

Mech 3701

Chapter 3701 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 3702 Self-Improvement

Ves never spoke about the fourth statue. He even commanded the Black Cats to delete all of the footage and reports about it in the internal database.

He wasn't able to delete the records on the fourth statue of the Lifers themselves, though.

It was a lot harder to keep his creation a secret when he made it in a busy place. Ves had created his four statues during a crisis when he was stuck in a metropolis on a highly-populated planet. He probably didn't have the luxury to ensure that he was able to maintain total secrecy.

Though most people still didn't know what this supposed fourth statue was capable of, Ketis was different.

She was not an ordinary Journeyman but also a swordmaster. That boosted her awareness and sensitivity towards the sort of creations that Ves had made to a greater level.

It also helped that she frequently collaborated with Ves on a number of mech design projects.

Whenever Blinky or Alexandria connected their minds to their design networks, she was able to gain a more direct glimpse of what went on in his overactive mind.

Though this glimpse was not as comprehensive as she wished, she was still able to catch stray thoughts from him that somehow got past the various filters.

She learned that Ves considered the statue behind this gate to be his most powerful yet also his most dangerous creation.

He feared its glow even as he yearned to unlock its secrets.

It was so dangerous that he did not even dare to let any Larkinson get close to it. The fourth Aspect's lethality was no joke and he did not want any of his clansmen to die due to negligence!

Due to these concerns, Ves had always locked it away. If he did anything with it, he made sure to be alone.

"That's not entirely true." She corrected herself. "You know what's inside, right?"

The cat that she had called back to her arms looked around for a moment.

"I'm talking to you, Lucky. You've been with Ves when he has been experimenting with this statue, right?"

"Meow meow!"

"I'm aware of the risks. Don't worry. I'm different from other people. Do you doubt my strength?"

"Meow..."

"Thought so. Can you help me get inside? Ves hasn't given me permission to proceed further. While I am sure I can break this gate through different means, I don't want to leave a mess behind. I need your help in order to unlock it. Can you do that?"

Lucky looked quite uncertain about this! "Meow!"

"Don't worry. You don't have to do anything by yourself. I've already studied the locking mechanism. I will transfer instructions to you that will tell you what to do. If you do everything right, the gate will unlock without breaking or setting off any alarms."

As a mech designer, she possessed more than enough engineering knowledge to know how to disarm the lock. It was trivial for her to come up with solutions.

The real problem was trying to get past this barrier without setting off any alarms. The security systems in the workshop were not totally worthless in that regard.

"C'mon, Lucky. Aren't we comrades in arms? Back me up again this time."

After Ketis persuaded Lucky a bit more, she finally got the cat to fulfill her request.

The reluctant gem cat phased through the gate and fiddled inside according to her instructions. This was not a complicated job for a cat that had been trained in sabotage.

Soon enough, a beep rang through the workshop and the gate slowly slid open without any further commotion.

The alarms that Ketis feared didn't ring this time.

Though she didn't expect a bunch of guards to show up, she did not want to deal with Ves at this time.

She vaguely knew what to expect and she had made her own considerations.

Lucky was still a worrywart though. As soon as he completed his job, he flew back to Ketis and made strange motions with his paws. He exaggeratingly patted his own head before spreading his limbs outwards.

"Meow meow meow. Meow meow!"

It was too bad that Ketis did not understand cat speech. She grinned and rubbed her head.

"I already said it's going to be fine. I don't intend to push my limits. I just want to borrow a bit of help, that's all. You can stay close and be ready to pull me out if I ever fall in distress. Is that okay?"

"Meow." Lucky nodded with relief.

"Good kitty."

Ketis caressed the gem cat a few more times before she turned to face the Aspect of Transcendence that was stored inside.

Since the lighting inside this enclosure was off, the organic statue looked a lot more ominous than it should.

The Aspect of Transcendence's expression was the most active one of all. Whereas the other ones looked peaceful or calm, the fourth statue's face looked excited as it also raised its arms in the air.

It looked as if the Aspect of Transcendence was about to receive the grace of a god.

Of course, the Aspect of Transcendence's appearance was not as important as its glow.

Ketis could more clearly feel the hint of madness and brilliance that the Aspect of Transcendence was promising.

She briefly paused when she sensed an air of bloodiness and heartlessness that she associated with killing.

Though she was familiar with this air herself, it was highly disturbing to sense it from an organic statue. The other three Aspects of Lufa did not possess this trait at all. This meant that the Aspect of Transcendence was truly an oddity.

"I'm not here to judge. I'm here to find enlightenment."

She did not let her discomfort stop her from fulfilling her second objective. She carefully stepped forward and made sure to maintain her mental defenses at this time.

Swish swish!

Her Bloodsinger flew in front of her body and attempted to communicate with her while barring her way forward.

"It's fine. I can handle myself. I think it is best if you stay outside my mind."

Swish?

"You're another part of myself, so you should know that what I am attempting to do will only be good for you. Don't worry. It will be fine."

She held her Bloodsinger by the hilt and steadily strode forward.

When she entered the range of the Aspect of Transcendence, she already felt a somewhat familiar pressure exerting on her mind.

It was not that different from the glows of the previous two Aspects.

In fact, she was even able to discern that the Aspect of Transcendence was a mutation of the Aspect of Healing.

While the latter merely removed negative thoughts and emotions, the former went a step further and removed a lot of positive elements as well.

What was left were her strongest desires. They became even more prominent due to the sudden isolation in her mind!

Though she hadn't lowered her defenses yet, she could already sense a hint of mania and fanaticism from herself.

"Interesting."

From a professional standpoint, she found it amazing that Ves was able to create a condition where people could not only find out their heart's true desires, but also amplify their strength so that they could help with achieving breakthroughs!

Ketis quickly sat down in the same meditative position. She held her Bloodsinger on her lap and quickly lowered the defenses of her mind.

The Aspect of Transcendence affected her to a greater degree, though not to the same extent as someone weaker.

As she let the danger affect her mentality, she felt as if someone poured a lot of fuel onto the fire in her heart!

It was as if a normal campfire was growing into a wildfire!

She breathed faster as she began to identify and embrace the parts of herself that truly mattered to herself!

Her earlier introspection already gave her a lot of lessons about herself. She had a clear impression of her ambitions, motivations and desires.

Now, the strongest of them stood out and tried to imprint on herself to a greater degree.

She had a hunch that if she was able to merge with them, she could reach a higher state, though she wasn't sure in what way.

"I'm not ready for that." She shook her head.

The activity taking place in her mind and spirit required a lot of support in order to work properly. She was still too young and needed a lot more growth before her mental strength was high enough to take a step forward.

She was not here to seek a breakthrough for herself.

"Instead, it's about you." Ketis smiled as she caressed the blade of her Bloodsinger.

Sharpie was both a part of herself and a separate entity on its own. Ketis didn't fully know what that meant, but from what she experienced and what she figured out by herself, that meant that their advancements were completely separate from each other!

If Ketis wasn't able to improve, that didn't necessarily mean that Sharpie was unable to improve either!

"This is your moment, Sharpie. Use the Aspect of Transcendence to find out what kind of sword you are. Will you choose a merciful blade or a killing blade? Do you prefer to embody another blade instead? No matter what, the choice is yours!"

Sharpie fully understood what Ketis had in mind and tried its best to open up to the Aspect of Transcendence.

It was much harder for it to do so this time! Unlike the other organic statues, the fourth one of the series was not only more dangerous, but was also tainted with the deaths it had induced!

The angel was stained with blood!

For a sword will that was sensitive towards blood and death, Sharpie could not ignore the threat and relax completely!

Fortunately, it did not need to lower all of its gates entirely. Just opening a few windows was enough for the Aspect of Transcendence to exert an effect on Sharpie.

The companion spirit grew more quiet as much of its own distractions faded away.

In terms of life, Sharpie was similar to Blinky and so on. It possessed its own personality, which meant it also possessed its own wants and needs.

The problem was that its age was much lower than that of Ketis. It was a child in a sense and it also behaved that way. It possessed a lot of curiosity and actually entertained numerous different distractions.

It was only when the Aspect of Transcendence quieted all of those unnecessary elements that its true focus reasserted itself.

Unyielding!

Sharpie was the personification of Ketis' unyielding spirit!

As the Bloodsinger began to glow and shake with power, Sharpie became more and more obsessed on Ketis' core obsession as a swordmaster.

When it came down to it, Ketis never wanted to back down no matter how strong her opponent turned out to be. She believed in the depths of her heart that as long as she was a strong enough swordswoman, she could cut through any opponent!

This was her warrior's heart, and this was also the central basis of Sharpie's extraordinary existence!

As Sharpie began to embody this principle to a deeper degree, Ketis and her greatsword began to glow more brightly.

A gray radiance enveloped them all as their unyielding spirits continued to resonate with each other.

Even though Ketis and Sharpie began to experience greater pressure on themselves, their mental fortitude allowed them to endure the strain for the moment.

"Keep going, Sharpie." Ketis broke the silence. "Keep exploring yourself. What kind of sword are you? What kind of sword do you want to become? There are many swords in existence, but only one fits you best. Seek it out and embrace your true self!"

The resonance phenomenon surrounding her form grew stronger as they all united for a single purpose!

Ketis sought to cut through the fog in herself and find the ideal sword for herself!

Chapter 3703 Sharper Sword

As the Aspect of Transcendence continued to exert its effect on Ketis and Sharpie, more than 90 seconds had already passed.

If a group of ordinary people spent this much time in the organic statue's glow, the area would have been drenched with blood and bodies by now!

Ketis did not hold much concern, though. She was so strong and resilient that the Aspect of Transcendence could not push her to a dangerous extent. She merely allowed it to hone her mind in a way that best complemented Sharpie.

By doing this, she was able to resonate with Sharpie, thereby providing it with greater support for what it was attempting to accomplish.

Under all of these influences, Sharpie had become more focused and active than ever. Its will experienced subtle changes as it became more and more certain of itself.

As its unyielding will grew firmer and more unshakeable, Sharpie made sure to follow Ketis' instructions and search what kind of sword it wanted to be. There were so many different choices out there that it was not easy to narrow down its choices!

"You can do it, Sharpie." Ketis encouraged her companion spirit. "Find the truth in yourself. Cut until you don't feel like cutting any longer."

Sharpie wanted nothing more than to be the best and sharpest sword at her disposal. At least that was what it always thought.

Now, it discovered that it wanted more than that. As a semi-independent life form, Sharpie was able to become more than Ketis' add-on.

Was it possible to separate from Ketis entirely?

Perhaps, but it did not wish to do so. Sharpie and Ketis shared the same root. The thought of cutting their common bond was unthinkable!

Teaming up was always better than trying to go solo. This was also what made companion spirits so brilliant. They enabled people like Ketis to team up with herself!

It was quite typical for Ves to create such a ludicrous invention. With his trust issues, only a companion created out of his own mind deserved to hold his unreserved trust!

Right now, Ketis and Sharpie also trusted each other to a great extent. They had fought together and grown together.

Ketis also started considering Sharpie as more than just a different side of herself. What she sought to accomplish might not have been done before, but that did not stop her from making this attempt.

"You're on the right track, Sharpie! Keep this up! Don't mind the pressure!"

As Sharpie became more engrossed in this process, it unconsciously opened itself up to the Angel of Transcendence even further.

Though its strain increased, the companion spirit benefited from the increased pressure.

It was only under challenging circumstances that it improved the most!

In previous instances, Ketis and Sharpie always progressed the most when they were in battle.

Now, they obtained the same benefits by remaining in the safety of the Larkinson fleet.

While the lack of new stimuli meant that they did not gain as much inspiration this time, the constant pressure and inducements from the Aspect of Transcendence meant that the pair became a lot more effective at introspection!

Right now, Sharpie delved deeper into the nature of its own self and personality. It moved beyond its initial conviction of remaining unyielding and expanded it into a wider context now that it began to see itself as a more comprehensive entity.

It was as if Sharpie used to be a seed that had remained relatively static all this time.

With the Aspect of Transcendence acting as water, the seed finally began to bud into something greater.

The Bloodsinger began to glow brighter as Sharpie's unknown changes began to generate more and more energies.

It was as if the greatsword was having increasingly more difficulties containing the increasingly more active companion spirit!

The aura around Ketis grew sharper and more resilient as she and Sharpie achieved greater harmony with each other.

Perhaps Ves himself had never imagined that Ketis would simultaneously attempt to make her companion spirit stand out further while at the same time resonate with it to a more intimate degree!

The results were astounding. Through all of these influences combined, Sharpie finally experienced a more profound shift that caused it to explode in power!

Though it was not a full breakthrough, Sharpie nonetheless experienced a flood of changes that improved its essence and personality in a way that it could never have accomplished under ordinary circumstances!

Before Ketis' lap, Sharpie's intangible form burst out of the Bloodsinger and hovered in front of Ketis like a proud warrior!

Its initial shape was that of a greatsword that looked nearly identical to that of the Bloodsinger.

For a long time, Sharpie did consider itself as one of Ketis' swords.

It was different now. With the expansion of its other facets, Sharpie evolved into a more complex entity.

The reason why it had grown more comprehensive was because it had successfully expanded its will and conviction!

Ketis opened her eyes. She looked radiant as she felt the changes that Sharpie was experiencing through their bond.

As Sharpie grew stronger, so did she. They were one, but they were also separate.

Ketis slowly reached out with her hand as Sharpie continued to mold itself further. It did not grow in size, but its essence was altering into a higher state.

The resonance between them grew even stronger. The aura of sharpness caused the deck underneath her to incur scars!

"Meow..."

Further back, Lucky watched on with concern as the Aspect of Transcendence kept affecting Ketis and Sharpie in a highly abnormal fashion.

The cat wondered whether he should bring Ves over. The Swordmaiden mech designer had remained in the Aspect of Transcendence's influence for a much longer period of time than anyone else!

Ketis did not pay attention to Lucky's concerns, though. She grew more and more excited as she felt that Sharpie had grown by leaps and bounds!

At a certain point, power exploded from Sharpie as the companion spirit finally found the answer it was looking for! It had discovered what kind of sword it wanted to become!

As Ketis connected to Sharpie in its new state, she learned the answer as well.

"The meaning of being unyielding is to stand tall in the face of adversity." She said as greater clarity entered her mind.

She stood up and held her Bloodsinger in a proud and rigid stance.

"My sword relishes in defeating the strongest and most challenging opponents."

Thoughts of defeating strong duelists as well as strange beasts and monsters briefly dominated her conscience.

She always felt more alive than ever during these exciting moments!

"My sword shall extend mercy towards the weak."

Ketis thought of the recent battle where she refused to sink the razor-sharp edge of her Bloodsinger into the soft and vulnerable flesh of the pakklaton chicks.

"I will defend myself and my comrades if necessary, but I shall never satisfy myself by cutting down the weak."

She thought back on the times where she cut down hordes of pirates. Back then, she indulged too much in the bloodshed to realize that she might not want to go down this path.

"I am a swordswoman, not a butcher."

She resolved to hold onto a code of honor. Not every target was acceptable for her kill.

"I am a Swordmaiden, but also a Larkinson. However, when it comes down to it, I am myself."

She wanted to be driven by her own rules and by what she thought was right. Though she did not intend to go as far as Venerable Jannzi, she still drew a couple of red lines that she would never wish to cross unless the need was too great!

"This is my sword! My unyielding sword that seeks to cut through everything! If we cannot cut through an obstacle, we shall hone ourselves until we become strong enough to succeed! This shall be the source of our persistence!"

Ketis briefly closed her eyes before opening them up again. Her fiery hot gaze pinned Sharpie's shaking intangible form as their resonance reached a peak!

"SHARPIE!"

The companion spirit's form burst apart!

"Meow!"

When Lucky witnessed the intangible sword breaking into pieces, he grew alarmed! Had Sharpie succumbed?!

The glowing shards did not dissipate, though.

The will that formed the root of Sharpie's existence was still as strong as ever.

It transcended the material.

It transcended the spirit.

It was a stronger and more resilient existence than anything else. Sharpie had become so unyielding that shedding its old form did not damage it in the slightest!

Instead, it liberated itself from the shackles of its former shape. As a sword, Sharpie was too limited in what it could do for Ketis. It could have been so much more than that, and now it finally received the opportunity to reshape itself into a more fitting form!

The shards soon converged back together. Sharpie and Ketis' will ensured that the remnants merged and conformed to a new shape that was a lot more complicated than a simple sword.

Eventually, a surprising shape came into existence.

Sharpie was still the size of a cat.

The difference was that it was no longer a sword.

It, no she, had become a swordswoman!

Sharpie's new appearance was identical to that of Ketis, but scaled down to size.

The evolved companion spirit's intangible shape was completely grey and wore a traditional robe associated with swordmasters.

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect about the humanized companion spirit's appearance was that Sharpie was also wielding a sword!

Right now, the empowered companion spirit was maintaining an identical stance to that of Ketis.

When the swordmaster raised her sword, so did Sharpie.

When Ketis performed a mock attack, her small companion spirit followed suit.

They were completely in sync with each other. The harmony between them grew even stronger as they appeared to mirror each other as if they were clones!

This was not quite what Ketis and Sharpie wanted, though.

The companion spirit twitched as her appearance morphed a bit. With Ketis' blessing, Sharpie gained a stronger sense of self.

Her personality grew a bit more defined and her face began to diverge so that it no longer looked like an exact copy of her origin.

"This is better." Ketis smiled.

Now, the relationship between her and her companion spirit had changed into that of a big sister and little sister.

Ketis was the big sister in this relationship and was in charge for the most part.

Sharpie had literally and figuratively become the little sister that cheered Ketis on but also provided help whenever her talents were needed.

This was the true form of Sharpie!

This was the path of evolution that Sharpie had chosen for itself!

This was the companion spirit that Ketis looked forward to partnering with for the rest of her life!

"You... are my sword."

"Sharp!" Her companion spirit vocalized in an infantile tone! "Sharp! Sharp!"

Once Sharpie completed her journey, she quickly fell back into the Bloodsinger and took a nap.

Ketis raised her mental defenses again and forcibly blocked out the Aspect of Transcendence's glow.

She bowed in front of the organic statue.

"Thank you, Lufa. You truly gave me a lot of help. I will come see you again in the future. You're too useful to be hiding in this corner all the time."

She stepped out of the enclosure and signaled to Lucky to reactivate the locking mechanism.

As the gate slowly slid shut, the curious gem cat flew towards Ketis and sniffed her body from multiple angles.

"Relax, Lucky. I am still the Ketis you know. I just became better."

"Meow."

She took the cat in her arms again and began to pamper him with pets and hugs.

Exhaustion finally kicked in at this point. Though she hadn't done much herself, Sharpie had expended a lot of energy in trying to evolve to her more human state. Since the companion spirit was a part of Ketis, the mech designer had also grown tired as a consequence.

"I could use a good nap. Do you want to cuddle with me in bed?"

"Meow!"

Chapter 3704 Cyclical Engine

When Ves decided to take up Professor Benedict's invitation to study phasewater, he invited Gloriana and the other mech designers to go along, but they all refused.

"You're wasting your time that could be better spent on completing our mech design projects. Phasewater is a notoriously difficult substance to harness." His wife told him as she hugged and rocked their daughter. "It is dangerous in most states and difficult to harness. Most applications of phasewater involve building entire machines around it. At our current point of development, we are far from ready to build minidrive-equipped mechs, let alone ship-grade warp drives! The only way for us to make practical use of phasewater is if we buy out a research institution or naval development company that already possess the necessary knowhow. Otherwise, it would take at least 20 years and

a great sum of money for us to develop this specialty to a competitive level from scratch!"

"...Mama." Aurelia echoed her mother.

Naturally, that made Gloriana inordinately happy! She kissed Aurelia's cute head for the umpteenth time. "Good girl!"

Ves crossed his arms. "You are not thinking broad enough. Phasewater is the future. The Red Ocean revolves around it. Why shouldn't we familiarize ourselves with it early? Besides, just because the known applications of phasewater are too unwieldy and out of reach for us doesn't mean that will stay true for long. Not only are our capabilities improving every day, we may also find our own applications of this substance. If nothing else, it should be easy enough for us to configure a bomb that takes advantage of its volatility."

"Phasebombs are classified as weapons of mass destruction and are highly illegal, Ves. I thought you would know that since you've been trying to cozy up with the MTA as of late."

"Erm. Well... it would be handy to have this option in our pocket. Just in case."

Though Ves made good points, his wife was concerned that he would get sucked into another rabbit hole again. She knew his habits well and understood that Ves easily tended to get obsessed with odd new side projects that completely displaced his original priorities.

His high concentration was a boon whenever he was on the right track, but it could utterly consume him for weeks or months if he directed it towards other research projects!

Ves eventually brushed aside her concerns and left regardless of her complaints.

He and his bodyguards boarded a shuttle and transited over to the Cross Clan's new factory ship.

Ves had observed the Cyclical Engine often enough from a distance. She was hard to miss as she was the only other factory ship in the expeditionary fleet aside from the Spirit of Bentheim.

Compared to his Hexer-built vessel, the Cyclical Engine was noticeably inferior in numerous aspects.

She was a pure civilian vessel that was both slow and lightly-armored. This turned her into a burden that was not quite suited for frontier exploration.

The Cross Clan wouldn't have been able to acquire her on the second-hand market if her value was higher, though. At that point in time, the Crossers managed to secure quite the bargain.

A greater proportion of her budget went into her production facilities, which were quite numerous due to the greater length of her hull. The added space and capacity enabled her production output to surpass that of the Spirit of Bentheim if everything else was equal!

As the Larkinson Clan's shuttle slipped into the hangar bay of the 2.9-kilometer long factory ship, Ves took in the atmosphere among the crew.

The Crossers did not look upset or discontented from the recent battle. Though the material damage was considerable, not a lot of casualties occurred this time.

The only annoying part was that the material damage to the starships was considerable. This was also why the Cyclical Engine had become more active than usual. Her production lines were tasked with repairing or replacing a lot of broken hull plating.

The Hemmington Cross particularly required a lot of attention! The massive fleet carrier was one of the capital ships that bore the brunt of the alien warship fire. If not for her greater size and surface area, she would have incurred more serious damage to her forward compartments and systems.

"Patriarch Larkinson? This way, sir."

Ves and his group followed an attendant as they made their way into the interior of the Cyclical Engine.

Though the ship started off as a second-hand civilian vessel, the Crossers had tried their best to convert her to a more robust vessel.

Much of the interior had been upgraded with stronger alloys and thicker layers. The Crosser engineers had tried their best to reinforce her structural integrity whenever possible without necessitating a turn in a drydock.

Although the constraints of trying to upgrade a capital ship when she was in active service were considerable, the effort might make a difference one day.

Ves still considered his Spirit of Bentheim to be far more superior, though. His own factory ship had been designed and built with added defense and longevity in mind. Her defenses could also be upgraded rather easily due to her semi-modular layout.

The attendant led Ves through a scenic route this time. They passed through a number of interesting areas including a production hall where Ves could take a good look at the production equipment used by the Crossers.

Ves noted that the brand-new machines were considerably more powerful and modern than the ones on his own factory ship.

The Cross Clan had definitely made a substantial investment after entering the Red Ocean! Even though the new equipment were not superfabs, they were still heartland-level models that were considerably faster and more capable than what they used before!

"Impressive."

"Just wait until you see our lab and workshop, sir."

Once they came close to the center of the Cyclical Engine, they passed through a strict security checkpoint before Ves and no one else was able to pass through.

He entered a combination between a lab and workshop that was filled with high-quality machines.

Ves immediately took in the powerful scanners, the advanced experimental tools and the high-quality production line that easily exceeded the specifications of his aging ELKINE production line!

He grew slightly jealous at Professor Benedict's high-class equipment. It was even more expensive than the cheaper superfabs!

Still, once his clan completed the next design round, he might not necessarily be poorer than Professor Benedict. He would buy a big fat superfab once he decided the time was right for him to upgrade his workshop.

Once he finished admiring the equipment, he proceeded forward and found Professor Benedict to be standing behind a lab machine that was examining a quantity of phasewater for impurities.

"Ves." Professor Benedict said in a familiar tone. "You have arrived. Did you bring the phasewater?"

"I did." Ves replied as he raised the egg container that he had recently disarmed. "All 2375 grams of it. How much did we manage to retrieve from the pakklaton evacuation ship's warp drive?"

"Our specialists have managed to recover 1804 grams of pure phasewater from it, but there were clear signs that it used to carry more. The pakklatons have irreversibly expended hundreds of grams in an attempt to supercharge their warp drive."

Ves winced. Those hundreds of grams of phasewater were quite valuable!

"That much?"

"Yes. Just because your Amaranto managed to shut down the warp drive before it could activate does not mean that it could restore what it has used. From what I have observed from the alien warp drive, the emergency shutdown procedure dealt considerable damage to it and prevented it from performing any recovery activities."

This was the price for stalling a warp drive that had been supercharged.

If the pakklavons hadn't stuffed the device with so much extra phasewater, the loss wouldn't have been so exaggerated.

Ves made a quick calculation in his mind. "We've managed to gather 4179 grams of phasewater in total. That means that I am entitled to 1880 grams of it while you get 1463 grams."

"That is so." Professor Benedict nodded in acknowledgement. "These are substantial amounts of phasewater, enough to allow us to perform more daring experiments that may use up any phasewater we employ."

The Golden Skull Alliance had made an agreement about how to divide any profit and plunder from situations like this. The Larkinson Clan was entitled to 45 percent while the Cross Clan made do with 35 percent.

Since the Glory Seekers were smaller and weaker, they could only settle for 20 percent of the gains.

These proportions were based on the contributions that the alliance partners could make. If the Larkinsons underperformed in a battle, then they could only surrender a portion of their benefits to others.

Of course, it went without saying that if the Cross Clan ever gained an ace pilot, it would definitely demand a greater share of plunder!

"What do you plan to do now that I am here?" Ves asked.

"First, we examine all of the phasewater we have obtained and see whether they are tainted. Pass me your container."

Ves carefully handed over the alien egg container to the Senior Mech Designer.

Professor Benedict raised a curious eyebrow while he took a closer look at the alien device.

"This is an impressive container. I wonder what materials the pakklatons have used to be able to isolate the dimensional fluctuations generated by phasewater to such an extent."

"I wonder about that as well." Ves said. "The existence of this container reminds us that the local aliens have been working with phasewater from the beginning. We can learn much from them on how to handle and make use of the exotic."

"That is true, but we should do more than copy other people's homework. If we wish to develop our own uses of phasewater, we must get accustomed to performing our own research. Let us begin with the first step."

The process of examining phasewater was a lot harder than it sounded. The biggest difficulty was that pure phasewater in its rest state naturally produced dimensional fluctuations that could get pretty violent when gathered in greater quantities.

Even when Professor Benedict only took out a single drop, the phasewater already began to distort the surrounding dimensions. These disturbances made it extra difficult to examine the properties of any phasewater samples because all of the readings became distorted.

Fortunately, Professor Benedict had already made the right preparations. The large and modern lab equipment on the Cyclical Engine were all rated to work with phasewater, though only with a small amount at a time.

Ves had to help out and operate another lab machine in order to make better use of their time.

"Why don't you bring any lab assistants over?" He asked. "I have been curious about meeting the Journeymen you have hired."

"You shall meet them later, Ves. As a rule, I generally prefer to conduct my work in private in this space. The Journeymen I have hired are already preoccupied with other tasks and they are not suited to assist with my more personal research projects."

Considering what Professor Benedict had been up to in the past, Ves did not blame him. It also spoke much about the Senior's intentions when he insisted on working alone.

Once they completed their examination of the phasewater they had taken from the pakklaton refugee fleet, they confirmed that they were almost entirely devoid of impurities.

While they both found trace amounts of pollutants inside, the concentration was not significant enough to affect the efficacy of the phasewater in its current state.

"It's quite beautiful." Ves said as he studied one of the containers that Professor Benedict had prepared. "They can bend and knead space just by sitting there. I wonder where they get all of that energy from. Maybe we can turn it into an inexhaustible power source."

"That is hardly the best use of phasewater, Ves. There are far better applications that I can think of. Phasewater is the gate that can make distance irrelevant. We only need to develop the right technology to harness it to its full potential."

Chapter 3705 Minidrive Variations

As Ves and Professor Benedict Cortez examined the phasewater that they collected from their defeated opponents, both of them were considerably happy with how much they managed to obtain.

Although phasewater was supposed to be fairly prevalent in the Red Ocean, it was still a high-grade exotic that was difficult to obtain in greater quantities.

"Have you ever wondered how phasewater can appear in the cosmos?" Professor Benedict asked.

"Yeah. Plenty of times." Ves replied. "From what I learned, there doesn't appear to be a lot of rules concerning how they are formed. They can appear in space where there is not a drop of water in the vicinity. They can also appear underneath the immense oceans of heavy gravity planets. It really is inexplicable."

"Exotics do not make sense by definition. They are abnormal materials that are infused with greater energy than we can detect on the surface. For such a light material, it is highly unusual for phasewater to contain so much power. I advise you not to delve too deeply into the nature of exotic materials. Only material scientists have the necessary background and prerequisite knowledge to perform these studies. For mech designers such as ourselves, it is much more useful to generate new and better ideas on how to harness the existing properties of phasewater."

He was right. There were lots of mysteries in the multiverse. Except for maybe the Polymath, there was no other single individual who could possibly investigate every single unknown phenomenon.

Mech designers were engineers by nature, and that meant that they were mostly in the business of developing new products.

Of course, the good ones also performed a lot of original research, but they only did so in order to push their mech designs to a higher level.

Both of them began to direct their thoughts to the more immediate applications of phasewater.

"We could theoretically use the phasewater we have plundered from the pakklavons to make 83 minidrives." Ves remarked. "They say it takes at least 50 grams of phasewater to make a single minidrive to work, right?"

"It is more complicated than that, Ves. There are actually two types of minidrives. There is the miniaturized warp drive that can enable a mech to traverse distances in-system at a rapid rate. They excel in combat situations as they can quickly enable melee mechs to approach an enemy fleet and they can also allow mech forces to make unprecedentedly fast tactical movements in space combat. They are already starting to be used in battles involving first-class forces."

Professor Benedict activated a projection that displayed a battle between a first-class pioneering fleet and a group of nunsen warships.

Though first-class mech forces were generally a lot more powerful than the Larkinson Army, the ones in the footage brilliantly displayed how miniaturized warp drives changed the game for the human forces.

While the two forces initially took potshots at each other at extreme range, hundreds of human mechs appeared at the flank of the nunsen fleet without warning!

Upon showing up, the first-class multipurpose mechs instantly unleashed all of their ranged weapons at the adjacent alien vessels. They also activated all of their boosters in order to close the distance as fast as possible.

While the deadly nunsen warships ought to possess more than enough firepower to repel the human mechs, the problem was that much of the weapons of the centaur-like aliens were pointed towards the distant pioneering fleet!

It took time for the nunsens to reorient their ships and vessels. In the meantime, their warships could only make use of only some primary weapons and lots of secondary weapons to repel the human mechs.

While a few mechs succumbed from focused fire, the other mechs managed to make it through by relying on their excellent shield generators and armor systems as a buffer.

Once the mechs finally got close, they employed their deadly melee capabilities to tear apart the alien ships with impunity!

While the nunsen vessels possessed plenty of means to repel infantry-level boarding parties, they weren't designed to cope with mechs at all! Not even other ships could help out as their powerful anti-ship weapons were liable to deal more damage to the friendly ships than onto the mechs that were wreaking havoc inside!

Once the raiding first-class mechs managed to destroy a few nunser warships through this method, they jumped out and quickly split up in order to threaten many more alien vessels at a time!

Although the nunsers did possess shielding technology, it was considerably weaker than the human equivalent. The mechs possessed enough firepower to blow a hole in the shield cover.

Combined with the long-ranged fire support from the artillery mechs of the main human fleet, the nunser warships did not stand a chance!

"Impressive." Ves gasped. "Although the nunser fleet doesn't look all that big, it's incredibly inspiring to see how those mechs made short work of those warships."

The human fleet could have overcome the nunser fleet if it fought in a conventional manner, but the victory wouldn't be as smooth.

"Scenarios such as this are already taking place in the Red Ocean." Benedict said. "Mechs equipped with early-generation miniaturized warp drives are not practical enough to be used to travel to other star systems. A journey of weeks can take many months. It is much more efficient to board a simple combat carrier that can make the trip without relying on phasewater. The real utility of this type of minidrive is to enable mechs to perform long-distance tactical maneuvers on the battlefield. They are already starting to be called combat drives for that reason."

The combat drive was the cheapest faster-than-light device that mech designers could mount onto mechs. They were derived from traditional warp drives that aliens had already mastered for eons.

It did not take much of a stretch to figure out that the native alien races must have come up with minidrives themselves. The Big Two merely stole the small drives and reverse-engineered them so that they grasped the tech as well!

Professor Benedict waved his hand, causing another projection to appear. "Miniaturized FTL drives are more interesting. They make creative use of phasewater to massively lower the requirements to operate an FTL drive. With enough phasewater, a mech can enter FTL travel without relying on a ship and reach another star system in around the same amount of time."

The sights of the MTA's first-class multipurpose mechs exiting from one star system only to appear in another star system tens of light-years away was impressive in a different manner.

Although it was horrendously expensive to equip mechs with such extravagant drives, it provided mech pilots with an unprecedented degree of freedom. None of them had to rely on motherships any longer!

Though humanity was still searching for practical and cost-efficient uses of FTL-capable mechs, there was no doubt that such mechs might become the mainstay for certain specialized mech forces one day!

"I heard these miniaturized FTL drives are substantially more demanding than miniaturized warp drives."

Professor Benedict nodded. "That is especially the case when they need to mirror the performance of a superdrive that can travel ten times or even a hundred times faster than an ordinary FTL drive. In order to distinguish between the two performance standards, the people in the relevant industries have taken to calling the basic version a 'cruise drive' and the amplified version a 'supercruise drive'. Both of them can replace ships entirely when it comes to interstellar travel, but only the supercruise drive can be utilized in combat situations."

In short, the distinction was similar to the regular-sized drives.

The combat drive only excelled in combat.

The cruise drive was only usable for interstellar travel.

The supercruise drive possessed the capabilities of both of the aforementioned drives.

Naturally, the cost of the latter was insane!

"How much phasewater is needed to build a supercruise drive?" Ves asked.

"The development of supercruise drives has only recently begun. The few early generation models that are known to the public are extremely rudimentary. They make use of an excess of phasewater to brute-force processes that we do not fully understand. I have heard that one model uses an excess of 10 kilograms of phasewater just to provide superdrive capabilities to a single heavy mech."

10 kilograms!

Ves almost felt sick!

The same quantity of phasewater could easily provide superdrive capabilities to several capital ships! To provide the same to a single mech sounded like an enormous waste of resources considering how much less space needs to be warped to make a single mech go faster.

Professor Benedict smirked. "The current prototypes are merely the toys of overeager researchers that are not short on funding. The magnates and companies funding their development do not think they are wasting their money. As long as they manage to

accumulate more know-how and achieve an early breakthrough, they can quickly dominate the market for minidrives, which has the potential to yield unheard-of profits."

This was a game that could only be played by the biggest market players. Neither the Larkinson Clan nor the Cross Clan could touch this sector at the moment.

Ves fell into thought as he considered the different varieties of minidrives that humanity was exploring.

"If we want to employ the phasewater we've obtained in any of our mechs, then we should start with the relatively simple combat drive. Not only does it require the least amount of phasewater, it is also more stable and relatively cheaper for us to acquire. We probably can't build it ourselves though, is that right?"

The Senior Mech Designer slowly nodded. "That is correct. I am looking into rectifying that, but do not expect any news on this front in the short term. Our only choice at the moment is to commission a third-party manufacturer that is specialized in making drives and minidrives to fabricate the combat drives for us. I have already performed an investigation and there are numerous relevant companies in Davute that have recently opened up for business."

"I can hear a 'but' coming..."

"You are quite sharp, Ves. An ordinary shipbuilding company such as Murphy & Sons are incapable of producing minidrives. You need to approach a specialized institution or company, of which a handful exist in this zone. Each of them not only charge high fees for their services, but also demand that we submit more than the necessary quantities of phasewater required to build the minidrives."

"Can you give me an example?"

"We need to submit 100 grams of phasewater to obtain a combat drive that incorporates 50 grams of phasewater."

"WHAT A RIPOFF!"

Ves couldn't believe what he heard. He and his fleet struggled so hard to challenge alien warships. If not for the Amaranto's crucial move, the Golden Skull Alliance wouldn't have been able to obtain 4 kilograms of phasewater.

To give up half of that to obtain a handful of combat drives made him feel incredibly sore about this situation. The profiteers in the rear were harvesting the greatest benefits of the Red Ocean!

"We have little choice." Professor Benedict said in a tone that already conveyed his resignation. "High technology is difficult to master. The companies based in Davute are

not only in the business of developing and selling FTL drives for generations, they have also invested enormous sums of money to develop their first successful combat drives. If we wait five to ten years, the market for minidrives will no longer be as cramped. The ratio will certainly drop to more reasonable levels at that point."

Ves grimaced. "If that is the case, then I guess I will have to wait. What about you, professor?"

"I think you may have already guessed our clan's intentions. Patriarch Reginald Cross wishes to incorporate a combat drive for his next expert mech."

"So soon!?" Ves reacted with shock. "You'll squander half of your phasewater if you go this route!"

"Reginald does not mind. He seeks to pilot the strongest expert mech he can obtain from us, and it is within our means to integrate a ready-made combat drive to a design. I have already begun to study this module and how it should be added to a mech, but it is useful if you can gain familiarity with it as well. This is one of the reasons why I have invited you here to study phasewater together."

If Professor Benedict was being serious, then Patriarch Reginald Cross' next expert mech would likely be the first machine to gain faster-than-light travel capabilities in the expeditionary fleet!

Chapter 3706 Mars Project

Ves needed a moment to adjust to Professor Benedict's explosive revelations.

Right now, any form of minidrive was new technology to humanity. They were insanely expensive and considerably inefficient depending on their complexity.

It would take multiple generations of continuous development in order to mature the tech to a more practical and affordable state. By that time, the amount of phasewater required to build a minidrive would probably be half or a third as much as before.

This was why most powers weren't in a hurry to add minidrive-equipped mechs into their arsenal.

Though they opened up a lot of new possibilities, investing that money into more or better mechs was much more cost-effective!

"You never mentioned this before in our prior talks about our upcoming collaborative expert mech design project." Ves said.

"That is because we did not imagine that we could get our hands on a substantial quantity of phasewater this early. It is only when we have managed to defeat the

pakklaton refugee fleet that Reginald has told me to find a means to make use of our new bounty in the successor mech to his Bolvos Rage."

In other words, big boy Reggie wanted to have the latest toys. He was the kind of spoiled kid who nagged his parents to buy the latest released version of a popular virtual game upon the first day of its release.

Ves glowered as he thought of how the addition of a combat drive could completely mess up the design of an expert mech!

Not only would a combat drive take up valuable space in the rear of the mech, it also imposed a huge burden on the entire machine!

"From what I've heard, all forms of minidrives are notoriously power hungry." He told the other man. "How are we going to power Reginald's upcoming expert mech?"

"By investing more in its power reactor." Professor Benedict answered simply. "We must also upgrade the power transmission systems and other relevant parts. Though the cost and complexity of our expert mech design will rise at a geometric rate, the benefits we can obtain from these improvements are not light. The power levels of the expert mech's energy weapons will also rise in turn."

"That's true, but I bet they will also generate an insane amount of heat. You will need to add dimensional heatsinks or other advanced tech in order to prevent Patriarch Reginald from getting cooked alive by his own machine!"

"Heat management will indeed pose a major problem, but many issues can be resolved with enough funding." Professor Benedict nonchalantly replied as if this was not a great concern.

Ves truly couldn't see how they could design and make this expert mech at a reasonable cost. By the time they were done, the cost of the Cross Clan's extravagant new machine might be a hundred times more expensive than the Everchanger!

"I suppose this is one of the consequences of having an expert pilot in charge of a clan." Ves sighed.

"Indeed. To be fair, there is good justification for doing our best to empower Patriarch Reginald's expert mech. Even if he does not break through to ace pilot, he can still take advantage of the enhanced firepower and additional mobility options of his new expert mech to turn around losing battles. The impact he can exert on the battlefield may even exceed that of the Amaranto."

Ves asked another important question. "What if Reginald successfully breaks through, though? His brand-new and superexpensive high-tier expert mech will become obsolete in an instant. He will need to pilot an ace mech in order to showcase his full power and I

don't think we can straightforwardly upgrade the expert mech that we have painstakingly designed and built for that. Only the best Masters tend to design ace mechs."

The older man looked dismissive. "This is the Cross Clan's problem, not yours. We will see what we can do once we reach that point. For now, even if it is not necessary to equip Patriarch Reginald's new expert mech with a combat drive, we will do so anyway because of the reasons I have mentioned before and because it will make our client feel better. When it comes to matters like these, boosting the confidence of the pilot is worth all of the additional expensive."

The implicit theory here was that Patriarch Reginald would increase his chances of achieving a breakthrough if he piloted a more powerful and expensive mech.

Whether it was accurate or not, the Cross Clan appeared to be quite willing to squander tens of thousands of MTA credits on this bet!

Ves shrugged. The professor was right. It was none of his business how the Crossers spent their money.

Of course, he would feel quite upset if they wanted to splurge half of their total funds on building a giant statue of Saint Hemmington Cross in the center of Kotor City on Davute VII!

The strength of the Cross Clan directly affected the strength of the expeditionary fleet.

This was why he was not strongly inclined to object to the Crosser spending plans. Perhaps it might sound foolish to invest a disproportionate amount of money on just a single expert mech, but the hope of creating a new ace pilot was worth the gamble.

"Take a look at my initial drafts." The Senior offered as he projected a few sketches.

Ves immediately grew fascinated by the mechs that Professor Benedict had visualized. They not only included all of the elements they talked about before, but attempted to combine them in a way that squeezed out as much efficiency as possible!

"As you can see, I have presented two different draft designs to you. One of them depicts an expert mech without a combat drive while I have recently added one to the other draft design. The latter needs more work in order to make it more viable, but you can already see my overall direction from studying it. Take your time, Ves. These are not simple designs."

That was an understatement. Through their prior collaborations, Ves already understood that Professor Benedict tended to hold extremely high expectations for both himself and his customers.

He was the kind of mech designer that sought to pursue the best solutions within his means and assumed that the users of his products would also put in the same degree of effort!

That tended to go extremely poorly when the majority of his clientele consisted of uncivilized pirates who never earned high grades in whatever academy they attended.

Fortunately, Professor Benedict was able to preserve his sanity when he went back to designing mechs for professional second-class soldiers.

There was still a gap, though. If Professor Benedict wanted to design the high-spec of his dreams, he needed to find a sufficiently strong and skilled mech pilot that could actually keep up with all of the complex functions of such an insane machine.

Patriarch Reginald was pretty much one of the best mech pilots that he could get at this stage!

Though the leader of the Cross Clan possessed a lot of personality problems that made it difficult to work with him, there was nothing wrong with his combat skills. Getting tutored by his father who used to be an ace pilot elevated his prowess to an immense height!

If Venerable Joshua and Patriarch Reginald dueled against each other with completely even expert mechs, then the latter would easily be able to spank the former!

Of course, this wasn't actually a fair contest considering that Joshua was still in his thirties while Reginald was over 70 years old. It was not impossible for Joshua to catch up and exceed the Cross Patriarch when he reached this age range.

Once Ves got over the extreme amount of skill required to pilot either of the draft designs, he began to examine the basic properties of the newest of them that incorporated a combat drive.

"The Mars Project is a high-tier expert hybrid mech at heart." The Crosser mech designer narrated. "We have yet to decide its weapon loadout, but they will largely be energy-based to take advantage of the upgraded power reactor of this machine. Depending on how many dimensional heatsinks we can obtain, we may need to assume that the Mars Project will excel more in prolonged battles than short, heated engagements."

Ves nodded in understanding.

Dimensional heatsinks worked vastly differently from conventional ones. They were essentially holes in reality that siphoned any heat into a completely different dimension, and could do so endlessly.

The biggest constraint aside from their extreme cost was that they could only funnel a limited quantity of heat energy at a time.

In other words, it might take minutes for an overheated mech to cool down to a reasonable level!

Therefore, the most relevant variable in relation to heat management was how many dimensional heatsinks the Cross Clan could obtain.

Ves was quite familiar with the quirks of dimensional heatsinks because his Amastendira also made use of one. He could not fire the powerful laser weapon unscrupulously because of the need to wait until its dimensional heatsink funneled away enough excess heat.

"It should be fine even if you can't get your hands on a large amount of dimensional heatsinks." He remarked as he continued to study the design. "I see that you have made sure to reserve room for future expansion. That is good. You can easily slot in extra dimensional heatsinks once we are in a better state."

The other solution was to replace a weaker dimensional heatsink model with a more powerful one, but the costs would skyrocket as a consequence!

"Though Patriarch Reginald will have to limit the intensity of his combat actions if he pilots such an expert mech, I believe it is well worth the tradeoffs considering that each of his attacks can easily deal several times more damage. He does not have to fire as many shots in order to defeat his opponents."

"That is true."

Ves noticed a clear difference when he studied the weapon loadouts of the two draft designs.

Though neither of them went into excessive detail, he could see that the revised draft design carried more weapons that were suitable for long-ranged firefights.

Professor Benedict even opted to replace a few positron weapon systems with laser weapon systems in order to give the Mars Project a better chance of sniping down distant targets!

"I don't mean to doubt you, professor, but is this a wise choice?" Ves skeptically asked as he pointed towards the laser weapon mounts. "Your draft design has already taken on a great burden by mounting a combat drive on its back. This gives the Mars Project the option to warp forward at accelerated speeds and close the distance to any enemy fleets. Why would Patriarch Reginald need any long-ranged weapons in this instance?"

"There are plenty of countermeasures against close-ranged warping, Ves. We make use of some of the solutions as well. While the effective range of these countermeasures vary considerably, there may come a time where warping relatively close to an enemy fleet is not a wise option. Patriarch Reginald has made a request that the Mars Project should also remain useful in long-ranged combat. He has grown more frustrated with the Bolvos Rage's lack of precision solutions as of late. He does not mind it if the Mars Project becomes more of an all-rounder due to this design choice."

"I see."

"It is technically feasible even if we are not allowed to make use of your luminar crystal technology."

Hybrid mechs could excel in many different ranges but possessed an inherent bias for short to medium-ranged combat.

This was because their multitude of integrated weapon systems were not that accurate at longer ranges. It took a huge amount of effort in order to make them precise enough to compete against sniper mechs such as the Amaranto!

Still, the client had made his demands known. It was up to Ves and the Professor to do their best to realize Patriarch Reginald's ideal mech.

Chapter 3707 A New Form of Adaptation

The Mars Project represented a turning point for the Cross Clan. It was not the most powerful mech the Crossers had ever possessed. That honor went to the powerhouse of a mech that Saint Hemmington Cross once piloted when he was alive.

Still, the Mars Project significantly exceeded the power level of the Bolvos Rage. Just the fact that it might come with a combat drive that provided it with unparalleled battlefield mobility would completely change the way it could apply its prodigious power on the battlefield!

These elements and more propelled the successor mech of the Bolvos Rage past the threshold of every other expert mech in the expeditionary fleet, the masterwork expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan included!

"This... this is no longer a second-class expert mech. This... is a semi-first-class expert mech." Ves uttered with increasing admiration.

The lead designer of this project responded with a proud smile. "Strictly speaking, it is not a first-class mech. Its tech and power level are too low for that, and it still relies too much on second-class components and materials. Besides, if we truly completed a machine that conforms to the standards of a first-class expert mech, our Cross Clan would no longer be welcome in the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

"Ah. I forgot about that. There are rules."

The rules weren't that strict. They only provided additional pressure to discourage first-class pioneers from throwing their weight around in zones where second-class pioneers made their homes.

The upper zones were a lot more profitable anyway. As the former stomping grounds of the major alien races, the key star systems concentrated a lot more wealth.

In comparison, the middle zones were the equivalent to rural provinces while the lower zones were akin to wastelands.

The Golden Skull Alliance was not ready to promote to the upper zones. There was no reason to head down to the lower zones either.

The latter would only become necessary if the alliance suffered a horrible defeat. Plenty of remnant forces had already trickled down to the most resource-poor areas of the Red Ocean that no one important cared about.

"The Mars Project is meant to impose absolute superiority in second-class combat." Professor Benedict stated as he exhibited greater anticipation towards this expert mech design project. "In terms of combat effectiveness, it should reach the top of what is possible for second-class expert mechs. If Patriarch Reginald Cross ever manages to succeed in breaking through, then the Mars Project will still be strong enough to accompany him in his initial years as an ace pilot. Though I do not expect him to be able to defeat an enemy ace mech with our work, there should be no doubts about his ability to crush other expert mechs!"

This was the Mars Project! This was the expert mech that would rule over other expert mechs in the expeditionary fleet!

Ves could clearly see from the draft designs that martial dominance was one of its defining themes. The mech more than any other he had seen before centered around maintaining and reinforcing Patriarch Reginald's already domineering spirit.

The Cross Clan was an organization that lived and breathed war since its inception. Having risen from the Garlen Empire, the Crossers inherited its martial culture and perpetuated it to this day.

In a society where the strongest fists earned the most respect, Patriarch Reginald had long led the Cross Clan with his unrivaled strength and his father's legacy.

This was also why Ves partially felt intimidated by the Mars Project. This extremely powerful mech not only threatened to rearrange the power balance within the Golden Skull Alliance, but might also trigger a repeat of the past!

"Professor... are you sure about providing such a domineering mech to your patriarch?" Ves carefully asked. "This mech has a lot of sharp edges. I can imagine that once it is finished, it will inflate every aggressive and foolhardy trait that he possesses. What if he goes down the same road that Saint Hemmington Cross once traversed? The Cross Clan has already broken once. A second leader who is all brawn and no brain can easily make that happen again."

Though Ves voiced his concerns, Professor Benedict did not look concerned in the slightest.

From the beginning, the silver-haired Senior Mech Designer that looked deceptively mild never exhibited any sign that anything was beyond his control. He already accounted for many variables related to the Mars Project that it was difficult for him to get caught off-guard.

The older man currently shook his head. "Your understanding of our clan and our patriarch is outdated. While I cannot deny that Reginald is not a suitable administrator, he is committed to learning from the mistakes of the past. He is well aware that even if he advances to ace pilot, he will not be able to act unscrupulously. Besides, there is an additional factor that has slowly encouraged Reginald to show more consideration to his fellow Crossers."

"And what is that?"

The professor made the sign of a cross with his fingers. "The kinship network you have given us. Through his connection with this fantastic existence, he has developed a greater heart towards his fellow people. I cannot say for certain how much this influence has changed him, but over the months I have noticed that he has exhibited more patience than before."

Ves looked pleasantly surprised. "That is good news. If he can become a more responsible leader, then we can actually rely on him on and off the battlefield."

"External pressures are also helping with dampening his aggressive tendencies. Different from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, the Red Ocean is a large pond where many powerful sharks are roaming around. The threat of the major alien races along with the relatively close proximity to the Terrans and Rubarthans will keep his worst excesses in check."

Patriarch Reginald recognized that he wouldn't be able to become the biggest bully in town if he broke through. The only way to change this was to advance to god pilot, but that was such a mythical endeavor that he could only work quietly in order to progress faster.

Now that Ves dropped his concerns, they turned their attention back to the draft designs.

He could see a lot of hints of what Professor Benedict had in store for this powerful mech, but he did not observe as much details as he wished. The more he studied it, the more he felt that there were gaps.

"Wait a minute. Your specialty is energy transmission systems, right? Why don't I see much of that in your draft designs? They are considerably vague on the internals."

This was unusual to say the least. Mech designers mostly started off their design projects by beginning with their specialty. Their design philosophies literally colored their views on mech designs and always dominated the first design choices they made.

For a draft design to lack the strongest aspects that a mech designer was known for was definitely deliberate.

Professor Benedict did not keep Ves in suspense and summoned additional projections. Each of them showed diagrams that depicted the outlines of the internal architecture of the Mars Project. Each of them were rudimentary and subject to a lot of changes, but they already provided Ves with a much better idea of what the Senior Mech Designer wanted to accomplish with this expert mech design project.

"Earlier, I spoke about upgrading the power reactor of the Mars Project. This provides a massive boost to the mech, but as you know it is far from easy to leverage the abundance of energy it can output. The rest of the mech frame must be robust and powerful enough to cope with the powerful currents, but that is difficult to accomplish even with decent materials. What I have done is create a new concept of internal architecture that blends both my established strengths as well as the inspiration that I have successfully converted in my own gains."

The Senior had already mentioned numerous times of how he admired and took inspiration from Ves' work. By showing the older mech designer that mechs could be designed on another level aside from the physical was quite an eye-opening experience to him! This was especially important because he had one butchered an expert pilot in order to achieve a similar result!

To be able to gain the potential key to his advancement of Master without provoking the MTA was a fantastic turn of events for him! It took him quite a lot of time to reform his design philosophy, but he had finally reached a state where he could unveil his first fruits.

The professor proudly tapped at one of his diagrams. "What I have learned from your work does not enable me to supplant your specialty, but that is not my intention. The qualities of your design philosophy suit your inclinations the best, so even if I am greedy for them, I know quite well that there is little point in imitating a pioneer in his own field. The key lesson that I have learned from you is the power of adaptation."

When the man tapped the diagram yet again, an astounding change took place.

The power lines and structural elements... changed.

In their initial state, the internal architecture looked as if it was designed to generate as much peak performance out of the mech's weapons systems.

This was a configuration that was highly suitable for duels and hit-and-run attacks. The downside to it was that it overheated so quickly that the Mars Project's dimensional heat sinks would have to work overtime to cool this moving volcano down!

The change that Professor Benedict had introduced practically inverted the power profile of the Mars Project.

A mech with this kind of setup would no longer be able to use up as much energy in the same period of time. Its weapon systems, active defensive modules and flight system therefore became a lot weaker as the machine simply wasn't able to feed them as much.

In exchange, the Mars Project became a lot more efficient with how it utilized the lower energy output. It not only gained an immense amount of staying power, but it also cooled down a lot faster.

It was already good enough if the Mars Project possessed one of the two configurations. Yet Professor Benedict had a lot more in store for his expert mech design project!

"Are you... trying to make the internal architecture adaptable?" Ves asked with wide eyes.

"Correct. Why settle for one solution when it is possible to incorporate two of them? If I can realize this new idea, the Mars Project will be able to pick and choose its own power profile on the spot. Against large hordes of weaker opponents, it is enough for it to adopt a power-saving configuration. If it has to duel against another high-tier expert mech, it should switch over to a peak performance configuration right away. As long as this transition is fast enough, Patriarch Reginald will be able to display the greatest possible effectiveness and efficiency at all times!"

This was an impressive idea! Ves was astounded by how far Professor Benedict was willing to go in pursuit of energy efficiency!

The brilliance of designing an adaptable internal architecture was that most mechs were designed with more balanced configurations in mind.

While there were certainly mechs that possessed an emphasis on either peak performance or maximum endurance, these biases went only half-way most of the time.

To be able to switch to the extremes whenever the Mars Project fought against different opponents would rid itself of the compromises that weakened its battle power. It could more closely perform at 100 percent efficiency at all times!

Achieving 100 percent was practically impossible, at least with the tech, materials and methods utilized by second-class mech designers.

Perhaps first-class mech designers had access to better options that could get a mech to perform at 100 percent efficiency, but it was already good that the Mars Project had the potential to waste much less energy in multiple different situations.

A higher efficiency directly translated to stronger and more long-lasting performance!

Chapter 3708 - Changing Seats

Though the two mech designers eventually returned to studying the phasewater that their expeditionary forces obtained from the pakklaton refugee fleet, Ves no longer became as excited about phasewater as before.

He even figured that this entire meeting was an excuse for Professor Benedict Cortez to have a heart-to-heart talk with him. The way that a Senior Mech Designer made a formal bow left a strong impression on his psyche!

Professor Benedict was not the sort of person who acted frivolously. Just like his specialty, he prized efficiency and tried to make every action or word he said as meaningful as possible.

From beginning to end, Benedict did not treat Ves as a Journeyman that he could boss around.

Instead, both of them spoke on an equal level most of the time. While there were instances where Professor Benedict's considerable expertise and experience put him on a higher level, he shared more knowledge than was strictly needed.

Ves learned a lot during this hours-long session. He not only gained a closer appreciation of Professor Benedict's design philosophy and perspective, but also became more familiar with him on a personal level.

Of course, he was not blind to the practical benefits of developing a stronger personal bond between them. Since they were likely about to become the two most important mech designers of the Mars Project, increasing their intimacy was a good way to improve the finished mech design.

Ves and Gloriana had developed one of the closest bonds that mech designers could establish, so he already experienced the benefits first-hand.

There was no reason for Ves to reject Professor Benedict's goodwill. The Senior Mech Designer may not come across as sane on some days, but today happened to be a good day.

Once Ves finally boarded his shuttle again, his head was filled with a lot of new thoughts.

Getting a better feel and understanding of phasewater was only secondary. What Ves actually lingered on was all of the revelations he received about Professor Benedict's promising new innovations as well as the initial outlines of the Mars Project.

The Mars Project had become a pivotal mech for the Crossers. If it lived up to its promises, then the expert mech may very well spark a new era for both the Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance!

"Everything will change if the Cross Clan will truly be able to gain a Master Mech Designer as well as an ace pilot!"

The Cross Clan would have the biggest right to speak in the Golden Skull Alliance if that happened.

Ves initially couldn't figure out how he should feel about that. Was this a bad outcome?

A part of him would say yes. He had gotten used to being the top dog in the Golden Skull Alliance. It would be extremely difficult for him to maintain the same dominance if he had to compete directly against both an ace pilot and a Master.

Still, as Ves put more thought in it, he realized that his fears were probably overblown.

What he feared the most was other people trying to use him or boss him around. He did not think that a reinvigorated Cross Clan would do that to the Larkinson Clan. Both sides had already provided so much assistance to each other that neither of them would subjugate each other by force.

Instead, Ves thought it was likely that the Cross Clan would extend its protection to the Larkinson Clan.

Though the Crossers possessed a huge strength and rank advantage, their top figures were already old.

The Larkinson Clan was still young and its key members were predominantly two or three generations younger.

Everyone knew that Ves possessed high potential as a mech designer! As long as he succeeded in becoming a Master, his actual prowess would definitely exceed that of his peers!

Besides, Ves provided lots of benefits even if he was still a Journeyman. The utility he provided through his living mechs and so on was indispensable.

Otherwise, Patriarch Reginald wouldn't have requested Ves to turn the Mars Project into a living mech!

Now that Ves regained his confidence in his own organization, he no longer viewed the Cross Clan with as much dread.

With the principled personalities of its top two figures, the chances that either of them would backstab Ves and the Larkinsons were not high.

"This will be even more so once they advance to this point. Ace pilots are extremely rigid about their promises and Masters value their credibility like it is their religion."

Ves viewed this development in a favorable light. If the Cross Clan became the big brother of the Golden Skull Alliance, the Larkinson Clan no longer had to shoulder a huge burden alone.

The loss of control and decision-making power that came with this turn of events were acceptable prices to pay as long as the Larkinsons did not turn into complete followers.

"A decade or half a decade of peaceful development sounds nice."

It was impossible for that to happen, though. The Red Ocean was too tumultuous to give everyone a break. Ves also craved stimulation and the only way he could get his fix was to explore the unknown bounty of the new frontier!

"Does that make me an addict?"

As Ves pondered this question, his shuttle finally brought him back to his flagship.

Once he returned, everything went back on track. Ves and the other mech designers largely busied themselves with managing their spoils and resuming their work on their last mech design projects for the soon-to-be-completed design round.

Meanwhile, time went by as the expeditionary fleet continued to hover alongside the pakklaton prize fleet.

The voribug infestations were no longer as serious as before. They even turned into punching bags that the expeditionary forces utilized to train their armed forces.

All of the infantry units of the Larkinson Clan rotated to the pakklaton ships in order to gain real experience fighting against actual enemies.

Even brave groups of mech pilots joined the fray. Each of them needed to get acquainted with the psychological pressures of fighting an actual battle and facing the threat of death.

The most ridiculous instance was when a group of highly talented but completely green mech cadets went on a field trip to one of the alien vessels!

Lanie and her classmates managed to acquit themselves well, but as soon as Ves heard about this trip, he immediately ordered the Larkinson Mech Academy to stop these reckless tours!

"Don't underestimate the voribugs! Even if they appear weak and under control, who knows whether they will be able to breach their limitations. Leave the tours aside and focus on minimizing their population."

Ves was actually quite glad to see that his clansmen had overcome their fear of the alien threat. Sure, the voribugs weren't all that scary when their numbers hadn't accumulated up to a point, but they were still killers who always tried their best to slaughter any form of life that was not a fellow voribug!

As he continued to settle one matter after another, he abruptly froze when he became notified of an alarming piece of news!

"Who broke into the box where I stored the Angel of Transcendence!?"

Almost no one was allowed to wander in his personal workshop. The only one who could wander in without asking permission was Gloriana, but she never took advantage of this privilege because she vastly preferred to tinker around in her own workshop.

It didn't take long for Ves to recall that he had recently extended permission to Ketis.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Did she think about breaking in back then?"

He already figured out that Ketis came with a predetermined plan!

Suffice to say, Ves immediately called her in for a meeting. Given the sensitive nature of this breach, he invited her to his personal office.

"Meow."

Lucky lounged on the desk as usual when Ketis finally stepped through the hatch.

Ves studied her carefully. He did not believe she sought out the Angel of Transcendence just because she wanted to experience a new thrill. She almost certainly sought it out because she wanted to achieve a breakthrough in some way.

He could immediately spot the difference between the self-assured warrior before his desk and the uncertain woman who had fallen into doubt.

Whatever she managed to do most certainly helped her overcome her difficulties. This was good. At least she hadn't breached the rules in vain.

Though he was relieved and satisfied that Ketis managed to find her center again and get back on track, he was also enormously worried about the recklessness she displayed.

For a moment, he didn't know how to begin this meeting.

"You should already know why I called you here." He said after he recalled that he was dealing with a 'smart' mech designer and not a 'stupid' mech pilot. "I won't say any useless stuff. What do you have to say for yourself?"

He threw the ball in her court, allowing her to start this conversation and set the tone of this meeting.

For her part, Ketis did not show any regret or remorse.

"I may have acted improperly according to the rules of the clan, and I may have violated your trust, but I knew what I was doing. Those organic statues... maybe you don't fully realize it yet since you are only a mech designer, but they can provide a huge amount of help to expert pilots and swordmasters like myself. With my mental strength, the danger posed by any of them is reduced to a minimum. Even the Angel of Transcendence, which you fear so much, is only a paper tiger in my eyes. I would not have tried to reach it if it was stronger."

Ves glowered. "You could have told me, you know."

"We've been working alongside each other for years, Ves. I know you. There are times when you are amazingly reckless, but there are also times when you are too overprotective. If I walked up to you and directly requested you to lead me to the Angel of Transcendence, would you have done it or would you have kept it hidden inside a dark box?"

He could not provide her with a good answer. He feared that he would likely choose to go for the latter option. There was much about the Angel of Transcendence and its effect on different humans that he had yet to understand.

It had already blown up hundreds of heads! Having witnessed this bloodshed first-hand, how could Ves feel relieved to allow one of his closest friends and comrade to fool around with such a dangerous totem?

"Look, I might have said no in such a situation, but I am always open to persuasion. If you relied on solid logic to argue your case, I might have granted your wish after we perform a few careful tests and examinations."

"I couldn't wait that long." Ketis shook her head. "I saw a solution, so I went for it. I cut through all of the middle parts and went straight for the end. That's the kind of girl I am. A day ago, I was in a crisis. You don't know how it feels for powerful warriors like myself to fall into a pit of doubt and questioning. It was eating away my confidence. The sooner I remedied myself, the greater my chances of avoiding more serious repercussions. If my state of doubt went on for too long, I would have developed psychological problems that could not easily be resolved anymore. I was particularly afraid of that happening due to my unusual condition. You know as well as I do that I am not a traditional swordmaster. Have you ever thought about the dangers and complications that brings?"

Ves grew serious. He indeed neglected this aspect. He just thought that Ketis had won the lottery and managed to become both a Journeyman and a swordmaster at the same time. He never thought to look past the amazing benefits she received!

"Sit down and tell me about your issues. Let's figure this out together."

Chapter 3709 - Sharper

Though Ves still felt pissed about Ketis going behind his back, he did not quibble too much over her crimes. He was much more concerned about her health and safety. Getting to the bottom of this mattered a lot more than anything trivial.

As Ketis took her seat, Ves recalled that she had an accomplice.

"Lucky."

"Meow?"

"Do you know what you have done?"

"Meow?"

"Just because you have a good relationship with her doesn't mean you should listen to her whenever she wants you to take action! I'll deal with you later."

"Meow." Lucky rolled his body away from Ves and took a nap without exhibiting any concern!

Ves rolled his eyes at his cat's behavior, but he did not linger too long on this issue. He turned his attention back to Ketis and studied her form a bit deeper.

"Before we go any further, I'd like to examine you. Can you show me Sharpie? I can sense that your companion spirit has undergone substantial changes. It has a different feel to my senses."

Sharpie appeared out of Ketis' floating greatsword. Initially, the spirit looked like a miniature greatsword.

However, upon receiving a silent signal, Sharpie morphed into a downsized version of Ketis!

"What?!"

Ves almost stood up as he observed the changes!

Though he was quite aware that spiritual 'matter' was morphable and never as solid as real matter, he still became surprised by how Sharpie was able to change forms so drastically.

From what he learned about spirituality, the shape and appearance of spiritual entities directly reflected their identities. It was insanely difficult for such beings to change shape as that would entail a direct change of the essence of their own being.

Before, Sharpie adopted the shape of a sword, which said a lot on how it perceived itself. Sharpie was the living sword that Ketis always carried in her mind. It was the personification of her will to succeed and cut everything in her way.

This was a simple enough interpretation for Ves to figure out. Now that Sharpie was not only able to change shape, but also adopt a form that was a lot more complex in nature, how was he supposed to interpret this bizarre change?

The newly-evolved Sharpie did not hover around and do nothing. It, no, she directly preened in front of Ves while swinging her tiny greatsword as if to show off her might.

Due to her diminutive size, Sharpie looked like a toddler swinging around a toy sword. She looked rather cute if not for the fact that she was an extraordinary companion spirit that was also the source of Ketis' swordmaster powers!

If that wasn't surprising enough, Sharpie unveiled another little surprise!

"Sharp! Sharp! Sharp!"

"Huh?!"

Ves looked shocked at Sharpie!

This wasn't because Sharpie was able to communicate. Many spiritual entities were able to convey meaning to others.

The problem was that as intangible existences that could not meaningfully affect the material realm, they were incapable of creating actual sounds.

That would require them to gain the strength, ability or knowledge to affect the material realm in a way that allowed them to vibrate the molecules in a volume of gas or liquid.

Perhaps the Superior Mother was able to do that due to her sophisticated techniques and brilliant methods of leveraging her strength, but she had never demonstrated this capacity so far. It was far more strenuous than just conveying her thoughts directly to a receptive individual such as Ves.

This was why Sharpie was such an anomaly. The fact that she was able to create actual sounds was already notable, but what truly caught his attention was that the companion spirit did not look as if she had grown tired!

"It's a willpower thing." Ketis explained when she saw his confusion. "I was surprised as well that Sharpie is able to speak like this. After examining her for a few minutes, I figured out that she can use our willpower to bend reality so that she can exert pressure onto air molecules."

"Sharp Sharp Sharp!"

"Can Sharpie say anything more than that?" Ves asked.

"No." Ketis regrettably shook her head. "Believe me, I tried. I don't know what is wrong, but I am sure that Sharpie will be able to expand her vocabulary once she grows stronger. Right now, she is too new to her human form. She needs time to adapt and consolidate her latest round of changes."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he looked at Sharpie with an intrigued expression.

"There has to be more to Sharpie's evolution than just a shape change. What else did she gain?"

"Well, she can do this." Ketis smirked.

"Sharp! Sharp!" The cute mini-Ketis kept repeating the same word as she started to demonstrate the moves of the Annihilator Sword Style.

The doll-like spiritual entity did not just imitate the form of the style. She actually changed her demeanor so that she better aligned with the destructive sword style before her intangible blade actually glowed in an ominous dark corona.

Sharpie then dove with her tiny greatsword, causing her to penetrate the reinforced deck of Ves' office!

"HEY! Don't damage my ship!"

"Sharp! Sharp!"

Though Sharpie looked a bit more tired than before, Ves was still impressed by what the little companion spirit had accomplished.

Sharpie was able to deal a substantial amount of damage in the material realm by relying on her inherent capabilities.

She did not make use of the Bloodsinger. She did not channel her power through Ketis. She did not leverage the power of a mech.

It was all her! The companion spirit was able to inflict actual damage without any assistance, which meant that she had gained real bite this time!

This meant that even if Ketis was captured and restrained in almost every way, as long as her force of will was still intact, Sharpie would be able to create a bloodbath all by herself!

"This is a useful development!" Ves gasped. "Well, I don't think you will actually need Sharpie to do any fighting, but she is still a handy option to have in emergencies."

Only Blinky could match what Sharpie had just done, but that was only in the case where Ves channeled his powerful Worclaw energy through his companion spirit.

Mrow~

Blinky appeared from Ves' mind and curiously floated towards Sharpie.

"Sharp."

Sharpie stopped swinging her tiny blade and flew over to Blinky in order to hug the relatively large cat!

Mrow mrow~

The sight looked rather silly to Ves and Ketis. To them, it was like a miniature human was embracing a miniature tiger.

Ketis giggled a bit. "They look cute."

"They're far more powerful than they appear." Ves seriously said. "Blinky is no slouch, but your new Sharpie is much more useful now that she has adopted a human form. Can I ask why you evolved her in this direction? I thought with your personality, you would have chosen to turn Sharpie into an even sharper and better sword."

"That was my original plan as well, but I thought it was too simple for me. This will take a bit of explaining. Earlier, I hinted that being a Journeyman and a swordmaster isn't necessarily a paradise. Sure, I have more power in my hands than anyone else at this stage, but I am constantly split between the mentality of a mech designer and the mentality of a swordmaster. They are practically polar opposites when it comes to how you perceive reality and how you want to manipulate it. The further I progressed, the more I struggled with this dichotomy. The latest problem that I experienced finally prompted me to take drastic action."

"Did you succeed? Does Sharpie's new form help you with dealing with your split focus?"

Ketis smiled and nodded. "Definitely. Let me explain it to you with the help of an analogy. Let's say that I run a small traditional restaurant. Before, worked as both the chef and the waiter of my business. On one hand, I had to manage the ingredients and cook the meals. On the other hand, I had to serve the dishes and fulfill customer requests. These are two substantially different jobs, and while I was managing to keep up with the transitions, I never wore any of my hats long enough to concentrate on any of my jobs for too long."

"I see." Ves understood the gist of her story. "If you keep cooking and serving dishes in quick succession, you can never excel at any of the two jobs. The quality of your meals won't be able to increase as much."

"That's right. My answer to this problem is to bring in additional help. Since I primarily like to be a 'cook', I chose to concentrate more on my mech design activities and shift most of my preoccupation with swordsmanship to Sharpie."

"It's as if you hired a serving bot!" Ves remarked.

This was a brilliant solution!

However, Ketis shook her head. "Not exactly. Sharpie is not a mere bot. I did not hire a waiter either. Instead... you could say that I cloned myself and handed off the responsibility of serving customers to my clone."

That was indeed a more accurate description of what Ketis had done. When Ves studied Sharpie in a different light, he became impressed by how human she looked.

Though Sharpie had not yet reached the same level as a human, Ves could foresee a time when she could evolve once again and turn into a more complete form of life, equivalent to that of his third-order living mechs!

"So how did Sharpie evolving to this form solve your original doubts?" He asked.

This was a bit unclear to him at the moment.

"The order is wrong. I first used your Aspect of Tranquility and Aspect of Healing to know myself better and gain a clearer picture of what I was struggling with. I then used the Aspect of Transcendence to accelerate the process of resolving my doubts. When that happened, my swordmaster persona gained a boost of power which I purposed into altering Sharpie's nature. If I hadn't hit a minor bottleneck, the process of transforming Sharpie would have probably taken longer if it was possible to do so at all. Do you understand?"

"I think I do." Ves said as he became thoughtful again.

What happened to Ketis was outside of his knowledge base. Companion spirits were still new and several different variations existed. Sharpie was different from the rest in that she did not solely consist of spiritual energy but was also made up of extraordinary willpower.

This caused Sharpie to follow a mutated trajectory which had less in common with the normal progression of other companion spirits such as Blinky and Alexandria.

Ves lowered his head. "I can't give you any advice. I hardly know what I am doing with companion spirits and I still haven't seen how far they could go. What you have managed to do with Sharpie is unprecedented. You are a trailblazer, which means you need to forge your own way forward by yourself. I think I understand a bit better why you took action on your own. No one can tell you what you should do. If even I don't have a clue what is going on, then I doubt that there is a second person that can provide guidance."

"It's fine. I am used to it. I am confident that I can overcome all of the challenges that I will meet. This is just the first of many tests. With Sharpie in her new and more autonomous form, her ability to solve her own problems is much greater than before. She's like a second consciousness in my mind!"

That caused Ves to lose a bit of his elation. When Ketis described Sharpie in this manner, he developed a new concern.

"Are you saying that Sharpie has a more independent companion spirit?"

"Yes. She's become a lot more human than before. Why? Is that wrong?"

"What will happen if she evolves into a 'human' that becomes stronger than you? Will 'Sharpie' be content to allow you to keep inhabiting your own body?"

"Huh?"

Chapter 3710 - Better Applications

When Ves originally came up with the concept of a companion spirit, he quickly developed concerns about control.

A companion spirit originally came from a part of a person's spirituality. Ves essentially scooped up a portion of someone's spirit and infused it with life, causing it to develop a measure of independence.

However, Ves always made sure to make the companion spirit both loyal and subordinate to its originator.

He never grew concerned that Blinky would grow out of control because of these measures.

The issue was that nothing was absolute and any companion spirit could mutate in ways that contradicted their initial design.

That was the effect of life and growth. Companion spirits were never static and always grew over time.

In Sharpie's original design, Ves had never intended it to become a clone of Ketis. He actually contemplated this possibility before but always developed nightmares about the clone taking over the life of the original!

Though Ves could see that Ketis and Sharpie got along like bosom buddies at the moment, what if this changed one day? What if one of them started to resent the other?

Ketis did not exhibit much fear, though.

"That won't happen, Ves. The two of us are inseparable. Even if Sharpie grows smarter and more human, we are still the same person more or less. I am Ketis and Sharpie is also Ketis. If I was not so assured of this, I would not have expanded Sharpie's autonomy."

The certainty and self-assurance in her tone left Ves with little doubt that she was determined to make Sharpie more human.

She had already taken the first steps on this new path. There was no way someone as willful as her would back out at this point.

Ves looked helplessly at her former student. If she was someone less important to him like Melkor or Vincent, then he would have treated her as a test subject and given her his full blessings.

Unfortunately, she wasn't expendable to him. He would feel terrible if she suffered a mishap one day because of her continued attempts to push the boundaries of her companion spirit.

There wasn't much he could do. Ketis was an adult who was responsible for her own decisions. She had weighed the pros and cons by herself and decided that this was the best course of action.

If she made a mistake, she was already prepared to own up to it. She bet her future in the hopes of obtaining a fantastic advantage once Sharpie developed to a monstrous point in the far future.

"What is your endgame, Ketis? What is the goal that you are trying to reach by humanizing Sharpie?"

Mrow mrow!

"Sharp! Sharp!"

Though the current iteration of Sharpie resembled a cute doll that a child like Aurelia would love to play with, Ves could clearly sense the sharp and unshakable will inside her diminutive form!

Sharpie actually gave him a sense of threat that was similar to that of his mother when she was in her own small ghostly form.

If the companion spirit was already this strong as an 'infant', how powerful would it become after a century of growth? Would Sharpie grow to the size of an adult human?

Maybe Sharpie might grow even bigger to the point where it could contend equally against mechs!

At that point in time, the traditional shortcomings of swordmasters might no longer apply. After all, whereas human warriors were always limited by their scale, a spiritual entity that could constantly morph its body was not as constrained!

Ketis threw an intriguing smile at Ves. "Wouldn't you like to know? I have a few ideas, but I am taking this one step at a time. As you have just said, this is all new to the both of us, so any plans I make right now are based on incomplete information. The only way I can go forward is to rely on my instincts and observations to figure out my next moves."

That was the wisest course of action. Ves was relieved that Ketis did not possess the hubris to construct a complete model out of limited data and assume that it provided her with an ironclad formula for success.

Innovation was much messier than that. Anyone who groped in the dark continually had to remind themselves that they rarely held the right answers.

"Now that I'm here, I'd like to bring up a more important topic with you." She said.

"Oh?"

Ketis glanced at Sharpie who kept playing games with Blinky. At one point, she even sat on top of the Star Cat as if she was riding a battle mount!

"How long has it been since you created those organic statues?" She asked. "Ever since you made them, all you've done is put them in your personal workshop and allowed them to collect dust. You have hardly made use of them aside from making those strange Sanctuary variants of yours."

"What are you driving at, Ketis?"

"Do you know how I came up with the idea of leveraging your Aspects of Lufa to solve my doubts?"

"No."

"Thought so. You can thank your Sanctuary models for that. I checked up on how your customers made use of them. While they haven't sold well in the old galaxy due to their poor marketing and extreme pricing, a few military organizations have actually bought them in bulk. Interesting, is it not? Why would they buy so many overpriced third-class mechs at once?"

Ves grew curious as well. He activated his terminal and searched for this topic. He soon discovered that the LMC wrote a few reports about how the local agents speculated that the military organizations were actually taking advantage of the Sanctuaries to treat expert pilots!

"What a brilliant solution!"

He didn't know who came up with the idea and how they convinced their bosses to purchase the Sanctuaries just so they could present them to different expert pilots, but the approach seemed to bear a bit fruit.

Of course, all of those psychologists and other specialists were being extremely cautious about experimenting with the Sanctuaries. The new methods were still

unverified and any procedure involving a state's precious expert pilots had to be conducted with the utmost care!

Therefore sales of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions hadn't skyrocketed, which explained why Ves hadn't noticed this development.

However, he could already foresee a trend where his customers would make more use of his Sanctuaries once the specialists figured out the correct way to make use of Lufa's glows.

Once a single state managed to crack the code, all of the other states would adopt the same methods as well!

After all, if one state managed to make use of the two Sanctuary variants to produce more expert pilots and raise their resonance strengths at a faster rate, then it would eventually attain regional superiority!

The Komodo War had already shown how being able to field more expert mechs could change the fate of a state. No one would say no to pursuing greater power!

Ketis' reminder caused Ves to recognize that his Sanctuary Treatment Editions turned out to be even more useful than he thought!

Perhaps he should have priced it at an even higher level!

His eyes sparkled as he expressed his gratitude towards his former student. "You are right. I haven't been paying as much attention to my old work as I should. I am always obsessed with my upcoming mech designs that I rarely put serious effort into looking back. Maybe I should check up on how all of my other old commercial mech models are doing. The mechs that we have produced over the years are all living mechs, after all. With the passage of time, I bet that plenty of them have grown formidable in their own different ways."

"Anyway, when I looked into your Sanctuary mechs and read all of the reports on how different people have benefited from the Tranquility and Healing variants, I became inspired. Why should you limit their use to norms? They can work equally well on expert pilots as long as they take the initiative to open themselves up. Although the glows are not beneficial all the time, as long as an expert pilot is troubled, your Sanctuary mechs can help make the problem go away!"

Ves widened his eyes. Ketis opened him up to new possibilities! There was so much potential in his existing work, but he didn't recognize it before! It took someone younger and more junior than him in order to figure out these basic truths!

"I never thought much about how glows interact with expert pilots since they can easily resist any mental influence. However, if the pilots lower their mental defenses on their own initiative, the treatments will definitely have an effect!"

This realization sounded so simple, but the implications were massive!

Demigods were essentially brain-damaged mech pilots who derived their strengths from extreme convictions and obsessions.

Were they normal?

Absolutely not!

Every expert pilot was insane by definition. While this was good in terms of moving closer to the rank of god pilot, this could also be bad because distorted personalities always produced mental problems!

Given these circumstances, wouldn't it be great if expert pilots could regain their balance

Ketis grinned like a shark. "In my opinion, your Aspects of Lufa become twice as relevant when they are used to help expert pilots sort out the hindrances that drag down their growth. While I'm not sure about the Aspect of Rationality, the other three statues can definitely help people like myself and Venerable Joshua!"

"Even the Aspect of Transcendence?" Ves skeptically asked.

"I have made use of it in person so I know it can." Ketis confidently answered. "I don't recommend you expose it to our expert pilots too frequently. They need to be able to do most of the work themselves, or else they won't work as hard as before. The Aspect of Transcendence should only be used to facilitate breakthroughs or help people past their bottlenecks. Don't worry. Even the weakest expert pilot won't be at risk. The threat level is completely different to powerful people."

Though Ves wasn't sure about all of this, Ketis had a lot in common with expert pilots. She could speak with authority on this issue.

"I am truly impressed you came up with this idea."

Ketis smirked and crossed her arms. "You should have known about it sooner. The reason why you didn't is because you cling too closely to your many secrets. You never let anyone get involved in your Aspects of Lufa, so there was no one with you that could look at your work from a different angle."

"You're right." Ves sighed. "While I do keep a lot of secrets, I suppose it isn't necessary to hold onto my Aspects of Lufa so tightly. I could have made more progress in my research if I had a bright mind like you in my research team."

"Hehe, if you think my earlier idea is useful enough, then my next one will definitely make you rethink their usage. From what I have gathered, your Aspect of Transcendence is your way of helping mech pilots advance, right?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. "Yes..."

"And your attempts never succeeded, right?"

"Uhm, that's not strictly true. I managed to create a few successes, but the costs are too high."

"You're going about it the wrong way." She plainly told him. "In matters like this, why haven't you asked our expert pilots to help out the people that are hoping to break through?"

"Huh?"

"Our expert pilots can keep a close eye on how much progress a mech pilot is making. I know that the Aspect of Transcendence is dangerous, but so what? With the guidance of an expert pilot, anyone who tries to break through while under the effect of its glow do not have to fear too much! As long as an expert pilot is sharp enough, he or she can vaguely understand what is taking place. I believe this is the right way for ordinary people to take advantage of the Aspect of Transcendence!"

What a radical idea! Ves never thought about using expert pilots as mentors to the people hoping to achieve a breakthrough, but Ketis' suggestion made a lot of sense!