up until this point.

The ambition she was working towards was personal in nature. Though she possessed other goals such as helping the Swordmaidens prosper and doing her best to keep the Larkinson Clan alive, none of them were as important as designing the best swordsman mechs.

While she was incredibly clear what she wanted to accomplish, she never made any concrete decisions on how she wanted to attain her ultimate goal.

"The journey is just as important as the destination." She whispered.

Right now, this battle put her journey squarely into focus. There were many different ways she could choose from in order to realize her design philosophy, but the key variable that distinguished her choices was morality.

"Let's take a short break." She commanded her troops as she stopped advancing forward.

As her fellow Swordmaidens took the time to check their equipment and survey the path forward, Ketis stood in a corner and looked at her armored sword hand.

The fact that it was shaking was incredibly absurd. Swordmasters were never supposed to waver when they wielded their weapons.

The reason why Ketis was afflicted by this condition was because she had become confused about her own morality. She never really spent much thought about this topic in the past. It didn't seem necessary or relevant at the time.

"I was too weak back then. What do good and evil matter when I constantly have to struggle to survive?"

She was also a follower back then who embraced the ideals of the Swordmaidens and the Larkinson Clan without much resistance.

It was only when she became an influential Journeyman and swordmaster that she was able to rise from the masses. She was no longer an ordinary person and her decisions could affect the lives of a lot of people.

With her growing responsibilities, it became increasingly more important for her to determine her own morality.

"What kind of sword should I wield?" She asked herself.

She thought back on all of the pirates and soldiers she killed with her greatsword over the years. She reveled in the slaughter and found a lot of inspiration in using the sword for its fundamental purpose.

"Swords are made for killing."

As a swordmaster and swordsman mech designer, how could she possibly deny this truth?

However, she also thought back on her motivation to protect her fellow sisters and Larkinsons. She not only fought to preserve her life, but also the lives of others such as Joshua, Ves, Dise and more.

"Swords can be used to protect."

Killing without reason was stupid and self-destructive. A swordmaster like Ketis should aspire to fight for a cause that was greater and more righteous than satisfying her bloodlust.

Ketis believed in both stances, but the problem right now was that they didn't always get along. Getting confronted by aliens that didn't necessarily deserve to get cut by her Bloodsinger had brought this conflict forward in an ugly fashion!

She realized that the time had come for her to make a decision. Was she more inclined to fight without getting entangled by distracting thoughts like justification, or was she a swordmaster who fought with honor?

Choosing the former would allow her to fight with fewer constraints.

Choosing the latter would give her a greater sense of purpose.

Both of them had their own pros and cons. Ketis was certain that she would experience drastic changes once she settled on her choice!

Chapter 3692 Clear Egg

After they finished their brief break, the Swordmaidens advanced closer to the center.

After batting aside numerous voribug attacks and forcing the surrender of dozens more pakklavons, they arrived in front of a massive closed gate.

It was large enough to allow for the entry of mechs.

Ketis briefly frowned as she studied the scans of the gate. The barrier was thick enough to withstand serious firepower. Her squad of elite Swordmaidens didn't bring enough firepower to open up a breach.

Fortunately, she didn't have to wait and call for a demolitionist to blast the gates open.

Her sword arm became firm again as she and Sharpie embodied the Annihilator Sword Style.

Under the impressed gazes of her fellow Swordmaidens, Ketis strode forward and used her sword to slice through the material of the gate with ease.

She would have exerted herself a lot more if she through to cut through so much resilient material in the past, but the consumption was much more manageable to her this time.

Soon enough, she succeeded in cutting open a rectangular cavity that was large enough for her group to pass through.

They entered a massive hall with a high ceiling and contained lots of different metal trees.

The Larkinsons had already learned that the pakklavons were fond of recreating their traditional living environment.

"All of the important stuff is above." Ketis said as she swept the area with her senses. "We should head closer to the center. Pay attention to ambushes."

Ketis and the Swordmaidens activated their boosters and their antigrav modules to rise from the deck.

Most of them wore medium armor which provided them with a balanced mix of armor and maneuverability. Their flight speeds weren't low. With the local gravity set at 0.76 g, the Swordmaidens were actually faster than usual!

Once they flew close to the top, they noticed that much of the central hall was devoid of pakklavons.

"Where are the voribugs? I can see plenty of chew marks, but it is odd we haven't been attacked by them for a while."

"Dead. Look down. The deck is littered with insect corpses."

"Don't forget that we have exterminated a lot of voribugs since we entered." Ketis pointed out. "They should be a lot less active at this time."

The chance of getting assaulted by a huge voribug swarm was low as long as there weren't any elder voribugs in the vicinity.

After a short flight, they neared the center of the massive chamber. The Swordmaidens spotted a large platform that contained numerous strange and colorful statues and structures.

Ketis was no stranger to this sight. Her eyes twitched as she figured out the significance of this place.

"Careful. This is a ceremonial or religious site. The pakklavons must value it a lot. This might even be their command center."

The Swordmaidens slowed down and readied their weapons. As long as the pakklavons launched a single attack, the soldiers would be ready to fight back as hard as possible!

The expected attack did not arrive, though. The human soldiers smoothly landed on the high platform and looked around with a mix of vigilance and curiosity.

The avians possessed a simple aesthetic style. Much of the civilian ship's architecture looked cheap and utilitarian. The aliens clearly did not value her before humans began to invade the Red Ocean.

Even so, they invested a lot of effort into turning this platform into some sort of shrine or ceremonial site.

The murals depicted alien letters that the Swordmaidens didn't even attempt to read.

Dozens of statues of noble-looking pakklavons were placed in a circle around the middle. Nobody knew whether they were gods or historical figures, but none of them cared about that detail at the moment.

"Contact."

They spotted a single pakklavon at the very center of the platform. The alien was clearly older than any of the other avians the Swordmaidens had encountered.

"Caww..." The alien calmly gestured towards the approaching humans.

The pakklavon on the platform possessed a different demeanor that Ketis instantly recognized from those who wielded authority.

This was a leader. Perhaps they might have encountered the alien individual in charge of the entire refugee fleet!

Compared to the other pakklatons they encountered, the leader bird's feathers were faded and drooping. A beautiful headdress made out of metal and the feathers of other avian species adorned the alien's head.

As Ketis stepped forward and stood in front of the larger and taller alien, she gazed into the pakklaton leader's eyes.

Despite their inability to interpret each other's words, they were able to read each other's gazes.

The alien's eyes were deep and conveyed a lot of sadness. The tragedy that had befallen his race and the people he was charged with protecting had left an enormous burden on his mind.

This was an alien who cared for his fellow pakklatons. Ketis could respect that sentiment.

"I'm sorry that it has come to this." She told the alien with her own words. "I am not comfortable with what has happened, but humanity will not stop until they conquer the Red Ocean."

The large alien looked down at the human soldiers that had conquered the evacuation ship and thumped the surface of the platform with his clawed foot.

"Caw caw caw caw..."

Ketis frowned. If Ves was here, he could probably figure out what this alien figure was saying.

It was too bad that she excelled in wielding swords. She could cut down this pakklaton leader easily enough, but what would that accomplish?

The figure had already taken the initiative to show that he didn't carry any weapons or suspicious equipment. The alien anticipated that the humans would reach this key location and did not prepare an ambush.

Although Ketis appreciated the willingness of the alien leader to greet her without pointing any laser guns at her, their inability to talk with each other made her feel lost.

Fortunately, the pakklaton leader did not insist on his attempt to talk with Ketis. The large sentient bird slowly turned around and reached out towards a cylindrical pillar with one of his limbs.

A small circular port opened up to reveal a transparent container that was shaped like an egg.

The alien carefully grasped the egg with his articulating wing arm and slowly drew it out before displaying it to his human guests.

A Swordmaiden that was performing scans gasped when she learned what the transparent egg-like container held.

"Phasewater! The egg is a container for phasewater!"

Everyone else grew a lot more excited all of a sudden.

Seeking out phasewater was one of their main purposes for boarding the evacuation ship!

However, the pakklavons were just as aware of the importance of this critical substance. They had already transferred all of the phasewater in their fleet to the original five evacuation ships.

Though it was a pity that four of them had already warped away, this final ship should definitely hold an unknown quantity of phasewater.

A part of the phasewater must undoubtedly be used to make the warp drive functional, but the aliens aboard the ship must definitely be holding onto a surplus.

Right now, Ketis suspected that the surplus was contained in the basketball-sized egg.

The container was made out of an odd material that completely isolated the spatial disturbances generated by this powerful exotic.

Not only that, it also contained alien technological components whose functions were unknown.

Ketis guessed that they helped with stabilizing the phasewater, but could easily ruin it if someone tampered with the container!

She didn't need to translate the alien leader's speech in order to figure out that he could erase the phasewater if this meeting did not go to his liking.

"How much phasewater have you detected?" She asked.

"According to our scans, that container must be holding around 2.375 kilograms of phasewater!"

Over 2 kg of phasewater!

From what Ketis had heard, 50 grams of phasewater was enough to form a minidrive.

Larger quantities were needed to form a starship-grade warp drive or superdrive, though she wasn't sure about the exact numbers. Different designs and specifications required different amounts of phasewater in order to work. First-class drives were especially hungry in this regard!

Even so, 2 kilograms of phasewater ought to be enough to provide basic warp capabilities to numerous modest-sized capital ships!

If the Larkinsons utilized all of the phasewater obtained from this evacuation ship to build warp drives or superdrives, then ships like the Spirit of Bentheim could become a safer and more mobile!

These were just the most obvious uses for phasewater. Humanity had already come up with other applications and the substance could certainly be used for more purposes.

For a moment, Ketis' mech designer side welled up. She became incredibly interested in experimenting on phasewater.

Though she had no clue how she could apply this strange material to her mechs, her intuition told her that such a versatile material could definitely be used to develop a stronger swordsman mech!

"Cawww..."

She forcibly calmed down her excitement and returned her attention to the large alien bird.

She slowly pointed her armored finger towards the transparent egg. "Are... you willing to surrender your phasewater?"

"Caww!"

From the moment Ketis conveyed her intentions, the old alien leader became agitated!

The pakklaton's grip on the egg grew tighter! This action caused the egg's internal components to flash in a concerning manner!

"Careful, Ketis! Our scans have detected rising activity from the egg. It might blow if this continues!"

Ketis saw fatalistic determination in the eyes of the old alien. She thought quickly. How could she guarantee that the aliens would hand over the phasewater intact?

Cut the avian leader down with her sword? She could have done that from the beginning, but she didn't because she became more reluctant to kill without reason.

She also figured that the alien leader had made precautions and rigged the egg container to blow if anything happened.

If she wanted to resolve this incident, she needed to employ other means.

Ketis slowly let go of her Bloodsinger, causing her sword to fly in mid-air.

She subsequently activated her suit projector and displayed footage of the last few encounters she had with the pakklavons.

Each of them clearly showed that Ketis had tried her best to subdue the pakklavons without killing them. There was no point where she and her Swordmaidens attacked any pakklavon that did not resist!

"We do not intend to wipe out your race." She held her armored hand against her chestplate and slightly opened up her will to the alien leader. "You have my promise that I shall do my best to keep them alive."

Her force of will, which was ordinary sharp, had grown a lot more restrained as she conveyed her words.

The alien was able to sense the sincerity in her words. An individual who managed to grow accumulated a lot of wisdom, so the pakklavon leader easily figured out the gist of her meaning.

After a dozen seconds had passed, the alien made a judgment about Ketis.

"Cawww..."

The alien leader slowly loosened his grip on the egg container.

When Ketis reached out to grasp the object, the intelligent bird did not exhibit any negative reactions this time.

Once she firmly took hold of the container that stored 2.375 kilograms of pure phasewater, she felt a lot more vindicated!

She would have never been able to negotiate such an easy handover if she hadn't been able to show the footage of her treating the pakklavons with mercy.

Just as she was about to convey her gratitude, the pakklavon leader abruptly spread his wings and uttered a loud and majestic bird cry!

"CAAAAWWWWW!"

All of the alien's feathers spontaneously burst into flames!

"Fall back!"

The Swordmaidens hastily boosted backwards! The soldiers even took the initiative to surround Ketis. She had become a lot more important now that she had gotten her hands on a phasewater container!

Chapter 3693 Salvage Handling

After a long day, the Battle of Orange Tulip had fully come to an end at this point.

Under the rays of the orange dwarf star, the surviving alien vessels no longer posed a significant threat to the human attackers.

All forms of pakklaton opposition had been neutralized one way or another. The voribugs were all suppressed to a tolerable level and any explosive risk factors had fallen firmly under the control of the human boarding parties.

Different from last battles, the cleanup operation was a lot more complicated this time.

A lot of ships of the expeditionary fleet incurred serious hull damage to their bow sections.

While the space worthiness of the capital ships was still intact, the vessels still needed a lot of repair work in order to prevent subsequent enemies from exploiting the loopholes in their defensive coverage.

Another complication that the Golden Skull Alliance had to deal with was how to take advantage of the spoils they gained.

The pakklaton ships were not particularly high-end. They were built with serviceable bulk materials and did not contain anything special aside from their warp drives and various goods that they managed to take in when they started their flight.

"We managed to free up a lot of cargo space when we made a pit stop at Davute, but we'll fill all of our cargo holds if we attempt to stuff all of the valuable materials that we can salvage from the alien wrecks." Gavin's projection reported to Ves. "Even then, we'll be leaving a lot more materials behind. We'd be throwing away thousands of MTA credits worth of salvage."

Ves recalled the mountain of debt hanging over the Larkinson Clan. Even if he had to split the salvage with his alliance partners, he still didn't want to let go of a potential opportunity to earn a lot of money!

"I don't want to return to Davute right away after filling up our cargo holds. It seems wasteful to go back just a short time after we started a journey to the deep frontier. I

don't want other scavengers to get their hands on all of this salvage for cheap. Do you have any suggestions on what we should do, Benny?"

"I was waiting for you to ask that question." The personal assistant smirked. "Compared to before, our situation has changed. Our circle of friends is no longer limited to the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan. We have vastly expanded our business network after forming the Open Consortium. There are numerous consortium partner that we can call upon to dispatch a fleet to this star system and bring all of our plunder back to Davute."

Ves' eyes lit up! Gavin was right!

If the Larkinsons couldn't trust anyone, they would have little choice but to salvage the most valuable materials themselves while leaving much of the bulkier materials behind.

At best, they might contact a third party to sell the salvage at a steep discount, thereby missing out on a huge amount of profits!

However, if they could sell or entrust the salvage from the pakklaton refugee fleet to a consortium partner or two, they could form a win-win arrangement where the Golden Skull Alliance could earn a lot more money without doing anything by themselves!

"Contact Chairwoman Calsie of the Open Consortium. Work out a deal where our clan can maximize our profits. How much money do you think we can earn from this arrangement?"

"I can't say yet, boss. It depends on how many valuable exotics we choose to add to our reserves and how much the alien ships are actually worth. We haven't completed our surveys on them so we don't know what materials they contain and what other valuables they might have such as artworks, databases and so on. Furthermore, ships that are more intact and functional are substantially more valuable than broken pieces of wreckage."

"Can you give me an estimate? Just give me an idea."

"Hm, I estimate that our share of the profits should range from 6,000 to 14,000 MTA credits."

"That much?!"

Gavin smiled. "The pakklaton race might not be that impressive to us, but their refugee fleet is still formidable. Few other pioneering organizations would have been able to fight it head on and take it down without suffering too many losses. Don't forget that we beat pakklavons a lot easier than usual due to their voribug infestation. The damage they inflicted onto the alien ships has substantially reduced their value. The fact that

they are still gnawing the ships from the inside will impose a lot of burdens on whoever takes over prizes, so we have to lower their value even further."

The maximum possible value of the alien refugee fleet would have been a lot higher if it was completely intact, but Ves did not mind that. The poor conditions of the pakklaton ships had made it much easier to defeat them all. The voribugs had truly helped the Golden Skull Alliance out this time.

Once they finished their discussion on how to handle the salvage, Gavin brought up a more delicate topic.

"You told our boarding troops to take prisoners whenever possible. They weren't always able to do that, but they managed to capture a lot of pakklaton prisoners, mostly civilians aboard the evacuation ship. How... how do you wish to handle them, boss?"

That was a good question. Though Ves did not wish to perpetrate a senseless slaughter, he could not easily dump a lot of pakklaton prisoners on a random ship and call it a day.

"How many did we capture?"

"Currently, our forces have captured a total of 43,643 juvenile and adult pakklatons. We also found egg chambers where the pakklatons have stored 112,340 of their eggs."

Another set of massive numbers! This time, the figures were far more serious. Ves could not easily dispose of these prisoners after he had ordered his men to take them prisoner.

"Eggs, benny?"

"Apparently, the eggs are stored in a way that stretches out their incubation time to an extreme degree, which effectively prolongs the hatching by many years. Chicks won't come out of the eggs unless we want to, so we don't have to worry about feeding an extra hundred-thousand mouths."

"Are they edible?" Ves casually asked.

Gavin violently coughed. "The pakklatons are sentient aliens! They are not chickens, and their eggs are not like the ones you eat for breakfast. Eating them is almost like cannibalism!"

"Whoa there. Geez. If I knew you would react so strongly to it, I wouldn't have asked this question. Never mind, then."

Ves wasn't really being serious anyway. There was no logical reason for him to eat pakklatons when ordinary poultry could also do the job.

The other Larkinsons might not agree, though. He was not blind to the fact that the Swordmaidens and many other clansmen did not view eating sentient alien flesh as taboo.

"Put the aliens aside for now." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I'm not sure the Blinding Banshee is large enough to hold them all and I'm sure we need to make a lot of special accommodations to hold them for more than a week. We also need to figure out what to do with them after this. We can't just give them back their freedom nor execute them out of hand."

Ketis had made the issue of dealing with the survivors a lot more complicated than normal. He already foresaw plenty of future headaches.

His talk with Gavin ended shortly afterwards. The situation was still changing and the Golden Skull Alliance still needed to tally all of the loot. Everyone would have a much better idea on what to do with their spoils once they knew exactly what they got out of this battle.

The Larkinson Clan and the Open Consortium worked quickly. Calsie had gotten in touch with a couple of consortium partners and eventually helped with forming a salvage agreement with two different companies.

Murphy & Sons expressed a lot of interest in getting its hands on the more intact and working alien starships.

As a shipbuilding company, its shipwrights were constantly on the lookout for alien ships. Even if alien shipbuilding standards were more superior, the alien ships were much more refined in their use of warp drives. The vessels were also native to the Red Ocean, which meant they made good use of materials that were abundant in the Red Ocean.

The Murphies could derive a lot of insight and inspiration from studying the alien vessels!

They might even choose to renovate them into more human starships!

However, Murphy & Sons wasn't capable of bringing home the salvage by itself.

In order to perform the bulk of the salvage and transportation work, a rather boring-sounding company known as the RTG Group offered its assistance.

The RTG Group was a company that specialized in various spaceborn activities. It not only specialized in salvaging, but also achieved success in space construction.

According to Calsie, Murphy & Sons and RTG Group had already grown close to each other. The latter group had offered its services to help the shipbuilding company restore its damaged shipyard.

In the future, once Murphy & Sons decided to build a second shipyard, RTG Group would readily be available to take on this heavy responsibility.

This was just one of the many bonds of cooperation that had emerged since the Open Consortium came into existence.

Ves no longer paid attention to this, though. He had grown tense and excited when he heard that Ketis and her group of Swordmaiden soldiers returned from the alien evacuation ship.

The swordmaster couldn't return to the Spirit of Bentheim willy-nilly this time. The risk of bringing tiny voribugs was not great, but it only took a single moment of carelessness to turn the factory ship into a new nest for the space bugs!

The Larkinsons employed a lot of detection and sterilization procedures before they were certain that Ketis was clean.

Only then was she allowed to step aboard the Spirit of Bentheim again.

She did not linger in the hangar bay but moved all the way to design lab where a lot of mech designers awaited her return.

"Welcome back, ma'am!"

The hundreds of assistant mech designers all crowded closer in order to observe the clear egg that was in the swordmaster's armored grasp.

Once Ketis stopped in front of Ves, she raised the egg-shaped container and presented it to the patriarch.

"Is this what you wanted, Ves?"

"Yes."

"Was it worth it?" Ketis asked.

"You know my answer." He replied as he looked at her with a knowing expression. "I am aware that not everyone in the clan agrees with me. I think you should figure out your own answer to your question."

Ves reached out and tried to take the container that stored over 2 kilograms of phasewater from her armored grasp.

She didn't let go, though.

"Promise me, Ves." She said.

"Promise what?"

"Promise me that you will sincerely uphold the promise that I have given to the aliens. I don't want to see your prisoners 'disappearing' yet again. Not with these pakklavons."

Ves began to frown. "Do you know what you're asking? You're contravening the policies of the Big Two. Look, I don't mind keeping some of them alive, but you're just asking for trouble if you want to preserve such a massive alien population."

"Then we'll deal with it. Just do it, Ves. Don't make me break my promise."

"...Fine. I'll figure something out." He grumbled.

She finally let go of the egg container, allowing Ves to take possession of this valuable bounty!

"Meow...?"

Lucky had already floated close to it. The cat looked confused as he sniffed the clear container. Whatever it was made from suppressed all of the instability associated with pure phasewater to an impressive degree!

"Are you thirsty, Lucky?"

"Meow..."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

Lucky looked a bit frightened. His body drew back from the egg container.

"Meow meow..."

The cat wasn't sure he could even ingest phasewater!

Chapter 3694 Source of Strength

An exhausted Joshua embraced his wife as she returned to their grand stateroom.

"I was worried about you." He said as he kissed her cheek. "Anything could have happened on that alien ship. What if those crazy pakklavons blew up their power reactors and propellants all at once? Swordmaster or not, there is no way you can survive an attack that can engulf an entire vessel!"

Ketis huffed. "Don't underestimate me. My intuition is just as sharp as yours. Before heading off to battle, I made sure to study the scans and blueprint of the evacuation ship closely. The pakklaton civilian-grade power reactors aren't that volatile. Just like human power reactors, they are built with many safeguards. A single engineer can't just blow them up by introducing a few faults. You need to deactivate a lot of safeties and deliberately create cascading faults. It takes a lot of time and effort to perform this kind of work."

Her words did not reassure Joshua that much.

"What if you're wrong, honey?"

"Hey, I never complain when you are racing off to battle. Have you ever imagined what I am feeling whenever I see you fight a tough opponent?"

The expert pilot caressed her powerful arm. "I do. I do think about what you must be going through. I am much more confident about my ability to get back home, though. Unlike you, my mech is my armor. Not only that, it is also an expert mech, which can amplify all of my strengths. As long as I am piloting the Everchanger, I am confident that I can resist a warship strike. The same doesn't apply to you. Your combat armor is tough but it can still be broken with enough brute force."

Ketis sighed and withdrew from her embrace. "The same applies to you if you face a battleship one day. Not even first-class ace mechs can survive a direct impact from such an immensely destructive vessel, you know. We all have our weaknesses. That shouldn't prevent us from turning away from our vocations. You are an expert pilot and I am a swordmaster. Both of our strengths are far above the norm. Our responsibilities to the Larkinson Clan are also heavier as a consequence."

They had talked about this topic a lot of times so they did not linger over it for too long. Both of them were strong-willed individuals so it wasn't easy for either of them to budge from their stances.

"You're different now." Joshua said as both of them headed to the bedroom in order to get ready for bed. Both of them needed the rest after exerting themselves so much. "Your will... it's different."

Though Ketis normally restrained her force of will by storing Sharpie in her Bloodsinger, her mood and demeanor were still different from usual.

Normally, she was overflowing with confidence and faced the future with an optimistic mindset. It was as if she thought that she could easily smash aside any obstacle that barred her way into becoming the ultimate swordsman mech designer!

Compared to her previous self, the Ketis that returned from the evacuation ship was like a soldier who returned home from a battle that did not end in a clear victory.

As the pair changed into their pajamas and slipped into their luxurious queen-sized bed, Joshua turned towards his wedded partner.

"I can guess what you must be going through right now. Would you like to talk about it?" He softly asked.

"Hm. You must be laughing at me right now." Ketis turbulently said as she closed her eyes. "Before, I ridiculed you for having a soft heart, but now I find myself in the same circumstance."

Her husband slid closer and carefully embraced her firm waist. "I would never do such a thing. I care about you, Ketis. It's exactly because I have gone through this phase myself that I am aware how badly you are affected."

Ketis sighed again. Her husband was too good at reading her mood.

"You're right. I am entertaining similar doubts as yours."

She briefly explained her moral dilemma and how she was wavering between wielding a merciful sword or a merciless sword.

"I can understand your desire to be merciful, but why would you want to go for the other option?" Joshua asked in confusion.

"Don't take the meaning of the words too literally. They're just a way for me to contextualize my choices. To answer your question, the merciless sword is what best describes my old self. Ten years ago, I was a typical Swordmaiden, you know. We killed people whether they were innocent or not and did stuff that I am not proud of if I look back on those days. Joining the Larkinson Clan has changed that. Although I often feel that all of this emphasis on honor and rules is constricting, I can't help but embrace these new ideals. My life is much better than before. I don't want to go back to watching my back all the time."

Joshua leaned in and pressed his face in her hair. "Isn't your choice simple, then? It sounds to me like you enjoy being a Larkinson. I would love it if you embrace our clan's ideals even more. I think you would be a lot more pleasant to be around if you don't think about killing all the time."

"You're not thinking deep enough." Ketis frowned. "I wouldn't be in a dilemma if there was an obvious choice. To me, a merciless sword might not sound as noble as the other one, but it is one that has always kept me alive whenever I need it the most. What about honor? What about principles? Just look at Ves. He can be a bastard at times, but I don't deny his ability to survive in situations where he should be dead. This is one of the reasons he keeps getting away with risks that keep putting him in danger to begin with. He cheats whenever possible."

Venerable Joshua scrunched his face. "So let me get this straight. You are undecided whether you want to become more like Jannzi or more like Ves, right?"

"I wouldn't exactly put it that way, you dummy. Those are extreme examples and I am trying to be neither of them. I am merely thinking whether I should fight with or without scruples."

"I see. I faced a similar choice as yours. Even now, I am still a bit ambivalent towards killing aliens. They're not human, but they are still alive. I prefer not to kill them all. I'm glad you insisted on taking the pakklavons prisoner. I can breathe a bit easier knowing that we haven't tarnished our honor."

Ketis softly chuckled. "There are those who do not see humanity's actions in the Red Ocean as dishonorable. Aliens are the enemy, you see. If they aren't threats today, they will be in the future. The only way for us to ensure they will never rise up and overthrow our civilization is to crush them while we still have the upper hand. Have you truly reconciled yourself with the status quo?"

The expert pilot's force of will fluctuated as she asked that question. It was evident that he was still conflicted to an extent.

"To be honest, I am not reconciled." He whispered in her ear. "I think we have gone way too far in killing every alien we come across because of perceived threats. However, a single expert pilot like me cannot do anything about this. I'm too small in the face of the MTA and CFA. I can only choose to compromise and accept our current reality. I won't stop other humans from doing what they want to the aliens, but I will not condone their actions either."

"That doesn't sound like a strong conviction."

"It doesn't have to be. I'm aware it sounds like an excuse to you, but as long as it works, I shouldn't be picky. I am only qualified to pursue change when I have grown. I shouldn't overestimate my capabilities and try to impose my will on everyone while I am just an expert pilot."

His stance sounded highly realistic and betrayed a sense of helplessness on his part. There was no way he could possibly impose his will on the entirety of human civilization.

He would have to advance to god pilot at the very least in order to have his voice heard!

Ketis understood his stance and frowned because of that. She did not wish to judge him, but she felt that he had taken a less optimal solution because his more ideal ones were not practical.

As a mech designer, Ketis was not a stranger to this approach. She had to balance out her dreams with lots of compromises and less than desirable solutions due to the constraints of physics, resource availability, production capabilities and budget.

While this was a normal condition in mech design, she instinctively resisted the need to make the same sort of compromises when it came to her will and conviction.

She thought back on what she knew about transcendent warriors.

According to Ves, the basis of a swordmaster and an expert pilot was to use their unnaturally high willpower to distort the rules that governed reality.

In other words, it did not matter whether something was physically impossible. As long as she believed in something hard enough, she could grow to a point where reality bent to her will instead of the other way around!

Of course, she was different from others. She was a mech designer who studied the rules of reality. When she advanced to Journeyman, she could begin to infiltrate and subvert the physical laws, but only on a smaller scale.

The outcome was similar, but the methods were radically different.

A mech designer respected the laws of reality. An expert pilot smashed them apart if they got in the way.

It was this duality that gave Ketis a much more profound insight into the two approaches.

She knew that if she was by herself, she could not possibly develop a will that was strong enough to bend reality by force.

She was only able to become a swordmaster due to the existence of Sharpie. Her living sword intent was a bug-like existence that was both a part of herself but also possessed an ego of its own.

Ketis stiffened a bit.

She fell into a mental trap. While her current problems appeared to be related to her own conflicting morality, she recalled that her swordmaster powers actually came from Sharpie.

Any problems related to her swordmaster progression had to involve Sharpie as well!

Ever since Ves brought life to her sword intent, Ketis never paid too much attention to Sharpie's own will and desires.

It was an extension of herself after all. She always assumed that Sharpie's desires were actually a reflection of her own desires.

What if this assumption wasn't true?

What if Sharpie possessed aspirations that weren't necessarily identical to her own? It sounded disturbing, but Ketis didn't think her guess was wrong.

That was because she was a mech designer while Sharpie was the true swordmaster.

"Do you feel better now?" Joshua asked as he sensed that she had grown calmer.

"I do. I have an idea on how to resolve my problem." She replied. "No matter what sword I will end up wielding, I will try my best to stay true to myself. Both my selves."

This was the first time she thought about Sharpie as more than just a limited part of herself that had coincidentally been empowered with an ego of its own. What if it could be more than just an assistant in her mind?

All kinds of ideas swirled in her mind as she faded into slumber.

She needed to delve deeper into all her facets. She needed to know more about herself before she could make a proper choice on the direction of her swordsmanship.

She did not want to regret her decision.

Chapter 3695 New Relevance

The Golden Skull Alliance struggled to secure their spoils. Even after they had taken control over all of the important systems of the captured pakklaton ships, the vessels continued to deteriorate as the voribugs kept gnawing on everything.

The soldiers tried their best to detect and exterminate any concentration of voribugs, but there were way too many juvenile bugs that slipped away.

There were also cases where one or two voribugs remained undetected because they lingered around ship components that produced a lot of activity. The relatively weak lifesigns of an immature voribug would get drowned out by more powerful energy emissions of important systems.

Even if the Larkinsons shut down all of the systems, all of the residual heat and energy inside the alien vessels wouldn't dissipate immediately. The damn voribugs seemed to possess a vague instinct that encountered them to find the most annoying hiding spots on a starship.

"We can't go on like this." General Verle's projection reported to Ves. "The infestation levels on the captured alien starships are too high. The internal damage generated by the voribugs along with the external damage that our mechs have inflicted on the hulls has made it much easier for the voribugs to hide and move around."

Ves paused his examination of the pakklaton egg-shaped phasewater container. He frowned as he digested what he heard.

"I thought we stood a better chance of cleansing the starships. We're stronger and more advanced than the pakklatons. Our sensors are better and we aren't burdened by the necessity of keeping the ships operational. Have you tried taking advantage of our glows? I noticed from the recent battle that our Ferocious Piranhas are surprisingly effective in messing with the bugs."

That was indeed a welcome discovery. Before this point, Ves had always treated his glows as a means to affect humans.

Whether they were targeted towards friendlies or enemies, he never really thought about their effects on non-human entities.

In fact, the non-human opponents he fought against in the past were so big and powerful that he never really thought that his suppressive glows could make any difference.

The dark gods were so spiritually powerful that they possessed glows of their own.

The Uranus was so massive and powerful that glows could not have impacted his crazed bestial mentality in the slightest.

The Titania was so big and massive that mechs needed to breach its thick exterior at first in order to get to its control organs.

However, what if he employed his glows against smaller and weaker opponents?

While Ves figured that not every kind of glow worked against the voribugs, the recent battle had definitely concluded that the disorientation effect produced by the Ferocious Piranhas were highly effective!

Unlike human mech pilots, the voribugs were too young and mentally underdeveloped to resist this effect!

Even the so-called 'elder' voribugs were just insects that lived long enough to eat enough food to grow to their size and strength. They were a lot more powerful in a physical and biological sense but it appeared their mental development hadn't caught up to that of a highly-trained mech pilot!

Witnessing how his living mechs messed up the voribugs opened up a new door for Ves.

His mechs provided a lot more utility than he initially thought!

Suppressive glows might not always work well against human opponents, but there were lots of alien races whose minds and will were significantly worse. Their mentalities were 'weaker' which meant they became a lot more susceptible to the presence of strong spiritual entities.

This was a fundamental difference in life phases!

This was especially the case in the Red Ocean where lots of humans came in contact with different alien races.

Back in the Milky Way, humans did not need to think about fighting against alien forces.

Ves was the same. He had spent way too much time on visualizing his products in fights against the opponents he had fought against in the past.

That was fine if he stayed in the old galaxy, but he needed to revise his mental models now that he had moved to the new frontier.

Now that he had begun to think in this new direction, he understood that he could offer a lot more to his customers than he thought!

The natives of the Red Ocean probably never encountered anything like his glows. If they did, then someone would have pointed out the similarities between his solutions and an exotic application of alien technology.

This meant that the aliens probably lacked countermeasures against his solution.

Unless an alien race managed to dig up B-stone or develop a new innovation that blocked glow effects, they would remain vulnerable to his problems depending on their racial mental strength!

The only surefire way for voribugs and other susceptible alien races to prevent glows from screwing them over was to keep their distance from living mechs.

Ves calmed down a bit. A small and ridiculous-looking race like nunsers might be susceptible, but they were practically impossible to affect because many of them utilized warships that were much more powerful than the half-crippled vessels of the pakklaton refugee fleet!

His mechs would get blasted before they could even get close enough!

"Sir?" General Verle's projection asked. He was a busy man who did not have much time to spare.

"Ah." Ves returned his mind to the immediate situation. "What did you just say?"

"I replied to you that we have attempted to make use of our Ferocious Piranhas. While the mechs have been effective at driving away the voribugs from the exterior of the starships, their glows cannot reach the whole interior of the ships. The only result we have achieved is to compress the living space of the voribugs."

It was like flooding the outer circle of an island. The insects could still make do with half as much dry land!

"That does sound like a problem." Ves frowned. "It looks like you have an alternative in mind."

"We do. We just came up with the idea of employing the Penitent Sister battle formation to... exterminate all of the bugs at once. We have already seen how effective it can be against the elder voribugs. We will probably need Venerable Joshua's help to direct the energy attack and make sure it comprehensively sweeps through every corner of the infected alien starships."

"...You're asking me if you can use a battle formation, a trump card designed to change the outcome of major battles, to delouse our prizes?"

General Verle apologetically shrugged. "It is the most convenient and effective solution that we can think of. The sooner we can pull this off, the less we have to worry about the ships falling apart. We have been informed that it will take a couple of weeks for a professional salvage fleet to arrive in Orange Tulip. The voribugs will remain idle during this time."

Though his words made sense, Ves did not like the idea in the slightest.

"I don't like to lose money either, but this is going way overboard. It's like using a nuclear warhead to bake a cake! It sounds wrong to employ the Superior Mother for something as banal as pest control."

"The voribugs are more than simple pests, sir. They are a scourge that can destroy entire ships and planets if they grow out of control. Killing them by any means is a worthy cause."

Ves sighed. "You're right, but that doesn't necessarily mean we should grab the biggest hammer in our toolbox. The solution that you've mentioned is way too crude. There's trees, wildlife, bioponics, organic products and other stuff inside. All of them will be affected in unknown ways if they get swept by the same indiscriminate attack."

"Then what do you have in mind, sir?"

"Hmmm." Ves thought for a moment. "Start by making use of the Everchanger. It can imitate the glow of all of my other living mechs. It can also amplify the range of its glow across a large distance. Try taking advantage of these properties and see how that works out. If you position all of the alien ships around the expert mech, Joshua will only need to do this once to affect all of the voribugs."

"Glows won't kill them, though." Verle retorted. "The insects will only go crazy for as long as Venerable Joshua can maintain this effect. Once he stops, the voribugs will probably go back to eating up our prize ships."

"Try and experiment with different glows. This is a good opportunity to see how voribugs and more generally non-humans can be affected by them. Maybe I can develop a specialized anti-voribug solution from what we are able to learn from these experiments."

Ves and General Verle continued to discuss the potential applications of glows towards aliens.

Once General Verle ended the call so that he could arrange the 'experiments,' Ves finally turned his attention back to the phasewater egg container.

For safety's sake, Ves did not dare to get close to it. Even though the container was highly effective in isolating the dimensional disturbances produced by gathering so much pure phasewater together, he had no idea how solid it was and whether it was up to the task.

A quantity of over 2 kilograms of phasewater was no joke!

In fact, the expeditionary fleet managed to capture even more phasewater. The pakklatons had stuffed a lot of extra phasewater inside the evacuation ship's warp drive.

Retrieving all of that phasewater was a delicate operation so Ves wouldn't know until a few days later how much of the substance could be recovered.

Even if the phasewater would have to be split between every alliance partner, the Larkinsons would still come away with a generous bounty!

As Ves resumed his examination on the egg container, his cat acted a bit oddly ever since Ketis handed it over.

"Meow..."

Lucky did not dare to get close to the object. The contents of the container exerted a huge amount of threat towards him! He did not even dare to employ his phasing abilities at this distance!

"Meow meow."

"You're right. I need to do something about this bomb. This container is designed to do more than isolate all of that phasewater."

Ves had studied it for a while now. He not only gained more confidence in the storage properties of the container, but also confirmed that it could do more than store this dangerous substance.

The alien circuitry and components apparently helped with regulating temperature, pressure, radiation and other factors that could affect the stability of the phasewater.

Just like regular water, phasewater could come in different states of matter.

It could be frozen like an icicle and it could be warmed up until it turned into steam.

The only difference was that its freezing point was way lower and its boiling point was way higher. This was also why most natural deposits of phasewater were all liquid.

In any case, the egg container did not have to work that hard in order to keep the phasewater inside in a stable form of liquid.

What Ves was actually concerned about was how this alien tech could also be used to make phasewater less stable!

When the phasewater inside the container boiled into a gas, it would expand in an explosive manner, thereby turning the egg container into a bomb that could deal great damage to its surroundings!

If that wasn't bad enough, phasewater in gaseous form was a lot more active, producing stronger dimensional disturbances that could destroy entire ships if the quantities of phasewater were great enough!

"I need to get this phasewater out of this alien container."

He had to figure out a way to extract the phasewater from this device without triggering anything dangerous. He also had to find an alternative way to store this volatile substance.

Ves turned to Lucky. "Hey, would you like to take a sip of phasewater?"

"MEOW!"

The cat jumped back as if he was scalded by hot water!

Chapter 3696 Ves the Exterminator

The suggestion to utilize the Everchanger to expose the voribugs to different glows led to a ridiculous spectacle.

The Larkinsons carefully towed the crippled alien vessels in a spherical formation.

The Everchanger then proceeded to enter the sphere in preparation for the experiment.

In order to make sure that the expert mech did not do any further harm than necessary, the Larkinsons had to relocate all of the pakklaton prisoners and unhatched eggs from the ships.

For now, the Larkinsons decided to confine the prisoners to a couple of the larger biomes inside the Dragon's Den.

The bioresearch vessel was not meant to function as a prison, but she was designed to carry a myriad of alien exobeasts.

These creatures may be large and dangerous so the biomes had to be sturdy enough to prevent them from breaking out and wreaking havoc inside the rest of the Dragon's Den like an overdone space horror drama.

It was easy enough for the researchers to free up the necessary biomes and adjust their environmental conditions to make them livable for the pakklaton race.

The exobiologists tuned the air, temperature, humidity, radiation and other variables to keep the avian aliens comfortable.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute even dug out the plants and other flora inside the alien vessels and proceeded to transplant them into the specific biomes.

The goal was to give the pakklavons the illusion that they were residing on a location on their home planet. The only fault was that they were prisoners rather than guests. The Larkinsons could not possibly hand them back their freedom and tech.

The most difficult part of this logistical operation was to transport tens of thousands of pakklaton prisoners to the Dragon's Den without bringing in a single voribug!

This caused the operation to become a lot more laborious than normal, but once the subdued occupants of the alien vessels relocated to their temporary new accommodation, the Everchanger could finally begin.

"Good morning, Joshua." Ves said as he monitored the situation from the Spirit of Bentheim. "Today, we are attempting to study the effects of glows on the voribugs. To do this, we will be using your expert mech to cycle through all of the design spirits on the list. Do you understand?"

The expert pilot nodded. "I do. I hope we find a glow that can work."

"You don't have to amplify your glows just yet. Start by flying to the coordinates I'm giving you. There's a cluster of voribugs that is fairly close to the exterior that we can easily monitor."

When the Everchanger was in position, Ves instructed Joshua to alternate the design spirit of his expert mech.

He also issued an extra instruction.

"I think you have noticed that all of the design spirits on the top are supportive. We're not interested in making friends with the voribugs, so make sure you consider them hostile. Our goal here today is to find an effective countermeasure against this species. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't worry. I have already briefed the design spirits. They all know what we are asking of them. Your Everchanger should be able to call upon them easily enough."

The session began at this point. The Everchanger did not possess a native design spirit on its own, so the expert mech could channel all of them with decent compatibility.

Ves found it fascinating to observe how switching the design spirits changed his overall impression of the Everchanger.

The physical mech remained the same, but its aura and demeanor fluctuated with every switch.

In one moment, it inspired duty and loyalty from any friendlies affected by the glow.

In the next moment, it exuded a sense of bravado and manliness that Ves did not traditionally fit with the masterwork mech.

Witnessing how effortlessly the Everchanger adjusted from design spirit to design spirit made Ves proud of his work. This living mech was truly the champion of his design philosophy! No other machine was as versatile and all-encompassing as the machine he specially designed for Joshua.

It was too bad that much of the results were relatively boring so far. The glows exuded from relatively harmless design spirits such as the Solemn Guardian and the Golden Cat did not affect the voribugs in any noticeable fashion.

The stupid insects still multiplied and fed on the pakklaton starship as usual.

"Their reaction is no different from that of other hostile humans." Ves noted. "So far, the results haven't defied my expectations."

That could be both good and bad depending on the circumstances.

To be honest, experiments where everything happened completely according to expectations were boring to him. He enjoyed a bit of excitement and wanted to elicit new and different reactions from the voribugs.

The experimental session finally started to get interesting once the Everchanger channeled the more interesting design spirits.

Ves leaned closer as he paid greater attention to a projected feed that displayed a cluster of voribugs.

The insects behaved a little more agitated than usual as they came under the influence of different glows. Even though the effects so far weren't all that great, the voribugs didn't appreciate getting messed around so many times.

"Switch to the Superior Mother in her death aspect."

The Superior Mother was a special design spirit. Having designed with the six phases of existence in mind, she essentially came in six different flavors.

Of them all, other phases didn't do so much against the creatures.

Sure, her life and godhood aspect made the voribugs a little more vigorous, but the other ones did not produce any significant changes.

It was impossible for the Superior Mother's death aspect to kill others when she was merely channeling her presence through the medium of a mech.

A glow was a passive power phenomenon while the attack launched by a battle formation was an active power phenomenon.

The latter could produce much more drastic effects, but the cost and effort required to make it possible was also greater!

As a result, when the Everchanger adopted this specific glow, the voribugs only became a bit more lethargic. They slowed down their actions by up to 10 percent, which was hardly meaningful.

"I see." Ves hummed.

He already formed a preliminary conclusion on the effects of different glows towards the voribugs.

Compared to humans, they were a lot more simple-minded and driven by their instincts.

More erudite design spirits such as Ylvaine and the Illustrious One were not able to affect the voribugs in a significant fashion. The creatures were just too bestial for subtlety to work.

If that was the case, then more drastic glows should produce stronger results.

"Try out Lufa's glow." He instructed Venerable Joshua.

He looked forward to this part of the session.

When the Everchanger began to adopt a pure and tranquil glow, the voribugs finally exhibited a greater difference.

They slowed down a lot this time!

The voribugs did not possess a lot of thoughts in whatever passed for their minds, but trying to blank them out successfully reduced their activity levels.

"The voribugs are resisting the glow!"

The creatures were sensitive towards danger. Once the voribugs realized they were subjected to an undesirable effect, they tried to move away from the Everchanger.

Still, Ves was happy enough with these results. He learned that he could leverage his angelic design spirit as a pest control solution.

"I think I can earn a lot of money if I design a mech that specializes in repelling voribugs."

Seeing how much damage a voribug infestation could do to a starship caused him to recognize the importance of such a solution.

Even a single copy of this hypothetical mech could make a difference!

As long as it was stationed close to critical sections such as engineering, the voribugs would not want to go to that place.

Though Ves theorized that the voribugs might be able to resist Lufa's glow and push through anyway, the insects normally wouldn't choose to do so unless they already hollowed out the rest of a starship.

"It's like the difference between staying in a comfy home and going outside to brave a freezing storm."

He quickly came up with a preliminary mech design concept that could provide the greatest value for the least amount of cost.

"The mech doesn't have to be too big or expensive!"

While normal mechs were susceptible to getting swarmed by voribugs, his anti-bug model did not have to worry about this problem as much. A glow like the one that the Everchanger was exuding was the best form of defense against these insects!

"In case any voribugs are desperate enough to attack it anyway, this mech should possess enough firepower to defend itself."

A light shotgun should do the trick. The weapon didn't need to be large because most voribugs weren't all that tough. In fact, most mech weapons were actually overkill against these vermin.

A lighter weapon was not only more efficient against this kind of opponent, it also allowed his mech to carry more shotgun rounds.

Ves could go a step further and make the mech as small and light as possible!

By making it smaller, Ves could not only save on a lot of costly materials, but also enable the machine to squeeze into smaller spaces.

This was especially relevant for starships and space stations where the interior was always cramped!

"A light mech? No, that might be too big. How about an ultralight mech?"

Mechs varied considerably in size. Light mechs were generally the smallest ones to enter a typical battlefield but there were even smaller machines than that. Mech designers could be highly creative when they needed to shrink their products to an even greater extent.

Still, at that point, mechs became so small that they lost far too many scale advantages. They could only function as cannon fodder if they ever dared to take part in a mech battle.

"An ultralight mech should still be fine if it is solely used to deal with voribug infestations."

If Ves designed this mech, he could change the way that humanity dealt with voribugs and other comparable pests!

While he was sure that humanity had already developed a lot more effective detection, repelling and killing solutions, the key to his own mech design was that it could be a lot cheaper and more economical!

"I don't necessarily have to make it a second-class mech. A third-class mech will do, just like my Sanctuary Treatment Edition models!"

Ves was a bit reluctant to go that cheap, though. The voribugs may be weak, but the power of a third-class mech might not be enough to guarantee the safety of the mech.

He resolved to think about that later. The current session hadn't ended.

After he was finished with observing the effect of Lufa's base glow, Ves instructed Joshua to mimic the glows of the Aspect of Healing and the Aspect of Rationality.

As expected, the glow from the Aspect of Healing didn't debilitate the voribugs in any fashion.

What Ves didn't expect was that the glow from the Aspect of Rationality did not produce any noticeable differences from Lufa's base glow.

Other than slowing down and repelling the voribug, the rationality-oriented glow did not appear to make them smarter.

"I see."

Ves skipped the glow of the Aspect of Transcendence. He did not dare to unveil it in such an open place, let alone subject lots of voribugs to this dangerous glow!

This was the only glow that Ves had invented that could actually kill people. He didn't think it would work against the voribugs due to their simplistic thought processes.

What if he was wrong, though?

What if he could not only make a lot of voribugs explode, but also cause a tiny proportion of them to... evolve?

"Is this how dark gods are made?" He fearfully speculated.

Ves did not want to see what would happen!

"I should stick to my original objective. I just need to find a way to make it easier to eliminate all of the voribugs."

Chapter 3697 Toying With Insects

The final glow the Everchanger imitated was that of the Ferocious Piranha.

The Ferocious Piranha's glow was quite complex because it consisted of a compound between the glows of Zeiga, Lufa and Qilanxo.

While Ves was easily able to engineer a stable balance when he designed the original Ferocious Piranha model, It was a bit more challenging for the Everchanger to replicate this scheme.

Still, this wasn't the first time the Everchanger replicated the glow of the Ferocious Piranha. Venerable Joshua and his expert mech had utilized it before in previous live practice sessions.

Once it learned the knack to balancing the glows of three design spirits at once, it only needed a few seconds to formulate the compound glow.

Everyone who had been paying attention to this experiment looked closely in order to see how the Everchanger was able to affect the voribugs this time.

By now, the insects were incredibly annoyed at being subjected to all of these inexplicable mental influences. They had attempted to move away multiple times. If the Larkinsons hadn't reinforced the bulkheads and stationed foot soldiers to prevent the bugs from slipping out of their cages, the alien creatures would have bugged out by this time!

"The voribugs are behaving in a nearly identical fashion to the glow of the Ferocious Piranha. They are showing signs of debilitation."

"I can see that." Ves said as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "The point of this particular exercise is not to see whether the Everchanger can do a better job than the Ferocious Piranha. This time, we need to engulf all of the alien ships with this glow. Let's disorient them all at once so we can quickly sweep them with ease!"

The Everchanger repositioned to the center of the ship formation. After a moment of preparation, Venerable Joshua resonated with the Iridescent Mercury integrated in his expert mech.

The resonating exotic reacted to his force of will and quickly caused the Everchanger's glow field to balloon by many times!

Many Larkinsons gasped and gazed in wonder as the glowing expert mech managed to affect an enormous volume with its glow.

By being able to stretch across kilometers in each direction, the glow field centered around the Everchanger was comfortably able to affect all of the alien starships without omission!

Just as expected, the insects soon reacted similar to how they were affected by the Ferocious Piranha. The individual glows themselves did not affect them too strongly, but the constant switch from calm to aggression and back again produced a lot of upheaval that the voribugs weren't able to cope against!

A lot of insects twitched and stopped in place. Many of them uttered pained hisses as they drunkenly moved around without direction.

A few of the older and more savage voribugs were able to maintain a bit of their wits. While they couldn't shrug off the disorientation effect entirely, they could still attempt to run away from the source!

A dozen small drunken-like voribugs crawled towards an exit, only for it to open up and reveal a bunch of Crosser heavy assault troops.

Each of the soldiers were armed with heavy shotguns and other equipment that were useful against voribugs!

"Fire!"

The fleeing voribugs stood no chance and got shot to pieces!

"Damn! The noise has startled some of the other bugs. They're starting to regain control of themselves!"

"They're still too slow. Sweep them all before they can run!"

The cluster of voribugs stood no chance! While the threat of death shocked the older and stronger voribugs into action, they still weren't able to fight as well as before due to the constant mental interference they were suffering from. It was as if they were sitting in the middle of a staring match between an angel and a devil!

As Ves and the others observed the efficiency of the extermination operation, they were satisfied with what they observed.

The voribugs became a lot easier to kill.

The younger ones were too underdeveloped to maintain their wits and became lambs to the slaughter.

The older ones were barely any better. They were able to run away but their lack of numbers along with the need to resist the Everchanger's glow caused them to be trivially easy to defeat.

"We've detected hundreds of hidden voribugs!"

"Kill them as quickly as possible!"

Since the Everchanger's glow affected such a large area, not a single corner of the alien ship was left out. The small voribugs that instinctively tried to hide themselves by lowering their activity levels and trying to use other powerful energy emissions as camouflage suddenly stood out now that they couldn't concentrate on hiding themselves anymore!

By the time Venerable Joshua became too worn out to sustain the enlarged glow field, the alien vessels had grown a lot calmer!

The results were pretty clear to Ves. Without reviewing the data, he estimated that over 80 percent of the voribugs on the ships had been dealt with in quick succession.

The lack of resistance and the inability for most of them to run away meant that it took much less manpower to wipe out an insect cluster!

Though there were still a fair amount of bugs that had managed to avoid the major sweep, the steep drop in numbers meant that the foot soldiers could hunt them down a lot more effectively than before.

"The duration is too short." Ketis concluded as she studied the data. "My husband isn't strong enough to resonate for so long. In the future, he'll be able to maintain this field a lot longer than before."

Ves did not look too disappointed. "I am aware of that. This is just a trial. The Everchanger's performance today has provided me with plenty of insights and also helped me confirm a few theories. From what I have observed, I think there is great commercial potential in fabricating an anti-voribug mech in the future."

"A mech like that can do more than incapacitate voribugs. They can mess up other weak creatures as well. That can be both good and bad."

Ah. She was right. Ves recalled that the MTA had announced a directive about how his products shouldn't be used to terrorize ordinary people.

Even though he was back in the Milky Way at the time, he did not think it was invalid in the Red Ocean.

He made a decision. "An anti-voribug mech is way too valuable if its glow can affect all life forms. Since I plan to sell it at a low price, I should make sure that it doesn't replace my Ferocious Piranhas and my other products. I think I can tweak its glow so that it only affects voribugs."

Ves would have to study a voribug up close in order to make that possible.

He instructed his men to keep exterminating the voribugs but at the same time preserve a few samples. They needed to secure at least one elder voribug as well so that he could study what made them different from their younger kind.

After he and his staff wrapped up the experimental session, Ketis walked up to him and caught his attention.

"Ves?"

"Yes?"

"I have a request. Can I access those organic statues of yours?"

"Huh?"

This was not a regular request. Ves paused what he was doing and turned around to study his former student.

Ever since she had returned from the evacuation ship, she had behaved a bit more subdued than before. The battle and the act of killing all of those aliens had undoubtedly left a mark on her. Was this why she wanted to borrow his Aspects of Lufa?

"If it's about your condition, maybe you should try to figure out your doubts on your own."

Ketis shook her head. "That's stupid. I'm not like Venerable Joshua and those other expert pilots. I'm not as stubborn as them. As a mech designer, I have always learned that I should achieve the greatest results for the least amount of effort. Instead of procrastinating and groping around, I can quickly get my answers by using the right glows of your statue. This is the most efficient solution that I can come up with at the moment."

"..."

Why did he feel as if she was breaking the script?

Compared to her husband Joshua, Ketis was actually being smart! Expert pilots and swordmasters typically didn't exhibit that much wisdom.

"Well, if you are sure about it, then go ahead. I won't allow you to access the Aspect of Transcendence, though. That thing is way too dangerous and I haven't performed enough studies to figure out how to use it in a responsible manner."

Once Ketis received permission, she quickly finished her own tasks before leaving the observation room.

Ves watched her go with a bit of concern. He actually wished he could help her more directly, but strong-willed people needed to develop their own ideas.

Even if their notions and principles turn out to be wrong, inaccurate or hopelessly stupid, as long as they continued to believe in themselves, they might one day be able to turn their delusions into reality!

He wondered how Ketis would be able to resolve her current problems given her special nature. Even he didn't know how she could keep progressing when mech designers and swordsmen needed to adopt vastly different attitudes to get any further.

"I hope it will work out."

He planned to study the footage of whatever Ketis was about to do later. If she actually succeeded in leveraging the Aspects of Lufa to resolve her current doubts, then he might be able to recognize another potential application for these creations.

Later on, Ves sought out Venerable Joshua who had just freshened up and changed his clothes.

The expert pilot looked a bit exhausted due to his prior exertion, but he also looked intrigued as he thought about his earlier experiences.

"Sir."

"Joshua. I have a few questions for you. How has the Everchanger been faring for you? Have you grown closer?"

Joshua smiled. "That's a given. I haven't made as much progress as in the beginning, but I am still finding new ways to strengthen my cooperation with my expert mech."

"You just cycled through a lot of glows. Did anything stand out to you while you tried them all out during the previous session?"

"Hm. Well, the new ones are noticeably weaker. A few of them are also a bit weird to me. I had trouble understanding them. Kalo doesn't have a strong presence and comes across as invisible sometimes. The Titania on the other hand..."

"She's taken from an astral beast that is over six millenia old." Ves stated. "You can't treat her like an ordinary design spirit. With all of her age and wisdom, I'm afraid that she might get up to something. Have you noticed anything odd when you channeled her? Did you ever get the feeling you were able to take control over the voribugs with her help?"

The existence of design spirits was still vague to most Larkinsons, but Joshua knew better. Ves did not have any reservations bringing them up with his favorite expert pilot. Letting him know more about them

"No, absolutely not. The Titania even expressed disgust at them. I think she had an encounter with them before and suffered from it. She can't do much to them in her current state."

Well, that made sense. Any resident in the Red Ocean would bump into the voribugs eventually. The longer they lived, the greater the likelihood of encountering the space pests.

Though Ves had faint hopes that the Titania would be able to influence the voribugs considering she excelled at controlling her offspring, he had been too optimistic.

The two belonged to vastly different species and didn't even get along with each other. It was ridiculous for him to think that the Titania could actually control the voribugs as if she was their queen.

The voribugs didn't even have queens as far as he knew!

He froze.

A strange idea suddenly popped into his mind.

What if... he could create his own voribug queen?

Chapter 3698 Dark Plan

Ves had just come up with the most brilliant or the stupidest idea ever since he entered the Red Ocean.

Just the thought about creating a voribug queen that could potentially take control of other voribug was an insane proposition!

If other people heard what he wanted to do, they would either kill him or ridicule him! Hardly anyone would ever consider it to be a good idea to create a voribug sovereign that could organize the feral insects!

After he finished getting answers out of Joshua, Ves quickly moved back to his office and read up on the voribugs.

The MTA database surprisingly contained less information on the space insects than he wished. He had the feeling that the mechers were hiding substantial amounts of crucial intelligence on the space pests.

"Why, though? Are there more to the voribugs than I thought?"

That might be plausible given how the voribugs attracted so much attention despite being a relatively weak race. Sure, they could become devastating when their reproduction got out of hand, but most humans and aliens in the Red Ocean were able to handle the insects for the most part.

Ves tried to search for specific mentions of voribugs that were smarter and more evolved than the elders of their kind.

"Rumors. Rumors. Rumors."

There were way too many rumors about voribugs. People invented all kinds of fantasies about the ubiquitous insects and also made wild claims of encountering 'special' voribugs.

The stories became even more ridiculous when humanity began to obtain and translate alien anecdotes about the voribugs!

The insects had been around for a long time and impacted pretty much every space-faring species. There were wild tales about huge voribug leaders that were able to command entire swarms of voribugs across multiple star systems.

No one ever brought solid proof, though. The humans and aliens only ever encountered the voribugs in their juvenile, adult and elder forms. Plenty of them had studied the voribug genome and did not find proof of larger and more advanced forms.

That hadn't stopped people from trying to bring a voribug queen into reality.

Suffice to say, such an act was taboo in both human and alien societies. The power to influence a lot of voribugs and turning them into weapons against opponents was just too dangerous!

It was fortunate that the voribugs possessed a number of odd quirks.

The first was that they were quite sensitive towards artificially-altered voribugs. They could sniff out the ones that were genetically modified or carrying any secret implants in a short amount of time.

The second was that it was impossible for them to accept a leader bug. If Ves put aside the fact that the voribugs mercilessly kill any brothers they perceive to be abnormal, they never submitted to any voribug that tried to take control over their species.

"Maybe that's solely because of the first reason." Ves surmised.

It was a fundamental problem with no solution. The voribugs were so repellent against those that were different from the norm that they had defeated plenty of 'modified' voribug species that were implanted with bioprogramming that subverted their loyalties.

This also made it difficult for mutated voribugs that potentially developed spiritual powers and become more intelligent from staying alive. Their lesser brethren simply couldn't accept their existence!

"This is also the reason why the voribugs have stagnated for so long."

However... Ves might have a way of circumventing this defense mechanism.

What if he created a voribug queen that wasn't tangible?

As far as he was aware, the voribugs were entirely physical creatures that did not possess the means of harming spiritual entities.

If that was the case, could Ves get away with creating an artificial leader figure that could assume control of the voribugs without eliciting their hostility?

This idea had a lot of promise! Theoretically, it should work as long as the voribugs possessed genes that respected authority.

Ves was sure that this existed as the elder voribugs had been known to take command of the younger and smaller of their kind.

If the elder voribugs also retained this instinct, then his theoretical intangible voribug queen entity might actually be able to command this alien species!

This was such an immense advantage that Ves had to proceed exceedingly carefully if he wished to pursue this idea!

At the very least, he could never get away with it if others found out about his intentions.

He didn't even dare to proceed with it as long as the Simile Halifax accompanied his fleet!

Even if he found a way to isolate a space where he could proceed with his attempt without anyone finding out, it would still be difficult to hide his involvement.

After all, Ves already created or befriended over a dozen different design spirits! If he created another spiritual entity that just happens to resemble them greatly, then the Polymath didn't even need to waste much of her prodigious brainpower to connect the dots!

The voribugs were already bad enough when they were lacking a race leader. Their lack of strategic direction and higher thoughts were the main reasons why the voribugs hadn't conquered the Red Ocean.

If a voribug queen truly came into being, the threat level of this major race would definitely skyrocket!

Ves even started to question whether it was even a good idea to make such a crazy spiritual product. What would be the point? How could he possibly employ a voribug queen to his advantage? Could he even maintain control of such a potentially destructive entity?

The main reasons why he wanted to proceed was to challenge himself and fulfill his desire for innovation by creating a creature that no one else had succeeded in making.

There were also more practical reasons why he would want a voribug queen in his pocket.

Voribugs may be hated by pretty much every human and alien in the Red Ocean, but they were unquestionably powerful in their own ways!

If he could cultivate a non-human species into his secret vassals, he could sneakily use them as his thugs!

For example, he might be able to direct voribugs to descend upon the colonies of his enemies to destroy them or at least set back their development.

This was a fantastic way for him to take revenge on the Fridaymen! He already learned about some of the colonies that the coalition partners had set up in the Red Ocean. If he could wipe out just one or two of their key settlements, that would be enough for the Friday Coalition's colonies to become vulnerable prey in the eyes of other rival pioneers!

There were other ways he could take advantage of gaining control of the voribugs.

He could use the voribugs to turn a valuable planet into a no man's land to anyone except himself.

He could even affect the course of entire wars. No matter which parties participated in a fight, the voribugs were always participants due to how they tended to appear on battlefields devastated by war.

Once infrastructure broke down to an extent, the occupants would have other priorities and were not able to stamp out any voribug infestations when they began.

The voribugs might even become the final winners of a major engagement!

All of these stories emphasized the power of the voribug race. If Ves could harness even a part of their group for his own ends, wouldn't he be able to wield influence comparable to a Star Designer in advance?

He could even turn himself into a secret masterwork that decided the life and deaths of trillions of people in the Red Ocean!

"What the hell am I thinking!?"

He vigorously shook his head. It was too premature for him to consider making a voribug queen. He at least needed to wait until the MTA protection period was over before he could proceed.

Until then, it was folly to entertain these delusions!

He put these ideas aside and focused on his more modest goals instead.

Once the Larkinsons had captured and isolated the voribugs that Ves had asked for, he traveled to a small transport that had been set aside for this specific purpose.

It was still too dangerous to bring any live voribugs to a ship like the Dragon's Den. Even now, the Larkinsons were still afraid that they might inadvertently miss a couple of insects that could subsequently multiply into an entire new horde.

To ensure the voribugs wouldn't be able to slip away, a squad of Ferocious Piranhas surrounded the transport at all times.

No voribug could remain hidden when subjected to their glows!

Ves was glad to see the Larkinsons already incorporating the lessons they learned. The next time the expeditionary fleet encountered the voribugs, his forces would immediately know what to do in order to minimize the damage.

"So these are the voribugs." He said.

He had seen plenty of them in battle footage but never encountered one in the flesh.

The juvenile, adult and elder voribugs had all been isolated into transparent cages. The insects were not reconciled with their captivity and tried to burrow their way out. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't even dig or gnaw through their cages.

This was because they were all suspended in mid-air by manipulating the gravity inside!

Only the elder voribug was able to move under these conditions, but the captors had locked its body into place with metal rods to prevent the large insect from moving.

When Ves inspected the juvenile and adult voribugs, he didn't look impressed. Aside from their cockroach-like tenacity and their ability to eat a wide variety of foods, the insects were quite weak.

It was only when he studied the elder voribug that he recognized that it was special.

The creature didn't possess any significant spirituality, but Ves could sense more complex emotions and desires from this bug.

Its cognition was on a whole other level. While Ves did not get the feeling that it was sentient, its intelligence was impressive compared to other insects!

The elder voribug was able to look outward, so it could see Ves on the other side of the transparent cage.

Ves was fully suited up at the moment. His double shield generators along with his Unending Regalia gave him enough confidence to confront this elder voribug.

The creature's mind and emotions were not that difficult for Ves to interpret. The elder voribug was an exoinsect that was driven by the usual biological drivers of needing to feed, protect its fellow kind and to brood offspring.

What was different was that the elder voribug seemed to possess a much more refined sense on how to team up and cooperate with its fellow voribugs. There were also other alien elements that caused these elder voribugs to possess a more unique vibe.

"There's something funny about these elder voribugs."

Ves wasn't an exobiologist, though. It would take much more competent specialists to figure out how this primal insect race managed to dominate the Red Ocean for so long.

Out of curiosity, he tried to communicate with the insect.

"Hello there. How are you doing today?"

"HSSSSSSSS!"

The elder voribug instantly grew berserk and tried its best to break the metal shackles holding it in place!

Furious hisses escaped from its maw as its blackened eyes glared at Ves as if he was an affront to voribugs!

"Well, I can see why no one has managed to tame you guys."

The voribugs were too xenophobic! They hated life forms other than themselves! Their need to devour any creature that didn't conform to their exact appearance was far too strong!

For a moment, Ves wanted to perform experiments on this fascinating creature.

What if he could make it smarter?

What if it could become more open to communication?

What if he was able to unlock the hidden potential of voribugs?

His desire to utilize the voribugs as his test subjects became so strong that it pained him to issue his next command.

"I've seen enough. Dispose of them, please."

The captive voribugs soon became riddled with projectiles. There was no more point in keeping them alive.

Though he still felt the urge to experiment, he knew there was a better way for him to sate this desire.

"I should learn more about phasewater. If I recall, Professor Benedict invited me to study it together."

That should be interesting!

A Senior Mech Designer had access to much more knowledge and resources than a Journeyman. Ves would definitely be able to gain insights if he studied phasewater alongside Professor Benedict!

Chapter 3699 Novel Therapy Session

"Meow."

"I'm glad you're accompanying me, Lucky. I may need your help later."

"Meow?"

"You'll see."

Ketis cradled Lucky in her arms as she went through the security checks that preceded her entry into Ves' personal workshop.

She was quite familiar with the place as she had frequently assisted Ves in fabricating their first production copies.

With the Monster Slayer Project and the Second Sword Project just weeks away from completion, she even planned to borrow this workshop to fabricate her first true solo mechs in the near term.

That said, the workshop undeniably belonged to Ves. Their current settings all conformed to his preferences which were quirky to say the least.

Nonetheless, Ves took good care of his equipment and treated them almost just as well as his living mechs. He was not the sort of mech designer to cheap out or try to compromise on quality in order to save on costs.

He made no secret that he desired to acquire a superfab. The ones he worked with back when he participated in various tournaments in the Vulit Central Star Node had left a profound impression on him. They provided the ideal balance between control, efficiency and production speed.

Unfortunately, even the cheaper second-hand superfabs sold for at least 10,000 MTA credits!

The Larkinson Clan couldn't justify the purchase of one as they couldn't make full use of such an amazing device. The Spirit of Bentheim's ordinary production lines were already sufficient for most production tasks.

She didn't come here to fabricate any mechs today.

No. What she actually wanted to do would help her get into a better mindset before she embarked on this important endeavor.

Ketis did not want to get stuck in confusion when she finally fulfilled one of her dreams. The fabrication of a fully functional and competitive mech of her own design was a major achievement for any young mech designer.

Sure, she participated in the development of incredible mechs like the Dark Zephyr and the Everchanger, but they were far from solo projects.

Even the First Sword where she practically led the entire design project was not truly a work she could call her own. The assistance of Ves, Gloriana and so on were crucial in making it so powerful. She could not justifiably claim sole credit for its design.

The Monster Slayer which she planned to design first would be her first true introduction to the mech market.

She initially came up with the concept after winning a duel against the weird priest in the Nyxian Gap. She still recalled her mentality and the rush of excitement of slaying the monster that the cultist had become.

Her intuition told her that if she wanted to do the Monster Slayer justice, she would have to put herself in that mindset again. If her mood was good enough, she might be able to recreate the circumstances where she had fabricated her best works, all without relying on Ves and Gloriana's help.

Her eyes grew sharper as she gazed upon the dormant production equipment. "Stay safe. I will make use of you soon enough."

She turned away from the production area and moved to the side where Ves had stashed three organic statues.

Ketis heard that Ves had actually made four of them back during their visit to the Life Research Association, but the last one was too dangerous.

The three in the open were fairly safe as long as people didn't get lost in them. Ketis had observed them before and even tried out the glows of two of them. Her experiences back then prompted her to think about the statues when she attempted to find a solution to her current problem.

"Let's start with you." She muttered as she gazed at the Aspect of Tranquility.

The large statue was disturbingly human in its appearance. The biotechnicians that Ves had cooperated with had done a decent job in shaping cloned human tissue into a towering angel-like form.

The Aspect of Tranquility distinguished itself from the other ones by possessing a calm expression and raising a single palm in peace.

"You should keep your distance, Lucky. There is no need for you to come close."

"Meow." The gem cat nodded.

Lucky had no desire to blank out his emotions! He was a cat!

Once Ketis made sure the pet remained at a safe distance, she grabbed her floating sword and pulled it from its scabbard.

The Bloodsinger thrummed with power. Sharpie had inhabited it for so long that Ketis had the illusion that the sword had molded itself to the companion spirit.

"Are you ready, Sharpie?"

Swish swish.

"Okay, then. Let's start."

Ketis resolutely stepped into the range of the Aspect of Tranquility's glow. The closer she got to the large angel-like statue, the more she felt the profoundness of its presence.

She didn't blank out, though.

Compared to other humans, she wasn't affected by the glow. Her thoughts and emotions remained as active as ever while her willpower was robust enough to resist external influences.

Ves had explained to her that glows were actually a phenomenon where lower-level life forms recognized the superiority of higher-level life forms.

"In that sense, my life state is much closer to that of Lufa."

The more she gazed at the Aspect of Tranquility, the more she could sense the entity it was connected to. Lufa did not pay attention to Ketis at all despite her formidable strength. This made sense as the design spirit did not possess an active personality.

"I'll be borrowing your help, Lufa." She said as she bowed in front of the organic statue.

Once she showed her courtesy to Lufa, she carefully knelt down into a meditative position and closed her eyes.

She placed her unsheathed Bloodsinger on her lap. This allowed her to retain a close connection to her personal weapon.

Once she was ready, she slowly lowered her mental defenses and opened herself up to Lufa's glow.

This was a difficult procedure for Ketis. She was a warrior who always kept her guard up. Lowering it on her own initiative went against her instincts. The more she created an opening in her defenses, the more she felt vulnerable!

Fortunately, Lufa's presence was very reassuring. His glow was so tranquil that Ketis could not perceive any threat from it at all. It became easier and easier for her to relax and allow the tranquil glow to calm her down.

The effect was better than any meditation she attempted herself. Even with her heightened control over her own mind, she could not beat the power of a spiritual entity that was literally designed to calm people down.

In a matter of minutes, she had reached a state that certain sword style manuals spoke about.

Clearing one's mind completely of every thought and emotion was impossible. Humans simply weren't made to accomplish this feat.

However, Lufa was able to induce humans under its influence to a state of mind that was very close to total tranquility!

As Ketis temporarily let go of her concerns, her burdens, her ambitions and her desires, she felt unprecedented calm and at peace.

Not just herself, but Sharpie had also quieted down to a large extent.

Of course, as a spiritual entity that was the carrier of her extraordinary will, Sharpie's conviction could never be extinguished. Lufa was only able to exert a limited effect on the living sword intent, but the session was still helpful.

As Sharpie and Ketis enjoyed this moment of calm, they naturally resonated with each other. The Bloodsinger passively radiated more power as it reflected Ketis' remarkable state of mind!

If she wanted to, she could even work out a brand-new sword style from her current state.

There was no need for her to do so, though. She already mastered multiple sword styles which provided plenty of solutions against different types of opponents.

A peaceful blade also didn't suit her inclinations. She was a swordswoman who liked to be active and embraced excitement.

She wouldn't have chosen to fight on the evacuation ship if she wanted to be steady!

With the awareness she had left, she slowly inspected her current state.

She felt a lot more comfortable than before. Though Lufa's influence also muted her positive emotions, the fact that she still experienced them meant that she truly gained a lot of relief through this 'therapy'.

"Maybe I should return here more often."

Once she thought she could not obtain more gains from meditating here, she slowly raised her mental defenses, allowing her to return to a semblance of her former state.

When she stepped out of the range of the Aspect of Tranquility, she noted with considerable pleasure that her mood was a lot better than before!

The concerns and mental burdens that reasserted themselves no longer weighed as heavily on her as before. The temporary separation from her more active thoughts and emotions allowed her to sort herself out and remember what it was like to face reality with a simpler attitude.

Even the turmoil she experienced from struggling with her dilemma had subsided to an extent. With her calmer and more unburdened mindset, she was able to evaluate her choices with much greater clarity.

"You've also benefited." She said as she raised her greatsword.

Though Sharpie hadn't been as affected by Lufa as herself, the companion spirit still benefited to an extent. It had rid itself of various distractions and became a bit more focused.

"Let's move on to the next one."

Ketis approached the Aspect of Healing and did not hesitate to enter the range of its glow.

She repeated her earlier moves and bent down to meditate under the current effect.

Different from the Aspect of Tranquility, the Aspect of Healing did not suppress positive emotions all that much. It was therefore an excellent tool to soothe people who suffered trauma.

When Ketis opened herself up to this modified glow, she felt her worries and burdens going away yet again.

However, she was able to retain all of the good stuff in her mind.

She embraced this moment.

Different from before, she actively allowed her imagination to go wild.

She thought about her design projects that she was just about to complete. She thought of her proudest accomplishments. She thought about the future projects that she had yet to start. She thought of how she wanted to advance her swordsmanship.

She smiled as she enjoyed this moment. Though she was aware that reality was a lot harsher than she currently thought, it was great for her to liberate her mind in this instance.

Sharpie also embraced this moment. The companion spirit was much less resistant towards this particular glow because it liked the current effect.

Even a sword intent possessed ambitions!

The two of them remained in place for fifteen whole minutes.

Nothing could last forever, though. Once she felt she had indulged in her fantasies long enough, she forcibly resisted the Aspect of Healing's glow and pulled herself away.

Though her mood dropped as soon as reality fully reasserted itself to her, she was still a lot more content than before.

What she had done before gave her a much greater understanding of what she and Sharpie truly yearned for. Without the noise of her limitations and negative influences, she was able to recognize her own ideals to a much greater degree than before.

She already gained an inkling on how she would be able to solve her moral dilemma to her satisfaction.

"All it took was spending half an hour with these two statues." She grinned.

At this point, she achieved her main objective. She not only purged her mind of unnecessary negative thoughts, but also gained a huge amount of clarity about herself.

Not just her, but also Sharpie benefited from this brief 'therapy' session!

She would probably be able to get back to her peak once she returned to her grand stateroom and leisurely solved her dilemma.

"I'm not done yet here."

It would be a waste to go back. She planned to borrow the services of another organic statue.

She moved over to the side and studied the Aspect of Rationality. She could feel how this totem emphasized logic over emotion.

"You're not the statue that I'm looking for." She apologetically said.

No. She had a different target in mind.

Ketis turned away from the Aspect of Rationality and approached a gate which was locked.

Even though the metal bulkheads blocked her from seeing what was inside, her sharp senses already sensed something powerful residing inside this enclosure.

"It's you I want."

Chapter 3700 Dark Plan

Ves had just come up with the most brilliant or the stupidest idea ever since he entered the Red Ocean.

Just the thought about creating a voribug queen that could potentially take control of other voribug was an insane proposition!

If other people heard what he wanted to do, they would either kill him or ridicule him! Hardly anyone would ever consider it to be a good idea to create a voribug sovereign that could organize the feral insects!

After he finished getting answers out of Joshua, Ves quickly moved back to his office and read up on the voribugs.

The MTA database surprisingly contained less information on the space insects than he wished. He had the feeling that the mechers were hiding substantial amounts of crucial intelligence on the space pests.

"Why, though? Are there more to the voribugs than I thought?"

That might be plausible given how the voribugs attracted so much attention despite being a relatively weak race. Sure, they could become devastating when their reproduction got out of hand, but most humans and aliens in the Red Ocean were able to handle the insects for the most part.

Ves tried to search for specific mentions of voribugs that were smarter and more evolved than the elders of their kind.

"Rumors. Rumors. Rumors."

There were way too many rumors about voribugs. People invented all kinds of fantasies about the ubiquitous insects and also made wild claims of encountering 'special' voribugs.

The stories became even more ridiculous when humanity began to obtain and translate alien anecdotes about the voribugs!

The insects had been around for a long time and impacted pretty much every space-faring species. There were wild tales about huge voribug leaders that were able to command entire swarms of voribugs across multiple star systems.

No one ever brought solid proof, though. The humans and aliens only ever encountered the voribugs in their juvenile, adult and elder forms. Plenty of them had studied the voribug genome and did not find proof of larger and more advanced forms.

That hadn't stopped people from trying to bring a voribug queen into reality.

Suffice to say, such an act was taboo in both human and alien societies. The power to influence a lot of voribugs and turning them into weapons against opponents was just too dangerous!

It was fortunate that the voribugs possessed a number of odd quirks.

The first was that they were quite sensitive towards artificially-altered voribugs. They could sniff out the ones that were genetically modified or carrying any secret implants in a short amount of time.

The second was that it was impossible for them to accept a leader bug. If Ves put aside the fact that the voribugs mercilessly kill any brothers they perceive to be abnormal, they never submitted to any voribug that tried to take control over their species.

"Maybe that's solely because of the first reason." Ves surmised.

It was a fundamental problem with no solution. The voribugs were so repellent against those that were different from the norm that they had defeated plenty of 'modified' voribug species that were implanted with bioprogramming that subverted their loyalties.

This also made it difficult for mutated voribugs that potentially developed spiritual powers and become more intelligent from staying alive. Their lesser brethren simply couldn't accept their existence!

"This is also the reason why the voribugs have stagnated for so long."

However... Ves might have a way of circumventing this defense mechanism.

What if he created a voribug queen that wasn't tangible?

As far as he was aware, the voribugs were entirely physical creatures that did not possess the means of harming spiritual entities.

If that was the case, could Ves get away with creating an artificial leader figure that could assume control of the voribugs without eliciting their hostility?

This idea had a lot of promise! Theoretically, it should work as long as the voribugs possessed genes that respected authority.

Ves was sure that this existed as the elder voribugs had been known to take command of the younger and smaller of their kind.

If the elder voribugs also retained this instinct, then his theoretical intangible voribug queen entity might actually be able to command this alien species!

This was such an immense advantage that Ves had to proceed exceedingly carefully if he wished to pursue this idea!

At the very least, he could never get away with it if others found out about his intentions.

He didn't even dare to proceed with it as long as the Simile Halifax accompanied his fleet!

Even if he found a way to isolate a space where he could proceed with his attempt without anyone finding out, it would still be difficult to hide his involvement.

After all, Ves already created or befriended over a dozen different design spirits! If he created another spiritual entity that just happens to resemble them greatly, then the Polymath didn't even need to waste much of her prodigious brainpower to connect the dots!

The voribugs were already bad enough when they were lacking a race leader. Their lack of strategic direction and higher thoughts were the main reasons why the voribugs hadn't conquered the Red Ocean.

If a voribug queen truly came into being, the threat level of this major race would definitely skyrocket!

Ves even started to question whether it was even a good idea to make such a crazy spiritual product. What would be the point? How could he possibly employ a voribug queen to his advantage? Could he even maintain control of such a potentially destructive entity?

The main reasons why he wanted to proceed was to challenge himself and fulfill his desire for innovation by creating a creature that no one else had succeeded in making.

There were also more practical reasons why he would want a voribug queen in his pocket.

Voribugs may be hated by pretty much every human and alien in the Red Ocean, but they were unquestionably powerful in their own ways!

If he could cultivate a non-human species into his secret vassals, he could sneakily use them as his thugs!

For example, he might be able to direct voribugs to descend upon the colonies of his enemies to destroy them or at least set back their development.

This was a fantastic way for him to take revenge on the Fridaymen! He already learned about some of the colonies that the coalition partners had set up in the Red Ocean. If he could wipe out just one or two of their key settlements, that would be enough for the Friday Coalition's colonies to become vulnerable prey in the eyes of other rival pioneers!

There were other ways he could take advantage of gaining control of the voribugs.

He could use the voribugs to turn a valuable planet into a no man's land to anyone except himself.

He could even affect the course of entire wars. No matter which parties participated in a fight, the voribugs were always participants due to how they tended to appear on battlefields devastated by war.

Once infrastructure broke down to an extent, the occupants would have other priorities and were not able to stamp out any voribug infestations when they began.

The voribugs might even become the final winners of a major engagement!

All of these stories emphasized the power of the voribug race. If Ves could harness even a part of their group for his own ends, wouldn't he be able to wield influence comparable to a Star Designer in advance?

He could even turn himself into a secret masterwork that decided the life and deaths of trillions of people in the Red Ocean!

"What the hell am I thinking!?"

He vigorously shook his head. It was too premature for him to consider making a voribug queen. He at least needed to wait until the MTA protection period was over before he could proceed.

Until then, it was folly to entertain these delusions!

He put these ideas aside and focused on his more modest goals instead.

Once the Larkinsons had captured and isolated the voribugs that Ves had asked for, he traveled to a small transport that had been set aside for this specific purpose.

It was still too dangerous to bring any live voribugs to a ship like the Dragon's Den. Even now, the Larkinsons were still afraid that they might inadvertently miss a couple of insects that could subsequently multiply into an entire new horde.

To ensure the voribugs wouldn't be able to slip away, a squad of Ferocious Piranhas surrounded the transport at all times.

No voribug could remain hidden when subjected to their glows!

Ves was glad to see the Larkinsons already incorporating the lessons they learned. The next time the expeditionary fleet encountered the voribugs, his forces would immediately know what to do in order to minimize the damage.

"So these are the voribugs." He said.

He had seen plenty of them in battle footage but never encountered one in the flesh.

The juvenile, adult and elder voribugs had all been isolated into transparent cages. The insects were not reconciled with their captivity and tried to burrow their way out. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't even dig or gnaw through their cages.

This was because they were all suspended in mid-air by manipulating the gravity inside!

Only the elder voribug was able to move under these conditions, but the captors had locked its body into place with metal rods to prevent the large insect from moving.

When Ves inspected the juvenile and adult voribugs, he didn't look impressed. Aside from their cockroach-like tenacity and their ability to eat a wide variety of foods, the insects were quite weak.

It was only when he studied the elder voribug that he recognized that it was special.

The creature didn't possess any significant spirituality, but Ves could sense more complex emotions and desires from this bug.

Its cognition was on a whole other level. While Ves did not get the feeling that it was sentient, its intelligence was impressive compared to other insects!

The elder voribug was able to look outward, so it could see Ves on the other side of the transparent cage.

Ves was fully suited up at the moment. His double shield generators along with his Unending Regalia gave him enough confidence to confront this elder voribug.

The creature's mind and emotions were not that difficult for Ves to interpret. The elder voribug was an exoinsect that was driven by the usual biological drivers of needing to feed, protect its fellow kind and to brood offspring.

What was different was that the elder voribug seemed to possess a much more refined sense on how to team up and cooperate with its fellow voribugs. There were also other alien elements that caused these elder voribugs to possess a more unique vibe.

"There's something funny about these elder voribugs."

Ves wasn't an exobiologist, though. It would take much more competent specialists to figure out how this primal insect race managed to dominate the Red Ocean for so long.

Out of curiosity, he tried to communicate with the insect.

"Hello there. How are you doing today?"

"HSSSSSSSS!"

The elder voribug instantly grew berserk and tried its best to break the metal shackles holding it in place!

Furious hisses escaped from its maw as its blackened eyes glared at Ves as if he was an affront to voribugs!

"Well, I can see why no one has managed to tame you guys."

The voribugs were too xenophobic! They hated life forms other than themselves! Their need to devour any creature that didn't conform to their exact appearance was far too strong!

For a moment, Ves wanted to perform experiments on this fascinating creature.

What if he could make it smarter?

What if it could become more open to communication?

What if he was able to unlock the hidden potential of voribugs?

His desire to utilize the voribugs as his test subjects became so strong that it pained him to issue his next command.

"I've seen enough. Dispose of them, please."

The captive voribugs soon became riddled with projectiles. There was no more point in keeping them alive.

Though he still felt the urge to experiment, he knew there was a better way for him to sate this desire.

"I should learn more about phasewater. If I recall, Professor Benedict invited me to study it together."

That should be interesting!

A Senior Mech Designer had access to much more knowledge and resources than a Journeyman. Ves would definitely be able to gain insights if he studied phasewater alongside Professor Benedict!