

## Mech 3761

### *Chapter 3761 - Deriving Lessons*

As much as Ves did not think highly of the Monster Slayer's potential to become a living mech, he did not rule out the possibility entirely.

There were always exceptions. Humanity's mech industry was incredibly vast and diverse.

When Ves visited the Masterwork Gallery in Chance Bay, he personally confirmed that every exhibit possessed varying degrees of X-Factor.

This was something inherent to them due to how much emotion and effort their makers had put into their design and fabrication. The mech designers literally imbued their work with a portion of themselves. This was probably the basis for making their machines alive, if only faintly.

The mechs probably wouldn't experience any further growth unless they became affected by exceptional circumstances.

The most obvious way for mechs to become more alive was to be used by a mech pilot that was breaking through!

This was why the mechs that continually accompanied a legendary mech pilot throughout their careers were so much more impressive than an ordinary machine. They had always retained and accumulated a portion of the excess energies released by their pilots.

Suffice to say, this process was so rare and difficult to accomplish that it was no surprise that the mech industry barely possessed a clue about this process.

Even if a mech designer was aware of what was happening, the money, resources and effort required to upgrade a mech to better standards was too great.

It was much more convenient to assign newer and more powerful mechs to the pilots that had just broken through!

This was especially the case when an expert candidate advanced to expert pilot. No one wanted to go through all of the trouble of upgrading a standard mech to an expert mech.

The evolution of the Shield of Samar was the exception rather than the rule!

The treatment that Venerable Jannzi received was too extravagant. An ordinary organization would never think about transforming a third-class standard mech into a second-class expert mech!

The rewards of going through all of this trouble also weren't as obvious for mechs designed by people other than himself. The only reason to go through with an upgrade was if the mech pilot strongly insisted on sticking with the same battle partner.

"Other mech designers have to go through so much effort while I don't need to do anything special." Ves smirked.

What Ves was trying to do with his mech designs was nothing more than make this rare and mystical process more accessible to the mech market.

His work enabled someone without the potential to become extraordinary to pilot a living mech right out of the gate.

Even someone devoid of greater talent such as Melkor would be able to pilot an impressive third-order living mech as long as he continued to partner with his new Gold Beacon!

Ves was thankful to Ketis for giving him a greater understanding of where he stood in the mech industry. It was difficult for him to recognize his own advantages when he was the only one to design proper living mechs.

While Gloriana was able to make her mechs a little more alive, she didn't count because she had access to a minute portion of his domain.

Someone like Ketis who learned his basic methods and theories but did not have the foundation to match his efforts was a true representation of what others could accomplish.

In other words, people like Juliet, Jovy, Professor Benedict and Master Willix all had the ability to design first-order living mechs.

Still, Ves did not think about teaching them because it did not make a difference most of the time. His peers and betters all possessed their own specialties.

In addition, it took a lot of changes to make it viable to produce living mechs. The production process needed to be adjusted as well and it was much harder to make mechs produced through materialization alive.

Ves faintly shook his head. "There is little point to teaching others if their work doesn't synergize with living mechs."

Ketis was one of the rare mech designers who took advantage of this phenomenon to enhance her own design applications. She wouldn't have been able to turn the Monster Slayer into a Chiron-like training mech without giving her work the necessary foundation!

This wasn't a one-sided relationship. Just as Ketis took inspiration from living mechs, Ves was able to derive lessons from her own work!

The way she imprinted her Monster Slayer with a sword style that was meant to be passed on to its pilots was different from his usual methods.

Although he wasn't able to replicate this process immediately, he was confident that he could slowly develop a similar application as long as he invested time in this research project.

"It's not much use, though." Ves frowned.

The reason why this method worked for Ketis was because she could utilize her impressive swordsmanship as her database.

As for Ves, how the hell was he supposed to know how to fight with a sword? He was a mech designer, not a swordmaster! Whatever skills he could pass on to his mechs would probably distract his customers more than anything!

Anyway, Ketis just concluded her presentation on her first commercial mech design. She was currently in the process of answering questions.

"I am curious to see how quickly the Monster Slayer will catch on in the mech market." Gloriana said. "Many of the benefits of your work are immediately accessible, but this swordsmanship training capability sounds vague. Will it work for any mech pilot?" ?ll ?  
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Ketis sighed and shook her head. "No. Not exactly. According to my assumptions, the mech pilots need to be receptive towards my mech. If the pilot doesn't take my Monster Slayer seriously, then I doubt anything will happen. We will need to make sure that my customers know what they must do in order to make the most out of my new work."

Once she answered a few more questions, she finally moved on to presenting the last completed mech design project of the current design round.

The second swordsman mech in the workshop possessed many similarities to the Monster Slayer that she had just showcased.

However, her second model was designed with a different target audience and usage in mind.

"This is my Second Sword." Ketis announced. "As you can see, it is coated in the green-and-blue colors of the mech legion that I am closest to. I have spent a lot of effort designing this mech to match the training and mech doctrines of the Swordmaidens. As their sister, I have deeply invested into this design, and what I managed to accomplish will serve as the standard of Swordmaidens to come."

She briefly summarized the overall configuration of the Second Sword. Unlike her previous work, the Swordmaiden-exclusive mech model was a spaceborn mech that conformed to military standards.

"The design budget of my Second Sword design is around 3 MTA credits. This is almost twice as much as my Monster Slayer and reflects the elite status of my mech and its intended pilots."

The Second Sword was indeed one of the more expensive models of the Larkinson Clan once it entered service. Ves had been generous in allocating this much room to her because the Swordmaidens were worth the investment.

The Swordmaidens weren't as resilient as the Living Sentinels. They also weren't as rounded and versatile as the Avatars of Myth.

What they did excel at was applying their superior swordsmanship skills to achieve superiority in battle!

Due to their harsh training and hyperspecialization in piloting swordsman mechs, the Swordmaidens could outfight many superior melee mechs.

The Bright Warriors in their swordsman mech configurations turned into entirely different beasts in their hands!

This was why the Second Sword design was so important. Ever since they became a part of the clan, the Swordmaidens piloted mechs that weren't specifically designed for their fighting style.

The Second Sword represented a radical departure from this reality. No mech designer could accommodate their needs better than Ketis!

With her deep background in the Swordmaidens and her profound understanding of swordsmanship, she designed her first Swordmaiden-exclusive mech model with elements that complimented their target users as much as possible!

"Aside from the differences in cost and flight capability, my Second Sword is also a more advanced mech in terms of difficulty. It is harder for mech pilots to get started with it because I exclusively designed it with the assumption that it will solely be piloted by well-trained Swordmaidens. It possesses a high skill floor because I included advanced

design elements that can provide greater advantages to elite mech pilots who know what they are doing."

A mech like that probably wouldn't sell well on the mech market, but Ketis didn't have to worry about that. By limiting her target audience to a highly specific group of mech pilots, she was able to adopt an approach similar to how Gloriana designed her custom mechs!

It helped that the Swordmaidens were highly homogenous as a group. Their mech pilots all mastered the same swordsmanship style and adopted the exact same mindset and approach towards combat.

To Ketis, the Second Sword was the missing link that the Swordmaidens needed to complete their combat system!

"You don't need to be concerned about whether the Swordmaidens will be able to utilize my Second Sword model properly." She confidently said. "I know exactly what the Swordmaidens are capable of just by observing their training sessions. Just to be sure, I also studied their performance when they volunteered to pilot the prototypes and the virtual versions of the earlier iterations of my work. I have fine-tuned my design so that it is able to accommodate the vast majority of Swordmaiden mech pilots, at least the ones that are in service today. In the future, I might add further complexity to an updated version of my work."

This was a viable choice. The Swordmaiden mech pilots that were currently serving in the mech legion all possessed different backgrounds.

The true core originally consisted of the survivors of a third-class pirate gang.

Numerous other mech pilots originally came from different second-rate states.

Many of the female mech pilots serving in the Swordmaidens today were originally citizens of the Heavensword Association.

The latter's skill, foundation and enthusiasm in swordsmanship was vastly superior. They frequently schooled the others whenever they demonstrated their strength.

One of the goals of the Swordmaidens was to lift every active mech pilot to this elevated standard. That would take time and Ketis might need to wait until most of the first-generation Swordmaiden mech pilots retired from active service.

Even so, the Second Sword still wasn't an easy mech to pilot!

"What happens if an Avatar or another Larkinson mech pilot attempts to pilot a Second Sword?" Ves asked.

His former student frowned. "The mech won't damage itself as long as the mech pilot doesn't try anything fancy. However, without the right training and without the correct swordsmanship, I don't think the Second Sword mech will be able to display over 50 percent of its combat potential. A large part of what makes it strong is that it is maneuverable and can maximize the effect of momentum-based swordsmanship. I truly doubt an Avatar mech pilot can replicate all of the necessary moves."

"I see."

"The Second Sword is similar to the Monster Slayer in that it fights like a dancer instead of a boar. My second solo mech design possesses high agility and benefits from having a high reaction speed, but its physical strength and defenses are not as exaggerated. High control is needed to prevent the mech from exposing any openings to its opponent. The fact that it is wielding a fairly large and heavy greatsword makes this even more important as the margin of error isn't as great."

A single major error wouldn't doom the Second Sword, but it could heavily inconvenience it. The mech pilot had to make as little mistakes as possible in order to keep defeat at bay!

#### *Chapter 3762 - Conclusion of the Fourth Round*

As Ketis elaborated on the properties of the Second Sword, it became clear that the spaceborn swordsman mech design had the potential to accommodate the most skilled swordsman mech pilots!

Its skill ceiling was ridiculously high, which meant that the Swordmaidens could potentially use the Second Sword to defeat ten times as many melee mechs in battle!

Of course, a lot of conditions had to be met before this could happen. Highly-skilled mech pilots with excellent combat instincts were essential.

The truth of the matter was that the Second Sword wouldn't perform as well as the Bright Warrior in its swordsman mech configuration if the pilot wasn't good enough!

If the female-only mech legion ever lost all of its mech pilots, then there would be no one left to pilot the Second Swords that remained.

Even if the Swordmaidens went on a massive recruiting spree, the new additions needed to undergo at least a year of intensive training to obtain the minimal qualifications to pilot this highly-advanced swordsman mech!

"This is the difference between a mech designed by Ketis and a mech designed by a normal mech designer." Ves observed.

Ketis knew how to fight. That instantly gave her an advantage that almost every other mech designer lacked!

Ves seriously doubted that someone as impressive as the Polymath could exceed Ketis in pure swordsmanship skill.

Although the Polymath was doubtlessly able to design a vastly superior swordsman mech by relying on her vast quantities of impressive design solutions, it did not change the fact that she was not a warrior by nature!

Due to Ketis' uniqueness, she honed in on piloting skill to a much greater extent than other mech designers. She used her deep background in this area as one of the selling points of her work.

One of the key elements that ensured that the Swordmaiden mech pilots continually improved their handling of the Second Sword mechs was the sword style that Ketis imbued in her work.

"Just like my Monster Slayer, my Second Sword design stands out in the same two areas." Ketis explained. "First, its greatsword is tougher and sharper. Its higher design budget allows me to invest in quality materials for its weapons. Since we have no idea what kind of powerful or absurd enemies we will face in the future, I wanted to make sure that my Second Sword will not be found wanting. A sharp sword will always have the potential to cut through stronger opponents."

The parameters of the Second Sword's primary armament were excellent. As Ves studied the specifications of the mech design, he could immediately tell that Ketis allocated a disproportionately high amount of resources into strengthening the greatsword!

This was also necessary to increase its sharpness and cutting power as much as possible. Ketis' design philosophy didn't have much to work with if the materials of the weapon weren't good enough.

Once Ketis was done with boasting how her Second Sword could cut through the toughest armor, she moved on to explaining the second highlight of her mech design.

"Since my Second Sword model is meant to be piloted by skilled Swordmaiden mech pilots, I did not imbue this work with a beginner sword style. I spent weeks developing a learning package that condenses all of my core insights on the Swordmaiden greatsword style and tweaked it so that it is relevant to advanced mech pilots. Although my Second Sword isn't as active in training its users as my Monster Slayer, it is still able to guide my fellow sisters into taking their swordsmanship to the next level."

"To what extent can the Swordmaiden mech pilots improve with the help of your Second Sword?" Ves curiously asked.



Ketis smirked. "Much higher than what they accomplish with the Monster Slayer. While my Second Sword isn't able to hold the hands of its mech pilots, it is still able to pass on a number of key lessons that many swordsmen need to learn before they can break through. If there are Swordmaidens that have developed their swordsmanship to an extreme, then they could theoretically execute the handful of extraordinary techniques that I included in the Second Sword."

Not everyone was aware of the significance of this statement, but Ves knew what this meant!

What Ketis was suggesting was nothing less than a mech pilot displaying some of the powers of an expert pilot in advance!

This roughly corresponded to the strength of a sword initiate in traditional swordsmanship. Ves was unable to figure out if this turned the Swordmaidens in question into expert candidates.

From what Ves had learned, extraordinary techniques required a lot of support in order to pull off. Those that trained their swordsmanship to an extreme and managed to breach the boundaries of what mortals were capable of definitely had a lot of similarities to expert candidates!

This was also why Ves was skeptical whether the Second Sword could truly guide its mech pilots to this level.

It was incredibly difficult for mech pilots to advance to expert candidate even if they had the benefit of spiritual potential.

There was no need for him to express his doubts, though. He wasn't sure about this possibility himself and the best way to know the truth was to see the Second Sword in action.

Speaking about that, the upcoming testing session would definitely become a grand affair!

There was no point in the Larkinson Clan's history that it had the opportunity to introduce so many exclusive mech models!

Once Ketis ended her presentation on her impressive mech models, Ves took the word once again.

"This concludes our fourth round of mech design projects. I am proud of what we have all accomplished. Of the fourteen mech design projects that we have embarked upon in the past half year, we have successfully completed thirteen of them while the remaining one got stalled due to regulatory problems." ?ll ? ???? Fu??..c?m



Ves still needed to meet the MTA's demands before he could resume development on his expert mech killer. He had already given up on completing his Fearless Project in the foreseeable time. It was better to shove it to the next design round so that he could work on it properly!

His wife crossed her arms and snorted. "You know we don't have enough room in our fleet to accommodate the new models, right? This is a consequence of poor planning and foresight. Since we will still be stuck with our existing mechs for the time being, we could have spent most of this design round on designing a large quantity of commercial mechs. If we did that, we could have expanded the income of our clan a lot sooner. Selling our Monster Slayers is not enough to whittle down our debt!"

"You just want an additional excuse to buy more handbags." Ves rolled his eyes.

"VES!"

"Anyway, despite the mismatch in needs, our mech legions will definitely be grateful for all of the work that you have done. Showing them that we care and providing them with the models that can comprehensively strengthen their performance will bind us all deeper to our clansmen. Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots, and in our case that goes double for our Larkinson soldiers. Their willingness to fight on behalf of the clan is what gives us the foundation to stay alive in the Red Ocean!"

This was one of the reasons why Ves wasn't in a hurry to design a lot of commercial mech designs. He needed to strengthen his base before he could venture outside.

Although Ves hadn't been able to provide the Larkinson Army with the 21 exclusive mech model that he envisioned, he had made a lot of progress in doing so even if he left out the custom mechs!

There was no hurry in designing the remaining exclusive mech models.

Ves turned and stared into the eyes of each of the four new additions to the Design Departments.

"Sara, Dulo, Janassa and Tifi. Although you are new to our clan, I am fully satisfied with the quality, performance and direction of your completed mech designs. As I have stated earlier, you are no longer probationary members. From today onwards, you will enjoy virtually the same treatment as our other lead designers."

Dulo Voiken raised his hand. "What do you mean by that, sir?"

"It means that I will extend greater trust to you all." Ves answered. "Basically, I am allowing you to set your own schedule, start up your own solo projects and side projects, cooperate with external mech designers or organizations and represent our clan as one of its preeminent members."

"It means you have all earned the authority and recognition that you deserve." Gloriana clarified with a smug expression. "Just remember that you should still look up to those that are more senior than yourselves. If Ves isn't around, you listen to me, do you understand?"

Her firm tone warned everyone that it was not wise to question her words!

Gloriana might just be an 'ordinary' lead designer in the hierarchy of the Design Department, but her status as the patriarch's wife granted her a lot of informal power and influence!

Ves coughed. "I do not intend to start our next design round immediately after we have finished this one. I still have to complete a number of other projects and I am sure that you can find something to do as well. I am not sure when I am ready to start our next round. It depends on how busy we will be in the Garimel System. If everything proceeds normally, I will probably be ready to start the next round in a month."

A month was not an excessive delay. This was enough time for the mech designers to enjoy their breaks, resume their studies, engage in their personal research and develop new ideas for the upcoming design round.

"As I am sure you are all aware of, our next batch of mech design projects should primarily be centered around commercial products. Whether we design them in partnership with external organizations or market them ourselves, the mechs must possess enough commercial viability to make them profitable."

Ketis raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Do you want us to focus on designing commercial mechs for the Red Ocean, the old galaxy, or both?"

"Both." Ves answered. "Ah, not all of you have PPs based in the Yeina Star Cluster, so only a few of us should consider designing mechs for the old galaxy. In any case, I have a few ideas on how we should approach our original market. I will tell them to you later. In any case, I do not intend to neglect the Red Ocean either. We are still newcomers here but I intend to turn the LMC into an established brand in this dwarf galaxy. I have a lot of confidence that we can accomplish this goal with the potential that we have all shown in this completed design round. We might not be able to succeed in a single year, but I hope we will be able to occupy our own niche in the regional mech market within a decade!"

At the very least, his living mechs should become a common sight in the Krakatoa Middle Zone!

As long as the LMC was able to succeed in this zone, it was not that difficult to expand its business activities to the other middle zones!

"Before you go, let me remind you that we are about to enter an energetic blue supergiant star system. I can't predict what we will encounter over there, but given how active these star systems tend to be, I am sure our troops need technical support. Be ready to provide as much assistance as you can. Whatever projects or jobs you want to work on will never take priority over protecting our fleet and helping our mechs succeed. That is all. Dismissed."

Ves let out a deep breath as the design round finally came to an end. His mind was already occupied with what he needed to do next

*Chapter 3763 - Chief Fabricator Kaesa Remos*

The Larkinson Clan gained a lot of new mech models!

While there wasn't enough room in the fleet to accommodate a large amount of mechs such as the Stingripper, the Rigid Spine, the Redaxe and Second Sword, the Spirit of Bentheim did not remain idle.

The mech legions that had obtained the new models had all decided to retire a number of their existing mechs.

A lot of Bright Warriors went straight to the Graveyard in order to break down their frames and recycle their materials. Any recovered exotics of greater value went straight to the cargo bays while the bulk materials of lesser value went on to reinforce the hull of the capital salvage ship.

Of all of the new models that recently entered service, the auxiliary mechs received special attention. The Red Ocean was filled with unexplored star systems and a number of them harbored complex environments that made it difficult to survey everything in an instant.

This was where mech models such as the new Light Hunter and the Signal Bearer came into play.

A proper expeditionary fleet had to possess enough exploration capabilities to survey and map out complex environments. The two scout mechs provided the Larkinsons with upgraded sensor and communication systems.

As long as these two mechs accompanied every mech team, the speed and effectiveness of exploration missions would surely soar!

Ves even stopped by the production halls of his factory ship in order to inspect the production of the new scout mechs.

"How well have the production crews adapted to their new production tasks?" Ves asked as he held his cute little daughter in his arms.

Aurelia curiously stared at all of the fascinating industrial activity. Scores of mech technicians operated numerous heavy machinery. Enormous metal parts up to the size of elephants were slowly being moved around by heavy-duty cranes and lifter bots.

Let alone children, even adults would grow fascinated by this impressive sight!

"We have already prepared for the production of the new Light Hunter and Signal Bearer models weeks ago, sir." The Chief Fabricator of the Production Department of the Spirit of Bentheim replied. "Miss Juliet Stameross has been generous enough to provide us with the nearly-completed schematics and the production manuals of the two mech models in advance. I assigned a number of our production crews to practice the production process in virtual simulations in order to familiarize themselves with the specific challenges of producing these auxiliary mechs."

Ves paid careful attention to the man in charge of the production halls of his factory ship.

Kaesa Remos-Larkinson was a recent recruit that the Larkinsons had picked up months ago back in the Vulit Central Star Node.

Just like many other fabricators, Mr. Kaesa Remos was a failed Apprentice Mech Designer who eventually saw no hope in going further. Since he possessed a love for constructing mechs, he successfully transitioned to becoming a fabricator, working his way up until he led the production of several production complexes.

A fabricator like that was a valuable human resource. It was quite fortunate for the Larkinson Clan to obtain someone with so much experience and leadership qualities. A  
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Of course, there were still plenty of former mech designers for hire, so someone like Mr. Kaesa was not a completely unattainable asset. The Larkinsons just had to raise their bids and promise a sumptuous salary to the man in order to convince him to work on the expeditionary fleet.

Since the time that Kaesa took over the position of Chief Fabricator from a Hexer who temporarily held this post in the past, not a lot had changed.

The new chief fabricator was 90 years old and no longer eager to earn fame and recognition. In the months that passed, he did his best to maintain the status quo and mainly spent his time on pursuing incremental improvements.

This was exactly what Ves sought in a chief fabricator.

While there were brilliant fabricators available who possessed the potential to master the production of mechs to such a degree that they were capable of making masterwork mechs, the Larkinsons didn't need such a personality.

Their leading mech designers were already capable of fabricating masterwork mechs themselves!

Since Ves and his colleagues were already able to produce high-quality mechs by themselves, it was much more important to make sure that the regular output of the Spirit of Bentheim remained stable and consistent.

Seeing how well the production crews adapted to making the new Light Hunter and Signal Bearer models, Ves was pleased with how Chief Fabricator Kaesa prepared for the new production tasks.

"So far, I can safely say that our production crews are already close to reaching the normal production efficiency levels." Kaesa reported to the clan patriarch. "They have already worked out the challenges during their simulation practice, so our men will not be stumped when they reach a difficult phase. Our mech technicians are only lacking practice in reality. Once they get over this hurdle, I expect that a single production hall will be able to produce a light mech once every two days."

Two days per mech was quite an impressive speed, especially when the Larkinsons did not adopt the most optimal production method. In order to make the mechs produced in the Spirit of Bentheim more alive, only a single production crew produced a single mech at a time.

If the Ves ever wanted to speed up production, then he could assign multiple production crews to work on a mech in shifts.

There was no need to do that when the situation wasn't urgent. Right now, the increase in production speed was not worth the drop in life in the new mechs.

"Do you have a batch of finished mechs?" Ves asked.

"We have. Our best-performing crews finished them a few hours ago. They are being prepped for shipment to the carriers of the Flagrant Vandals. Would you like to inspect them, sir?"

"I would. Please lead the way."

The old but still vigorous man led Ves to a storage hall where recently-fabricated mechs waited to be taken away.

The half-dozen Light Hunter and Signal Bearer mechs immediately made an impression on Ves. Even Aurelia became enthralled by the two substantially different vibes of the two auxiliary mechs.

"Mehhh..."

"Yes, those are mechs." Ves replied as he hugged his daughter tighter around his chest. "Not only that, they're our mechs. Each of them belong to our clan, which essentially means they belong to me! I can do anything I want to them. I can send them out on scouting missions and I can deploy them on the battlefield. I can even choose to upgrade them by myself. I'm a mech designer, you see. Working with mechs is my passion."

"Paapaaa..."

His warmth and love flowed towards his girl as he enjoyed this pleasurable moment. Nothing made him happier than spending time with both mechs and family!

He did not ignore the new light mechs, though. While he had already inspected them before when Juliet Stameris presented her work, she had made the copies back in the workshop by herself.

The ones in the storage hall were different. Ves could easily spot a lot of small details and irregularities that lowered their overall quality.

To someone who fabricated numerous masterwork mechs and regularly collaborated with a perfectionist like his own wife, Ves couldn't ignore these blemishes no matter how small and insignificant they appeared.

He had to suppress his tendency to pick up a multitool and personally correct the consequences of sloppy and inadequate workmanship!

He lightly coughed. "I am... satisfied with these initial attempts. I am sure they will serve the Flagrant Vandals and the Penitent Sisters well. Have you upgraded and configured their sensors to cope with the high-energy environment of the Garimel System?"

"Thank you for your compliments." Chief Fabricator Kaesa smiled. "Our mech technicians will be glad to hear your praise. As for your question, we did what you asked, though we weren't able to design the modifications ourselves. We had to enlist the help of one of your design teams to harden the more sensitive sensor arrays against the excessive heat and radiation that they will surely encounter in the next star system."

Entering the Garimel System was no joke! As a location that centered around a rare blue supergiant star, it essentially functioned like a bright blue beacon in a murky dwarf galaxy.

The light of this star could be seen with the naked eye at greater distances. This alone said a lot about the sheer amount of radiation this blue torch outputted every single day!

There was no way for the expeditionary fleet to safely enter the inner system of this large star system. Let alone the sensors, even the ships themselves would probably melt and burn into husks!

Fortunately, the lethality of the immense blue supergiant quickly diminished over distance due to the inverse square law. This was why the Golden Skull Alliance had the guts to travel to this star system.

That did not mean that a visit to the Garimel System was like visiting a tropical beach. The proper precautions still had to be made.

Radiation was a persistent threat. Starships were usually safe because their thick hulls blocked most harmful rays.

The same could not be said for mechs. The ones with thicker armor and bulkier frames would probably be okay for a time, but the thinner and lighter mechs were not as resistant!

What Ves was concerned about the most was the possibility of blinding his new auxiliary mechs. If powerful rays of light and other energies just happened to flood their sensor systems, the sensitive parts could easily be overwhelmed!

This was why the mechs had to be modified so that they could rely on additional protection to block the anticipated spikes of energy. It was like placing a pair of sunglasses in front of the sensor arrays.

"What about other forms of radiation protection?" Ves asked after he became satisfied with the extra hardening of the sensor systems. "What precautions have you applied?"

Chief Fabricator Kaesa already anticipated this question.

"We consulted with Miss Sara Voiken on this issue and came up with numerous solutions. She has volunteered to design an additional layer of heat and radiation-resistant plates to the auxiliary mechs. It will take time to produce and apply the extra layers to these mechs, but their addition will significantly increase their reliability while operating in this star system. If we don't add this protection, we might have to service them after every single deployment."

Ves nodded in understanding. This was a logical if cumbersome solution. "These auxiliary mechs will lose a substantial amount of mobility, but it can't be helped."



It didn't really matter. The expeditionary fleet was on a simple mining and exploration mission. It did not make a difference if the scout mechs moved a bit slower than usual, especially when they needed to be accompanied by other mechs.

Ves stepped closer to the completed mechs in order to experience their glows.

The Light Hunter possessed a mysterious vibe that made Ves feel as if the mech was eating light. This was the result of inverting the glow of the Illustrious One. The effect was strange but hopefully helpful in recognizing important sensor readings.

The Signal Bearer made him feel safe and comfortable. The Superior Mother governed this mech model and her presence was a lot more noticeable.

"Mamaaa!" Aurelia gurgled as she happily reached out towards the nearest Signal Bearer!

Ves chuckled and kissed his daughter's cheek. "That's your grandma, honey. Gloriana is your real mama."

"Mama! Hihihih!"

He played and cuddled with his daughter for a few minutes before he turned his attention back to his inspection.

"Make sure to produce twenty copies of each model." He instructed. "That should be enough for a start. Do you have enough materials to complete this order?"

"We do, but we will be running low on a number of key materials that are more difficult to obtain in the Red Ocean." Chief Fabricator Kaesa answered. "We will have to return to Davute and replenish our material stockpiles in order to alleviate the shortages."

"Understood."

### *Chapter 3764 - Garimel System*

After a lengthy journey through the Krakatoa Middle Zone, the expeditionary fleet finally reached the mission destination!

Moments before the fleet was scheduled to transition back into realspace, Ves and all of the other people on the ships momentarily experienced an unknown fluctuation.

It was as if their bodies were turning into jelly. It was a deeply uncomfortable sensation and made plenty of people worried.

This transition from the higher dimensions into realspace was not as easy as before!

Just as a couple of people began to worry about their bodies breaking apart, they all felt a strong suction feeling before their bodies instantly solidified again.

The fleet successfully arrived on the outskirts of the Garimel System!

"Deploy our mechs!"

"Scan our immediate surroundings."

"Count our ships and check for damage."

"Measure the radiation levels and report if there are any dangers."

"Keep our radiation shielding up and make sure that all of our people are wearing their protective suits."

The latter was an important precaution. Even though the suits did not offer that much protection against threatening radiation, it might make a difference if a solar flare swept the expeditionary fleet.

Nobody was comfortable wearing their protective suits during this time, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

As usual, Ves sat in the observer's seat on the bridge of his flagship during this key moment. He wore his Unending Regalia as usual and paid careful attention to the initial findings of his crew members.

The local plot which previously showed vague details became a little more clearer this time.

"Our current position is within our safety margins. Our mechs and ships are not under threat as long as we maintain this distance from the star."

The blue supergiant star was a lot larger and massive than a yellow dwarf star like humanity's ancestral sun!

It was difficult to describe the immensity and power of Garimel's central star. The enormous blue orb looked like it could swallow up a million ordinary dwarf stars!

Getting close to this humongous energy source was definitely suicide!

Fortunately, FTL drives were sensitive towards mass. A blue supergiant was many times heavier than ordinary stars and therefore changed the spacetime curvature over a significantly greater volume.

All of this meant that the expeditionary fleet landed much further away from the center than usual. It would take many days in order to the center of the star system, not that anyone was stupid enough to attempt such a feat.

More details emerged as the sensor operators and analysts gathered more data.

"The blue supergiant radiates so much heat that our ships will not be able to remain cool if they get too close. Depending on their heat capacity and heat dispersal characteristics, we will need to pull them away from the center of the star system so that their rate of heat loss exceeds the rate of heat absorption."

Ves frowned a bit when he heard this report. Although the astrophysicists had already predicted this condition, he hoped the conditions would be a little more temperate.

"How many planets have you found?" He asked.

"Only two so far, sir. Each of them is located in the outer system which we have expected. The closest is a dense superheavy terrestrial star that is presumably rich in metals but is far too hot for us to mine, let alone scout. The second is a gas giant that is located in the furthest reaches of the outer system and is likely safe enough for us to visit. We are not able to make any solid conclusions yet, but we have gathered preliminary clues that the gas giant is orbited by more than a dozen smaller moons."

"I see."

When Ves studied the constantly-updating plot, he judged that the first planet was too close to the blue supergiant star for the Larkinsons to explore. The second planet should be safer since it was quite distant from the massive heat source at the center of the Garimel System.

Both planets looked like oddballs. Their orbits were angled and their rotations were skewed. If that wasn't weird enough, their orbits were likely elliptical as well!

These were typical signs that the planets weren't native to the Garimel System.

In other words, they were adopted.

This made sense since blue supergiants generally possessed short lifespans. They typically lasted less than 100 million years, which was not enough time for the gasses and other space junk to merge into actual planets.

"We have confirmed that Garimel I and Garimel II are former rogue planets. They both originated elsewhere and wandered the Red Ocean for an unknown amount of years. Eventually, they flew close enough to Garimel to be captured by the blue supergiant. We are still gathering more data in order to determine how long ago their captures took place."

Ves was intrigued by these results.

The probability that the blue supergiant had managed to capture a few rogue planets was low. This was because they lived too short. It was already a small miracle that it had managed to capture one formerly-frozen rock ball. To be able to capture a gas giant as well was like winning the lottery two times in a row!

More data and analysis poured in. The terrestrial planet was extremely dense. It was 15 times heavier than Old Earth and was generating a lot of magnetic interference that prevented the Larkinson fleet's long-ranged sensors from collecting high-quality data.

The only way to know what was going on in this superheavy planet was to send a scout ship to it so that the scanning arrays had an easier time penetrating through all of the natural magnetic shielding!

Garimel II was not as difficult to analyze. It was not only further away from the blue supergiant star, but also didn't possess high concentrations of interfering matter. A II N OVE L FU LL . c 0m

Even so, it was hard to collect a lot of crucial details due to the fact that the expeditionary fleet was situated fairly close to a massive star that burned so bright that its rays overwhelmed many other emissions!

The Larkinsons weren't deterred. With ships like the Blinding Banshee, the crew continued to derive key information from a lot of unclear data.

The analysts soon figured out that the gas giant was orbited by 16 moons, many of them small and rather unimpressive.

What these moons held was a mystery, but it was virtually impossible for any of them to bear any life because the stellar environment was too hostile!

After half an hour went by, the Golden Skull Alliance gathered enough data to form a somewhat clear picture of the neighborhood.

The inner system was not only extremely hot, but also filled with a lot of dust clouds birthed by powerful solar winds!

This meant that it was extremely dangerous for ships to travel this close to the star. If a solar wind happened to collide against the vessels, the sheer amount of hot matter crashing against the hulls at high speeds would strain if not outright overwhelm the defenses!

Garimel I was extremely interesting due to the abundance of heavy metals it presumably held. Millions of years had passed since Garimel captured this superheavy

planet. It was originally filled with plenty of matter, but regular exposure to the blue supergiant's solar winds had probably deposited even more space junk on the planet!

However, the expeditionary fleet lacked a ship that was tough enough to survey this planet at close range.

If the incredible magnetic interference didn't scramble the ship's delicate electronics, then the higher heat exposure would steadily raise the overall heat levels until everyone inside got cooked!

This wasn't an instant process, though. As long as a ship was fast enough, she could get in and out quickly before her entire hull got roasted.

"One of the missions that we have accepted is to survey the star system, with a particular emphasis on any planets that we might find." Ves reminded everyone who attended a virtual meeting. "I have made a few calculations of my own and I believe it is possible for a specially-prepared starship to get in and out without incurring too many risks."

"Is it worth the risk to survey Garimel I?" Marshal Ariadne Wodin asked with a frown. "Our starships are valuable and we cannot afford to lose even one of them. None of our vessels are built to brave this extreme environment. Don't risk the deaths of our men just so you can earn more MTA merits."

Ves sighed. "Okay. Let's leave that aside, then. I guess that exploring that giant dust ring is also out of the question."

The blue supergiant was surrounded by a dust ring that surpassed the size of any asteroid belt or dust belt that the expeditionary fleet had encountered.

The dust ring might potentially be rich in valuable materials, but entering it was anything but safe. If the ring did happen to contain high-grade exotics, they were probably so dispersed that it was not economical to mine these resources!

For that reason, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance set their sights on the second planet of the star system.

"Garimel II is a lot safer by all accounts." Ves stated. "Its orbit is large enough to be spared from much of the heat and solar winds and it is also orbited by 16 different moons, each of which might hold valuable deposits of materials. With the current capabilities of our fleet, it should be safe for us to approach this planet."

The gas giant didn't appear to be special, but the moons were a different story. While the chances were high that they were ordinary chunks of rock, a few might hold substantial deposits of exotics!

It was too bad that none of their long-ranged sensors were able to determine the complete material composition of the moons.

From the perspective of the expeditionary fleet, the 16 moons were all treasure chests that were waiting to be opened!

The decision to survey Garimel II was a foregone conclusion. The only difficulty was deciding whether to approach it with the entire fleet or dispatch a smaller exploration task force.

Patriarch Reginald Cross looked impatient. "What do we have to fear from this star system and planet? Just bring everyone along."

"That would make it difficult to guarantee the safety of all of our ships." Marshall Ariadne Wodin replied. "The Larkinson Clan's civilian ships will especially become vulnerable to environmental changes. It is safer to keep them at this distance."

Ves found it difficult to decide which course of action was better. He was rather paranoid about splitting his fleet because enemies would have an easier time defeating its elements.

On the other hand, they truly didn't know enough about the Garimel System to figure out whether it was safe for their vulnerable starships to move this close.

"Since our civilian vessels are the most impacted by this complication, I don't want to make a decision until we have investigated the circumstances further." Ves told the others. "Please give us a day or so to determine the facts and weigh the risks."

The other two leaders of the alliance readily acquiesced to this request. They were not in a hurry and it was always better to gather more data before settling on a plan.

After the meeting, Ves continued to wait as more and more information poured in. The blue supergiant's immense activity made it difficult to figure out what went on in the inner system. There was too much radiation and too much space junk in the vicinity of the massive star to know whether it held anything of value.

The outer system was easier to understand. The chances that it contained other planets were low. The sensor operators hadn't found signs of alien presence.

Another day passed by until Ves had made a decision on how to explore the star system. He did not like to split up his assets, so when he learned that Garimel II was probably safe, he chose to explore the neighborhood with the entire expeditionary fleet!

"We advance together!"

## *Chapter 3765 - A Simple Patrol*

"This place sure is hot."

That was an understatement. Venerable Tusa was not a science geek, so he had no idea what he was talking about. All he knew was that if he pointed the sensors of the Dark Zephyr towards the giant blue torch in the center of the star system, his mech would quickly convey sensations of pain and blinding!

The Dark Zephyr along with the rest of the expeditionary fleet hadn't actually come close enough to get dangerously hot, but it was not easy to dispel the illusion that everyone was roasting in a blue oven!

Even if this was the case, the Dark Zephyr was less susceptible to getting burned despite its smaller frame. Its frame was covered by a substantial amount of Unending alloy which possessed a high heat capacity.

If this wasn't the case, the material wouldn't have been able to resist a lot of energy attacks!

As the Dark Zephyr continued to fly along its patrol route, Venerable Tusa directed his attention back to the expeditionary fleet.

He thought it was a bit reckless to bring hundreds of ships closer to one of the planets of the Garimel System. Who knew what they might find over there?

If he was in charge, he would have kept the main fleet in a neighboring star system. There was no need to send the entire gang to the Garimel System when just a couple of combat carriers were enough to get the lay of the land.

If the initial scouts found a rich and accessible resource deposit, the Larkinson Clan could choose to dispatch the Andrenidae along with additional escort vessels, but only a handful.

Ves had separation anxiety and refused to follow this strategy. Splitting the fleet sounded abominable to him. His past actions already showed that he would rather risk his entire clan than to dispatch a smaller group of clansmen into potential danger!

"Hm. The actual reason why he wants to keep everything together is because he wants to be at the forefront of every exploration!"

Tusa pretty much figured Ves out. The patriarch couldn't help himself and if he chose to go forward, then he better bring as much protection as possible!

As the Dark Zephyr continued to fly along the outermost perimeter of the expeditionary fleet, Tusa looked up as another mech was slowly approaching his position.



"Tusa." Imon Ingvar greeted. "How's your patrol?"

"It's as boring as ever. Blue supergiant or not, space is still mostly empty. The only thing I can't get used to is the blue tint on every ship and mech."

"Hehe, you're not the only one."

The two continued to chat as their respective mechs flew alongside each other.

The Dark Zephyr was a familiar expert mech to the Larkinson Clan. Although it received a number of minor upgrades and tweaks since its creation, it had essentially remained unchanged in terms of combat power.

It hadn't grown that much as a living mech either. Even though it was paired with an expert pilot, the Dark Zephyr was still a second-order living mech according to Ves' classification.

Sure, Venerable Tusa may have piloted it long enough to provide a lot of spiritual feedback, but it was not so easy for a second-order living mech to develop true sentience and life!

The expert pilot wasn't in a hurry, though. He would be lying if he claimed he wasn't jealous of the masterwork mechs of his fellow peers, but there was no use crying about it when he couldn't change the outcome.

Tusa used the optical sensors of his Dark Zephyr to glance at Imon's mech.

The latest expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan was both lucky and unlucky when it came to his mech.

The lucky part was that Imon received an impressive custom mech back when he was just an expert candidate.

The unlucky part was that Imon broke through only a short time later! This quickly made his Blade Chaser obsolete before it could participate in a proper fight!

Since the Larkinson Clan was nowhere ready to complete another powerful expert mech, Venerable Imon had no choice but to continue with piloting his custom mech.

Tusa knew how uncomfortable it was for an expert pilot to be confined to a lesser machine. It was like taking a space walk with a suit made out of paper!

"It's rare to see you away from your sister these days." He remarked.

"I vowed to protect her. That does not mean I'll die if I stay away from her for more than an hour! Why can't people figure that out?!" Venerable Imon spoke in an exasperated

tone. "This is why I chose to accept this patrol assignment. Everyone will see that I am not obsessed with my sister!"

Tusa wasn't too sure about that, but he bid his fellow expert pilot good luck in his attempt to change people's perception.

"What's it like to pilot an expert mech?"

"Didn't your sister already tell you that?"

"She did, but I want to hear what others think." Imon said. "I keep trying to imagine my future expert mech, but I don't know enough to sink into my fantasy."

"I was like that as well at first. I heard stories from my relatives back in the old family, but they didn't go into detail. Besides, each of them piloted more conventional expert mechs. The ones from our clan are different."

Imon understood what Tusa was talking about.

"They're alive."

"Yes. Your Blade Chaser ought to be alive as well, right?"

"Yeah. It's actually more impressive than I thought. The patriarch told me it's because it is a custom mech that I piloted during my breakthrough. It is because of this reason that he has promised me to upgrade my current machine into an expert mech."

Even Venerable Tusa understood how troublesome it was to pull off this upgrade!

"That's a great commitment! Venerable Jannzi received the same treatment, and look where that got her. Maybe getting a masterwork mech and catching up to your sister is just around the corner." A I I N O V E L F U L L . c 0m

"I don't dare to assume that much, Tusa. Compared to a new and impressive expert command mech like the Minerva, an upgrade to my Blade Chaser is a lot more boring."

"That shouldn't matter. From what I know about our mech designers, they always put in their full effort in every expert mech. Besides, I don't think your upgraded machine will be as boring as you think. Ves is anything but ordinary."

The expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan were definitely more eccentric than most. They also happened to pack more of a punch as well. Even the Glory Seekers and Crossers requested the cooperation of the Larkinsons to design their own expert mechs!

As the two expert mechs continued on their patrol, the discussion between the two demigods strayed to the new mechs that recently entered service.

Although not a lot of copies of the new mech models had emerged, the latest works had already demonstrated their capabilities in the initial field tests.

"What's your favorite new mech model that our clan has released in the last month?" Tusa asked. "Not including your own Blade Chaser, of course."

That was a difficult question for Imon to answer. None of the new models showed how they would perform in an actual battle as of yet. It didn't help that many of them were only effective against enemy mech forces. It had been a long time since the Larkinsons fought a proper mech force.

"I like each of them, but there are a couple of them that I think are more interesting. The new Second Sword mechs look formidable. You just know that their blades can cut through a lot of armor. They look especially fitting when they are accompanying the First Sword in their deployments."

"With names like that, they better be moving in sync." Tusa remarked. "I think Ketis specifically made them similar so that the Swordmaidens would have an easier time with activating their battle formation."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been a part of them, unlike Joshua."

"Join the club. I would love to lead one of those as well, but Ves told me that the Flagrant Vandals are completely unsuited for them. They're too different from each other or something."

Imon frowned. "That can be changed, right? If you approach the Vandals one day and tell them to shape up, I think they will do their best to fulfill your demand. They all look up to expert pilots, and you're pretty much their idol since you are the only light mech specialist in our group."

Venerable Tusa kept silent for a moment.

"I wouldn't want to do that. The Flagrant Vandals have their own way of doing things. The times where I hung out with them has made me appreciate how loose and free they behave. It's kind of strange why this is so since they used to be part of the Mech Corps of my former home state."

"Are you saying they're unprofessional?"

"Nah. They can be serious when it matters. They just like to be less constrained most of the time. I don't want to break the good thing that they have going for them. If they do their best to become more disciplined, they won't be the Flagrant Vandals that I prefer anymore."

He made a decent point, though Imon still thought the Vandals could put in more effort in their image. He much preferred to spend time with the Living Sentinels. They were much humbler and more attentive.

"The Vandals sure are lucky to receive two useful mech models at once." Imon said as he continued to think about the mech legion with former military roots. "They're not as monotonous as before."

"Yeah. The Light Hunter looks interesting but the Stingripper is the real prize here. It's always funny to see all of those mech pilots stumble when practicing against it. They always get fooled and miss all of their attacks."

The effect of the Stingripper went against common sense. Not a single mech pilot figured out how it worked!

That didn't stop the Vandals from embracing it, though!

If not for the fact that the Vandals had to dump a lot of Ferocious Piranhas, they would have obtained a larger batch of Stingrippers!

The two continued to chat about the merits of the Stingripper model until the Dark Zephyr detected a faint reading!

Tusa instantly became alert.

"Wait! My mech has detected a trace of metal!"

"How big?!"

"I don't know, but it shouldn't be big if your Blade Chaser's sensors haven't picked up on it. Let me send you the data so you can try and pin it down yourself."

"My mech can't see it, Tusa. My Blade Chaser is designed for fighting, not for scouting."

Venerable Tusa had already transmitted his findings to the main fleet. Half a minute went by before General Verle directly issued an instruction.

"Investigate the reading. Get closer, but maintain your caution. The risks should be low, but we can never rule out the possibility of danger."

"Roger that."

The Dark Zephyr cautiously flew forward while the Blade Chaser followed from a distance.

As the expert mech got closer, its sensors finally managed to resolve enough details to get a clearer image of the distant object.

"That's not an ordinary space rock."

The object discovered by his expert mech initially looked like a tiny asteroid the size of a hand.

Such objects were not too rare in deep space, though the chances of encountering them were still low.

The reason why Tusa was taken aback at the sight was because the identified object looked like more than just a random asteroid. One of the sides of the black rock looked as if it had been sliced by a giant blade! The surface of the cut side was so smooth that Tusa could hardly imagine that a natural process was responsible for downsizing the space rock!

"General? I think you need to see this..."

#### *Chapter 3766 - Strange Rock*

Ves and a number of suited figures entered a lab chamber and approached a table.

Among the accompanying figures were General Verle, Venerable Tusa, Venerable Imon. Each of them studied the object placed on the table with wariness and concern.

"Meow."

Lucky flew forward and sniffed the strange rock. His tail hung low as he too found the situation to be suspicious.

"Report." Ves commanded.

"We found this space rock drifting through space." Venerable Tusa replied as his mech was the one to discover it first. "Normally, the operating system of my mech has no reason to pay attention to random junk in space, but then the sensors detected signs of artificial tampering. That was when my mech sounded the alarm."

"Once you secured it and brought it back to our fleet, what have we found out about this rock?"

"The material composition of this specimen is mostly made up of silicate minerals." Ketis explained as she had been the one in charge of scanning the retrieved rock. "While the rock contains trace amounts of heavy metals on the surface, they are negligible. We have not found any trace of exotic materials in the rock."

In other words, the space rock was completely ordinary in terms of composition. It did not contain any materials of value. There were so many different rocks, asteroids, moons and planets that were made out of these materials that there was no reason to value this one in particular!

It wasn't the material composition that interested the Larkinsons, though.

The real reason why they paid attention to this otherwise unremarkable object was because it looked as if it had been sliced in half!

Lucky cautiously floated in front of the smooth and completely flat surface that had oddly cut this rock.

The cat looked confused as he was unable to figure out what could have created such a clean mark.

"Are there any natural processes in the cosmos that can produce this kind of cut on a rock like this?" Ves asked.

"No, sir." An astrophysicist answered. "I cannot think of a process where such a cut could be produced without affecting the integrity of the rest of its structure. If some sort of sharp asteroid collided with this rock with sufficient force, then it should have cracked or disintegrated entirely. If the rock was subjected to a heat spike, then its surface should never look this smooth and flat."

"What about gravity anomalies or space warping?" a????e? F u?? . c 0 m

"These are anomalies that fall outside the range of normal phenomena, sir. According to our current data, we have developed two possible explanations that could have produced such an effect on this rock. Hazards and anomalies are one possible explanation. There are endless varieties of anomalies in space, and it is not out of the question that they may be present in a star system that is extremely energetic, has captured two foreign planets and is also hosting an abundant quantity of heavy metals. The presence of large quantities of exotics in concentrated form can potentially produce spatial anomalies that may have the effect of 'cutting' rocks like these as they pass through at specific angles. However, it is still difficult to imagine that the rest of the rock does not display any damage."

The suggestion that the Garimel System might be hosting anomalies did not make Ves feel at ease. Some of them might just be small fluctuations in space, but there were many that turned entire regions of space into danger zones!

Ves had encountered his fair share of space anomalies and hazardous regions, though he encountered most of them in the Nyxian Gap, which was in itself a giant pool of anomalies!

If the Garimel System truly hosted a major anomaly, then that implied that a large concentration of energetic exotics may be sitting somewhere. The most likely locations were Garimel I, the moons of Garimel II and some place within the giant dust ring orbiting the massive blue supergiant.

However, even if such a hazardous region existed in the star system, it did not mean that it was responsible for cutting this space rock.

There was another possible explanation.

"Technically, an anomaly might be responsible, but there are so many of them that it is unlikely that any of them have the effect of cutting a rock like this without inflicting further damage." The scientist continued. "If we apply Occam's razor, then the most likely explanation is that this rock was sliced through artificial intervention. In other words, someone or something has made this cut, likely with the help of a technological device."

Everyone grew grimmer and more vigilant as they took this in. The intelligence and the initial observation data on the Garimel System showed no sign of other presences.

The Blinding Banshee had scoured the star system as best she could but failed to detect any hint that suggested human or alien starships.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean anything. The blinding energies outputted by the blue supergiant, the obscure former rogue planets along with the giant dust ring had frustrated every attempt to peer through them at a distance.

From the perspective of the expeditionary fleet, much of the star system ironically remained in the dark. The only way for the Larkinsons to illuminate these dark areas was to go forward and use their torches to light the surroundings.

They didn't harbor too many concerns before they found this abnormal rock. The fleet had detected no signs of dangerous anomalies or the presence of others in this hot and unforgiving star system.

This was different. Now that they had definite proof that this star system harbored unknowns, the Golden Skull Alliance had to adopt a more guarded posture.

Perhaps this visit to the Garimel System might turn out to be more than just a simple survey and mining expedition!

Ves wondered whether this space rock was related to whatever caused the MTA to conclude that something abnormal might be going on in this star system.

He needed more information.



"What have you found, Lucky?"

The cat had continued to inspect the space rock to no avail.

"Meow meow meow."

"Okay." Ves said before he turned to Ketis. "What about you? Do you have any clues of what might have produced this smooth cut?"

"It's unlikely that a sharp sword or other object has made this cut." She judged. "It's too smooth and there are no stresses to its structure at all. While I can technically reproduce this effect if I put in the effort, I seriously doubt an expert pilot or swordmaster is bored enough to cut random space rocks, and that one of them just happened to drift in the direction of our fleet."

"What do you suspect, then?"

Ketis raised two fingers. "I have made a couple of guesses. First, I believe this rock has been sliced by a spatial effect. It's the only explanation that makes sense to me. Rather than believing that it has been cut by a sharp blade, I think it is much more probable that some sort of space dome has appeared and physically separated the other half of this rock in an instant. Whether this spatial effect is produced by the environment or an alien race, I can't say."

That was actually a plausible explanation. Ves favored this idea as well because of the smoothness of the cut and the lack of any other traces of damage.

There weren't a lot of possible sources that could produce such a strange result, though. The ones that did were a bit terrifying!

"Second, I do not think this is the only rock that has been cut like this. The probability of encountering this kind of object all the way in the outer system is extremely small. There has to be more of them. If we can find additional specimens and map their trajectories, we may be able to trace their origin point."

This was another clever deduction. Finding a cut space rock in such an immense star system should be almost impossible if it was the only one of its kind.

The more probable explanation was that a huge amount of similar rocks must be floating in the star system!

The urgent priority right now was to find whether there was a second, third and more of these rocks!

"General Verle."

"Yes, patriarch?"

"Deploy search teams and spread them further away from our fleet in order to look for abnormal space rocks. We need to figure out how ubiquitous they are and whether they are all affected in a similar fashion before we can figure out what is going on. Try and determine whether they all originate from a single point in this star system. I think the most probable candidates are Garimel I or Garimel II. Use this assumption to narrow down your search range."

"Will do, sir."

Ves issued a few orders before he ended this meeting. The Golden Skull Alliance needed to become a lot more vigilant. The likelihood that there might be hazards or enemies hiding in the star system was not that small anymore. The mech forces needed to be on alert in order to guard against any sudden surprises.

Aside from that, Ves did not choose to stop the fleet's advance. There was little that his clan could do at this location. He had to get closer in order to lift a portion of the fog obscuring this star system.

Everyone else exited the chamber aside from Ves and Ketis. The two along with Lucky continued to stare at the space rock as if it held a hidden story.

"You know, the safest course of action that we can take is to abort whatever missions that you have accepted and leave this star system as soon as possible."

Ves shook his head. "I understand your concerns, but this is not enough to scare me away, Ketis. I've actually become more fascinated with the Garimel System. Exploring the Red Ocean and encountering abnormal phenomena is one of the principal reasons why I have worked so hard to pass through the beyonder gate. Now that we have bumped into an abnormality before anyone else, why should I pass on this opportunity? Whatever is out there will become another source of inspiration to me. I don't know about you, but exploring and assimilating new phenomena is the best way for me to advance my design philosophy!"

"I don't want to sound like Venerable Jannzi, but you're being reckless again. Why do you need to bring our entire fleet along?"

"We are not going to split up our fleet, especially in a place of danger. I am in charge here, Ketis. I am not going to change my mind on this. Perhaps we might be able to afford to do so in the future, but for now we need to stick together and concentrate our forces."

Ketis did not bother to argue further. Ves was never going to change his mind. She instead directed her attention back to the rock and picked it up with her gauntlets.

"Whoever or whatever produced this cut could easily do the same to our starships, you know. There are plenty of powerful threats in the Red Ocean that we cannot afford to confront. What if we find a powerful enemy hiding in the Garimel System?"

"The risks are great, but the rewards are greater." Ves grinned as he became more excited at the possibility! "This is conquered territory. If a remnant alien group is hiding out here, I seriously doubt it is as threatening as before. What can these aliens do when they are cut off from their former empires? As long as we expand our search perimeter and make sure our scouts discover them first, our main fleet shouldn't collide against the unknowns right away. This is a good opportunity to put our new scout mechs to test. The Light Hunter model should especially be useful in this scenario. We just have to make sure they receive additional reinforcement in order to shield them against the hostile environment."

#### *Chapter 3767 - A Small Trial*

When the news about the strange space rock spread throughout the fleet, a lot of Larkinsons started to entertain doubts about this expedition.

The Garimel System might not be as silent and empty as everyone thought.

General Verle and the legion commanders held numerous meetings before they directed the troops to become a lot more alert.

The mech legions deployed more mechs than before, causing the fleet to be surrounded by a larger swarm of metal. They also kept more mech pilots on standby in case they stumbled into another crisis.

Aside from that, the mech legions also spread out a number of their combat carriers outwards in order to scout the way ahead.

These scout units moved so far away from the main fleet that the main forces were unable to provide immediate support to the ships and mechs that went ahead.

This was the only way to make the reconnaissance units useful. They could hardly provide any advance warning if they stuck too close to the main fleet.

Even though Ves had approved of sending all of these units outwards, he did not approve of any measures to send a scout ship or task force to Garimel II in advance at first.

If there was nothing dangerous in the vicinity of the gas giant, then nothing would happen.

If the neighborhood harbored a threat, then the task force might get wiped out due to insufficient strength!

It took constant persuasion from the likes of Ketis, General Verle and the legion commanders for Ves to soften his stance.

"Fine! You may send out a single ship, but no more. Make sure she doesn't carry anyone important."

Eventually, a combat carrier of the Flagrant Vandals flew ahead and approached Garimel II at a faster pace.

At the same time, the rest continued to guard against possible threats while at the same time search for additional abnormal space rocks.

While the various scout units sporadically detected a couple of space rocks, their concentration in the current area was so low that it was normal to encounter them in this kind of place.

None of the space rocks exhibited the same kind of cut surface as the one discovered by Venerable Tusa.

Was it a coincidence? Were everyone's guesses wrong? What if the cut was made by a passing fleet?

If the latter was the case, then they might be overreacting.

Ves sighed as he felt this exploration had become a lot more troublesome than before. While he did not intend to give up on discovering what secrets the Garimel System held, he was not sure his fleet was strong enough to survive whatever surprises they might encounter.

"We need to form more effective scouting solutions."

The existing measures were not adequate enough. Sending valuable combat carriers away from the main fleet was a helpless decision as the fleet was severely lacking in dedicated scout vessels.

Normally, it should have been enough to send out the new Jhamper light carriers that had recently rolled off the Diligent Ovenbird, but the cheap vessels were so fragile that they could not adequately cope with the harsh environmental conditions of the Garimel System!

The smaller ships were fine for now, but as the expeditionary fleet continued to move closer to the center of the star system, it was no longer safe for them to bask in light of the blue supergiant.

The Larkinson Clan had already placed their more fragile ships in the shadows of their larger and more well-armored vessels.

Sheltering within the magnetosphere of Garimel II should offer them a bit of reprieve. The powerful magnetic shield of the gas giant was able to bounce away harmful solar winds and spikes of radiation.

However, who could tell if Garimel II hosted other threats? The planet might be the most dangerous location in the star system aside from the immediate vicinity of the blue supergiant star!

"Well, we'll find out what is going on over there sooner or later."

The size of the star system meant that it would take days to approach Garimel II. If nothing else happened, Ves had enough free time to work on his various projects.

"I should get to work on the Golden Tree Project."

He had not forgotten about his attempt to grow living coins on trees. Although it sounded like a silly idea, the significance of a tree that could grow living products could not be overstated!

Ves stayed aboard the Dragon's Den for a few days in order to assist with the development of the money tree.

There wasn't much he could do aside from contributing the design of the coins. He did not understand any of the biosciences and had to delegate the actual design of the money tree to Dr. Perris.

Fortunately, the development of the money tree did not take as long as he feared. Dr. Perris had already done much of the groundwork in the last few days.

It also wasn't difficult to bioprogram the money trees to grow specific coins. The only tedious change he had to make was switching the regular alloys with biometals that could easily be grown by the money trees.

Once they completed the design of their first money tree, Ves assisted with synthesizing the first money tree seeds that would eventually grow into full-sized organic production machines.

Although he didn't know how to manipulate the machines that spliced together the initial seeds, it was enough for him to listen to Dr. Perris' instructions.

This clumsy approach allowed them to obtain a seed that felt a bit more alive than usual. Ves hoped that this was enough to grow a money tree that could eventually grow coins that were utterly unique to humanity!

Once they figured out the process, they repeated it several times until they ended up with five Golden Cat Money Trees!

"How long does it take for them to start production?" Ves asked.

"I cannot fully say as this is the first tree of its kind that we are growing." Dr. Perris replied. "The specialized growth equipment that we have available in our laboratories should help with accelerating the growth cycle of the money trees, but don't expect to hear any immediate results."

This had always always been one of the weaknesses of biotechnology. If he had made an ordinary coin press, then he could have fabricated it within a day no matter its complexity.

"Alright, then. Please keep me apprised and don't hesitate to contact me directly if the trees have grown their first fruits."

Now that Ves finished his involvement in the Golden Fruit Project, he did not leave the Dragon's Den right away.

He briefly met with Director Ranya Wodin to discuss various developments before he decided it might be fun to visit the new 'guests' aboard the bioresearch vessel.

Despite designing the pakklaton prisoners as his test subjects, Ves hadn't done anything to the giant bird-like aliens.

The Larkinson Clan was still in the process of setting up the T Institute and the mechers that he had contacted a few weeks ago had yet to present him with a leader. There wasn't any manpower to work on the research projects that he envisioned.

He urgently needed a leader to take charge of this new research group!

"The MTA sure likes to take its time."

Just because he was on his own did not mean that he had to postpone his experimental studies. a???0?e? F u?? . c 0 m

He could still think of a couple of experiments that didn't require a lot of supervision to yield results.

Given that Ves had promised to give Jovy a companion spirit, he decided it might be useful to get additional practice by experimenting on a few alien test subjects.

"Their minds and thinking processes are similar enough to humans that the results should be similar." Ves surmised.

While this was only a guess, it was enough for Ves to go through with this experiment.

He instructed the researchers assigned to monitor the pakklavons to bring out 300 potential test subjects.

"Cawww! Cawww! Cawww!"

The pakklavons panicked as the dreaded bots arrived to take the aliens away from their fake habitats!

No matter how much they resisted the metal arms of the capture bots, their naked bodies were no match to the power of technology.

The bots that grasped the pakklavon prisoners all deposited their cargo in the test chamber of a nearby biolab.

The group of aliens consisted of an equal number of young, middle-aged and elder pakklavons.

Ves did not intend to experiment on all 300 of them. That would take a huge amount of time.

"This is just the start."

He stood in front of a transparent viewscreen and swept his spiritual senses towards the confused mob of pakklavons.

"Caww! Cawww! Cawwww!"

He successfully discovered a small amount pakklavons with spiritual potential, just as he expected.

What was interesting was that four of them were fairly young while the remaining two were middle-aged.

Ves had not found any pakklavons in the elder generation that possessed any significant spiritual potential.

He frowned. "That's problematic."

He had long speculated that spiritual potential could wither if it wasn't properly stimulated.

Was this theory true? Who knew. Ves may have been unlucky enough for the capture bots to pick the wrong pakklavons.

The only way to know for certain was to capture all of the old birds, but Ves did not have the patience to go through such a tedious process.



"I'll just start with two test subjects instead of three." He shrugged.

Ves marked out the ones with the strongest spiritual potential while commanding the bots to return the other prisoners to their biomes.

Soon enough, only two male bird aliens were left in the empty testing chamber.

No matter their age, both birds were large enough to tower over a human like Ves. The angry birds attempted to peck their beaks through the transparent screen that separated them from one of the humans that kept them under capacity!

"CAWWW! CAWWW! CAWWW!"

Ves only grinned as he vaguely interpreted the meaning of their bird speech.

While the Larkinsons had access to translators that could enable humans and pakklavons to understand each other, he did not bother with using them. He was not interested in making friends with the pakklavons.

"Let's start."

He used the lab controls to forcibly restrain the two pakklavons onto operating tables. The two birds panicked and tried their best to break out of their confinement, to no avail. The alloy manacles were too strong!

Once Ves confirmed it was safe inside, he entered the chamber and approached the side of the middle-aged pakklavon.

"Let's see. Your spiritual potential is quite substantial for your age. That makes it easier for me to operate on you. Hold still and don't resist."

Since this attempt was just an initial trial, Ves did not attempt anything ambitious. He summoned Blinky and commanded his companion spirit to enter the mind of his first test subject!

Mrow!

"CAAAWWWWW! CAAAWWWW! CAWWWWW!"

The alien experienced a lot of pain as soon as Blinky went to work!

Carving out a portion of spiritual potential and infusing it with enough of Ves' spiritual energy to convert it into a companion spirit was not a gentle process!

This was especially when Ves tried to be as frugal as possible! He did not make use of any additional spiritual ingredients and he especially did not use any of his limited universal life energy.

He wanted to see if he could successfully pull off this procedure on a budget!

Ten minutes later, Blinky left the pained and exhausted pakklaton's mind.

The operation appeared to be a success.

"The damage to the spirit is not light." He frowned.

Fortunately, it already showed signs of healing. It would probably take a few months for the alien's spirit to return to health.

Until then, the test subject would probably experience constant aches, but that was no concern as long as he managed to survive.

"Caw... cawww... cawww..." The bird alien listlessly cried.

Ves only smirked at the sight.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Subject 1."

#### *Chapter 3768 - Nutritious Fruit*

After Ves successfully created a companion spirit in an alien test subject's mind, he gained enough confidence to repeat the process.

The younger pakklaton specimen possessed a lot more fire than his older counterpart. The presumably adolescent alien continually resisted the restraints while crying out as loudly as possible!

Pure animosity burned in Subject 2's eyes as the pakklaton wished pure death and suffering on Ves and his fellow humans.

"Heh. Get angry all you want. The greater your emotions, the more you will stimulate the development of your companion spirit!"

At the end the operation, not even Subject 2 was able to think straight anymore when a piece of his spiritual potential had literally been carved and modified until it had come to life!

Ves stepped back and studied the two mentally-injured captives with considerable interest.

Since he had refrained from artificially boosting the growth of the companion spirits, the new pets weren't ready to make an appearance yet. The two aliens needed to recover to an extent before they could discover what Ves had added to their spirits.

Even Ves didn't know what shape the companion spirits would take. This was because he applied an extremely basic companion spirit template to them for this experiment.

"They can potentially evolve into any form." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he contemplated the possibilities.

That was the interesting part of this experiment!

In all of his previous attempts of making his companion spirits, he always had a specific template in mind. He designed his spiritual products beforehand and tried to realize them as faithfully as possible.

Another factor that skewed his companion spirits was the inclusion of spiritual ingredients that each introduced their own properties. Their specific spiritual attributes introduced strong biases in the companion spirits and bestowed them with new capabilities.

For example, Blinky excelled at processing and manipulating spiritual energy due to incorporating a spiritual fragment of the Unending One.

Alexandria was able to generate long-lasting design networks by incorporating half of Aisling Curver's design seed.

Even if Ves did not introduce any foreign ingredients, the subjects themselves were able to make up for the shortfall. This was how Venerable Dise gained her Respa and Ketis obtained her Sharpie.

In both cases, the recipients already possessed strong spiritual attributes that immediately shaped their companion spirits in highly complementary forms.

"This time is different."

The two pakklaton test subjects might have spiritual potential, but there was nothing special about them as they remained dormant all this time.

Without actively drawing out the potential and applying it to a specific way, the bird aliens had lived their entire lives without realizing their hidden power.

Now, Ves had forcefully drawn out a portion of it by bestowing them a companion spirit.

If nothing else, the birth of semi-independent spiritual creatures would definitely introduce them to the world of spiritual phenomena!

Since their companion spirits were made out of a portion of their spiritualities that contained ordinary attributes, the new entities probably wouldn't possess any special abilities.

"It's hard to cook a tasteful meal with plain ingredients."

However, the advantage of using boring ingredients without cooking them in a specific way was that the meals could turn into anything!

"Will the new companion spirits turn into miniature images of their pakklaton counterparts like the new Sharpie?"

"Will they take the form of their favored tools and objects like the older form of Sharpie?"

"Will the companion spirits spontaneously take completely different forms such as humans or planets?"

"To what extent will the strongest thoughts and emotions of the test subjects shape the abilities of their companion spirits?"

"Can companion spirits even develop special abilities without the support of powerful ingredients?"

Ves wanted answers to all of these questions and more. He originally thought about performing this experiment on lab animals, but now that the Dragon's Den hosted so many pakklaton captives, he could make use of more human-like test subjects!

So far, he did not encounter any signs that their spiritualities were significantly different from that of humans.

Their biological differences didn't matter as long as their spirits roughly behaved the same to his procedures.

This meant that as long as he was able to develop a powerful new application with the pakklavons, he could easily transfer that to humans!

"Let's take you back to your homes. I don't want you to go crazy."

Ves wrapped up the session and commanded the catcher bots to return Subject 1 and Subject 2 to their biomes.

Hopefully, the two test subjects would be able to recover with the help of their fellow pakklavons.

Once they enjoyed enough time to heal their injuries and mold their companion spirits into specific forms, Ves intended to return to them and inspect their properties.

Even if the bland companion spirits hadn't taken any strong or specific forms, the experiment was already a success if Subject 1 and Subject 2 both survived and returned to full health!

If their companion spirits eventually evolved into useful entities, then Ves completed the first step in mass producing companion spirits for his entire clan!

"This is my real goal!"

He had long thought about how he wanted to spread this advantage to his entire clan.

It wasn't fair that just a handful of prominent Larkinsons such as himself, his wife, his daughter and his close comrades obtained such a useful addition to their lives.

While he was willing to provide his other clansmen with companion spirits if possible, he faced the same problem with regards to producing living coins.

There was no way to delegate or automate the procedure!

It was impossible for Ves to manually work on his clansmen one by one, especially when each operation took a lot of effort and attention to complete.

What was worse was that he needed to make use of precious ingredients in order to make strong or highly-specific companion spirits.

This was why he conceived of the current trial. If everything worked out as he hoped, he had a basis of creating companion spirits with less effort and investment than before.

"This will substantially reduce the amount of time, effort and resources I need to spend to create a companion spirit, but it doesn't address the mass production issue."

This was the biggest hurdle to this grand and ambitious plan.

He already came up with a potential solution to this problem.

"What if... I create a companion spirit that specializes in creating other companion spirits?"

The idea sounded viable, but it would probably be incredibly difficult to make it possible!

The operator companion spirits needed to be as good as Blinky when it came to manipulating spiritual energy. They also needed access to his spiritual energy, because only he possessed the unique life attribute that breathed life into objects.

Perhaps it was possible to recreate a companion spirit like Blinky in someone else's head, but why should Ves hand over so much power to others?

An entity like Blinky might not be able to affect the material realm that much, but he was a natural enemy against spiritual entities!

There was no way that Ves would arm another person with a companion spirit that could threaten his spiritual applications!

"I don't think there's another way to turn other people into companion spirit surgeons."

How else would he be able to mass produce his companion spirits? There had to be a more practical and foolproof way to bestow this advantage to the rest of his clan!

He thought back on how he was in the process of mass producing his living coins.

An idea suddenly popped up in his mind. A.L.L N.O.V.E.L F.U.L.L

"What if... I can grow a companion spirit tree?"

He froze.

As long as the Golden Fruit Project succeeded, he would have solid proof that a bioengineered flesh tree was capable of growing living coins!

Since the trees were capable of producing coins with spiritual properties, what if he developed a tree that grew a different kind of fruit?

"The seed won't take the form of a solid coin that just happens to be alive. Instead, it will be a spiritual seed that someone can integrate by eating the fruit grown by the special tree!"

This could become a revolutionary invention if he was able to make it work! A companion spirit tree had much wider implications than a living coin tree!

The latter functioned as a vehicle to collect spiritual feedback at best. The former could completely strengthen humanity as a whole as long as it was popularized!

What if Ves and his close companions weren't the only ones who possessed spiritual pets?

What if they weren't confined to the Larkinson Clan?

If just 1 percent of humanity obtained a companion spirit, the comprehensive potential and capabilities of human civilization would experience a massive leap!

That was because companion spirits had the potential to provide a lot of additional possibilities, especially if they grew more formidable over time!

Just as he imagined himself changing humanity forever, he quickly interrupted his delusional fantasies.

"It's nearly impossible to make this work!"

Ves had overcome a huge amount of hurdles to create his so-called companion spirit trees.

He needed to develop a tree that was able to grow a special fruit that possessed the necessary ingredients to autonomously birth a companion spirit to the eater.

What was important was that the fruit had to complete this complicated process all by itself, which was an impossible challenge if there was no one to direct the operation!

"Will it work on everyone?"

That was anything but certain.

Ves was easily able to provide Subject 1 and Subject 2 with companion spirits because both possessed spiritual potential.

What if this wasn't the case?

What if they didn't possess any potential?

Ves didn't have any clear answers to these questions!

"Also, how can I develop a working mechanism for the companion spirit fruit?"

Something had to happen as soon as a person ate a fruit! The spiritual elements grown by the tree must not go to waste!

He exerted his creativity to the fullest as he attempted to find a viable solution.

He eventually came up with two potential directions.

The first direction was to develop a design spirit that could essentially perform this delicate operation on people's spirits with great proficiency!

Such a design spirit had to be extremely powerful, extremely precise and extremely loyal!

Suffice to say, Ves had a lot of misgivings about this plan. He did not trust any other design spirits with this power except Vulcan and maybe the Superior Mother.

He did not want to hand over this power to another entity!



This was why he was more inclined to go with the second direction.

"I need to develop a completely new method of creating a companion spirit in people."

What if he came up with a less violent process?

What if a companion spirit fruit held a spiritual seed that peacefully assimilated with the spiritualities with the eater?

Once the spiritual seed was buried into the mind of whoever ingested the fruit, it could steadily grow into a new companion spirit in a more natural and harmonious fashion!

Ves' eyes lit up! Although he had to solve numerous challenges in order to make this process work, it was a much better idea than the first method!

"In fact, as long as I can make this work, I don't need to limit the method to bestowing others with companion spirits."

He could potentially create an entire class of 'spirit trees' that grew fruits that provided all kinds of spiritual boosts when ingested!

Perhaps one fruit was able to bestow spiritual potential to people who lacked this strength!

Perhaps another fruit could impart specific talents to people by allowing them to assimilate spiritual attributes related to life, mechs or swords!

Perhaps a third fruit was able to grant enlightenment by stimulating their emotions similar to getting exposed to the Aspect of Transcendence!

While all of these ideas sounded great, the problem was that Ves didn't think that he was capable of making it all possible by himself!

"The T Institute needs to get up and running!"

## Chapter 3769 - Super Ambition

After Ves came up with the concept of giving life to extraordinary trees that could grow all sorts of fate-defying spirit fruits, how could he not be excited?!

His imagination fully went into bloom as he began to produce all kinds of galaxy-shaking fantasies!

He imagined a future where spirit fruit trees spread across human civilization.

Though these remarkable trees were expensive to grow and maintain, the fruits they grew were absolutely worth the effort!

With each fruit that grew from their branches, a human could gain power that was otherwise nearly impossible to obtain!

Ves imagined a future where mundane individuals with no special talents could become extraordinarily powerful with the help of his fruits!

"No longer will humanity be shackled by their own limited talents and the inherent deficiencies of humankind!"

The ability to turn this impossibility into a possibility would shake the foundations of human civilization and spark a golden age that could definitely surpass any of the ones that came before!

This wasn't hubris. This was a future that he could actually realize if he succeeded in his research!

Previously, it was unimaginable for him that the mere idea of developing a modified money tree could lead to such a momentous ambition.

If he succeeded, he would become a celebrated figure throughout humanity!

His contributions to society would exceed that of the Polymath and any other Star Designer!

Not even the Common Fleet Alliance could surpass his efforts!

As long as he cracked the secrets behind mass-producing fruits that contained beneficial spirit seeds and empowering human spirituality, he could single-handedly lead human civilization to an ascendant height that far surpassed the reach of other alien civilizations!

Neither the Seven Apex Races of the Milky Way Galaxy at their height nor the major alien races of the Red Ocean could shake humanity's strength once a lot more people unlocked the power of their spiritualities!

Humanity already occupied a dominant position in the Milky Way, and that was when the vast majority of humans were mere norms that did not possess any advantages.

Although second-class and first-class humans were able to break their biological limits by relying on increasingly more sophisticated implants and genetic treatments, these measures were unable to shake the deficiency in spirit.

Under ordinary circumstances, the only way for people to transcend into greatness was to put in an untold amount of effort and hardship in their work!

Despite the immense amount of humans living in the galaxy, how many of them could actually overcome all of the nigh-impossible hurdles and reach the top of their respective professions?

Over a span of four centuries, only a few hundred god pilots and Star Designers had emerged.

Even though a single person among them was incredibly powerful, the total number of humans who had reached the pinnacle of their professions was still abysmally low!

This was the great problem that the Mech Trade Association had always tried to overcome.

Whether the mechers managed to develop a solution or not, the cost had to be prohibitive, thereby preventing them from elevating humanity to a higher level.

What Ves came up with was different. As long as his spirit trees came into existence, people could shed their mortality and gain strength beyond any measure with the help of a couple of spirit fruits!

"People can't grow strong by relying on spirit fruits alone. They still need to put in the effort!"

How could transcendent power be so easy to obtain?

Mech pilots had to struggle against overwhelming odds in order to evolve into an expert candidate, expert pilot, ace pilot and finally god pilot.

Each of them needed to develop their willpower, conviction and other related traits step-by-step in order to earn the right to wield greater power!

"Spirit fruits can't help people perfect their will." Ves surmised. "What it can do is make up for the shortfall in talent and spiritual accumulation."

Ves finally envisioned a more realistic way of creating high-ranking expert pilots en masse!

"I need to unify my solutions into a cohesive ecosystem!"

Spirit fruits was just the start. They could provide mech pilots who originally did not have the qualifications to go any further the potential to undergo apotheosis!

However, potential was potential and did not translate into actual strength. Even if a mech pilot is a hundred spirit fruits, all of that additional power if the person was too weak and muddle-headed to forge his potential into a strong and overpowering will!

This process of refining one's mind and willpower into an extraordinary force of will had stumped many mech pilots.

Even those with an abundance of talent had fallen into obscurity because they failed to navigate the journey that could sublimate their lives!

"Don't I have another solution for that, though?"

He thought back on his Aspects of Lufa. He already envisioned a few research projects related to leveraging the different glows to assist with polishing the willpower of different mech pilots!

If what had happened to Ketis was any indication, then a lot of mech pilots would be able to find enlightenment and avoid the detours and dead ends that might block their progress to their next evolution!

In this way, the combination of spirit fruits and glow treatments formed a nearly complete breakthrough system!

With the help of the first solution, many more people would be able to obtain chances that they were denied due to congenital deficiencies!

With the help of the second solution, the difficulty in advancing to the next rank would probably be reduced by 75 percent!

Any of the two solutions in isolation was enough to boost humanity's strength.

When they were being utilized in combination, the results would definitely change the course of humanity's history to a massive degree!

The amount of expert pilots, Journeyman Mech Designers, swordmasters and possibly other extraordinary professions would skyrocket!

With the expansion of such an enormous base of extraordinary figures and the continued assistance of spirit trees and glow treatments, the speed and probability that any of them would overcome the subsequent hurdles were greater!

In a century or so, the number of god pilots and Star Designers in existence might exceed 10,000 individuals!

The addition of just a single new figure at the top was already a cause of celebration for humanity as a whole!

Ves could hardly imagine how his set of solutions would completely transform the upper echelon of human civilization!

The Common Fleet Alliance would no longer be able to compete against the Mech Trade Association!

"All of this can be possible one day!" Ves gasped in exaltation!

Although he was far from being able to realize all of these fantastic solutions, his existing capabilities gave him the confidence that he could give birth to an entirely new age!

As his passion and excitement continued to rise, the energy surrounding him became more active than ever!

His mind became affected by an exceptional mood and a sense of mania had completely overtaken his consciousness!

As his imagination went into overdrive, his awareness blurred as he developed an extremely strong urge to plan out his amazing ambition.

He used his implant to put all of his ideas and speculation into words. He created over a hundred different diagrams that encapsulated his theoretical framework and even drafted a few spirit tree designs.

When his passion and drive had reached a peak, he came up with the culmination of work by coming up with the design of an unprecedentedly powerful design spirit!

It was only then that he had slowly calmed down.

His excitement faded and his passion returned to a reasonable level as he beheld the results of his effort.

The reason why he was no longer able to sustain his drive was because he had hit too many walls!

As much as he became impressed by his ambitious new goals, it was anything but easy to make it all happen!

When he reviewed all of the documents that he had made in a span of a few hours, he recognized that he was wholly inadequate to realize even 10 percent of his master plan!

He needed to become a superb spiritual engineer the likes of which humanity had never seen!

He bet that not even Five Scrolls Compact could come close to developing all of these impossible solutions!

It was only up until now that he understood the magnitude of what he attempted to accomplish.

"This... is not an ordinary design anymore. It has far exceeded that level. This... is a grand design!"

Perhaps the grandest of all! Only Star Designers were capable of leveraging the strength that they had grown step-by-step by designing mechs into other powerful applications!

It was extremely arrogant and foolish for Ves to think that he could complete a plan that could only be tackled by Star Designers!

He had a long way to go before he developed his prowess and improved his mastery over spiritual engineering to the point where he could create his long-awaited spirit trees!

It might take a century. It might take two centuries. However long it would take, Ves was determined to pursue this ambition!

He clenched his fist as determination filled his body!

"A day will come when I shall realize my grand design."

He needed to be patient, though. The journey was a marathon, not a sprint. He needed to get close by researching incremental new solutions over a span of many years.

Not only that, he couldn't do it alone. He needed the support of hundreds if not thousands of brilliant researchers and assistants to solve the sheer amount of problems that prevented him from completing his grand design!

There were a few problems that he could potentially solve in a matter of years.

Developing a safe and systematic approach where people could make use of the Aspects of Lufa to accelerate their progress and trigger controlled breakthroughs was much more attainable.

Developing a spirit tree that could grow helpful spirit fruits was much harder in comparison!

The biggest challenge that Ves was grappling with was how the consumption of a spirit fruit could lead to a permanent improvement.

If Ves injected his spiritual energy into another person, the spike of energy would probably pass through everything before dissipating into the spiritual realm.

If he forcefully tried to inject it in someone's mind or spirit, a violent rejection process would occur as individuals were unable to cope with foreign spiritual energy!

Ves had only witnessed a few instances where powerful spiritual entities were able to absorb and digest foreign spiritual matter.

Both the Unending One and Cynthia had shown this capability. Yet in either of those cases, the process which they relied upon to absorb foreign energy was violent and forceful.

Ordinary people could never replicate such a high-end process!

Even Ves had only been able to reproduce a part of the Unending One's devouring capabilities by incorporating the dark god's spiritual fragment into Blinky.

"I can't rely on this direction to develop a solution where other people can absorb foreign energy."

This was why he turned his attention to a different and more ambitious direction.

"The key is universal life energy."

This high-end spiritual energy attribute was incredibly powerful, but also happened to be incomparably gentle!

A small quantity of universal life energy could assimilate into any spirituality as long as they had room to grow!

If Ves wanted his spirit fruits to achieve actual results, then he needed to come up with spirit seeds that behaved in a similar fashion!

The only solution that he could think of was to add universal life energy to all of the spirit fruits!

As long as they contained a sufficient amount of this powerful energy, they could facilitate the assimilation of any kind of spirit seed with foreign attributes!

"Perhaps a spirit seed that only consists of universal life energy is enough to bestow humans with spiritual potential!"

Ves had always speculated that this might be possible, but he never dared to test it out because he did not want to waste a finite quantity of universal life energy in his possession.



Yet... what if he found a way to replenish it? What if he could grow it by himself instead of relying on obtaining more high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum?

## Chapter 3770 - Crucial Epiphany

The difficulty of producing universal life energy was unimaginable.

This was not a regular form of spiritual energy. Its core attribute centered a higher concept of life!

Ves had only encountered a few varieties of high-end spiritual energy.

From the high-grade life-prolonging treatment vials, he was able to extract the universal life energy that served as the key ingredient to extending people's lives.

From Cassandra Breyer, he came in touch with the five elements of earth, water, fire, wood and metal.

From the Polymath, he not only encountered the metal attribute once once again, but also tasted the power of truth!

Each of these high-end attributes were powerful. Each of them opened up a lot of new possibilities. Each of them also happened to be extremely difficult to reproduce!

If what he learned from various sources was any indication, then the only way for the Big Two and the Five Scrolls Compact to generate universal life energy was to squeeze it out of the brains of high-ranking mech pilots!

"What an incredibly barbaric and inefficient process!"

While Ves could easily imagine the deranged cultists of the Five Scrolls Compact undertaking such a demented activity, it was hard for him to accept that the Big Two also engaged in such a terrible activity!

The suspicion that the Mech Trade Association, which had always stood up for the rights of mech pilots, eagerly sacrificed the lives of expert pilots and ace pilots in order to extend the lives of a cabal of geezers was too horrible to accept!

Although Ves still hadn't collected enough proof to clear his doubts, the possibility always remained.

He did not need to look any further than the research files that he had inadvertently obtained from the pinnacle lab on Prosperous Hill VI.

His eyes clouded over as he focused inward. He dug up a collection of research documents that he had managed to steal from the Supreme Sage's lab.

Project Cain encapsulated that former top bioresearcher's attempt to extract a special substance from the brains of dead expert pilots. The goal was to improve the yield and make it easier to produce greater quantities of high-grade serum!

There was no way the MTA had no relations to this macabre research project!

Perhaps its upright principles did not allow the organization to conduct this research directly. Outsourcing this controversial activity to a disposable third party associate was a lot safer!

The more Ves thought about it, the more this scheme made sense!

The MTA could just profess innocence if the public found out about the horrible experiments that they had secretly commissioned one day. After all, the mechers had done none of the actual work. It was the 'rogue scientists' that had gone down the wrong path!

Until then, the mechers could reap all of the gains without accepting any responsibility! It was a devious scheme that completely fit their behavior pattern!

Every external research partner was a tool as far as the MTA was concerned. The Supreme Sage and other 'research partners' were not as honored as they thought.

Perhaps they might hold value as long as their standing remained high, but the mechers would not hesitate to dump them as soon as any of them turned into a liability!

Ves even thought about his own relationship with the MTA. Were his friendship with Jovy, his acquaintance with the Polymath and his status as a contributor of restricted technology just levers to make him more useful to the Association?

What if he outlived his usefulness? Would he get cleaned up by them one day?

He shook his head. The mechers shouldn't be ungrateful!

As long as Ves grasped their goals and motivations, he could ensure that he remained a useful asset to them. His relationship with the MTA was safe as long as this was the case.

It didn't take much for him to remain in the good graces of the Association. He just had to keep improving as a mech designer. The greater his contributions to the mech community, the more he facilitated the MTA's purpose.

As Ves thought about how to maintain his relationship with the MTA, he suddenly reached another epiphany.

"Wait a minute." Ves abruptly paused. "Why am I thinking about improving humanity through spirit trees when I can more easily do so with my mechs?"

The grand design that he tentatively called the Spiritual Uplift Project was extremely immense and far-reaching.

In order to develop the spirit fruits that could seamlessly merge their spiritual seeds with people's spiritualities, he needed to develop a self-renewing source of universal life energy!

The only way that Ves could accomplish this was to create a new spiritual product that excelled at this job!

It would be the mother of all spirit trees.

By forming a spiritual entity that was largely based on high-end universal life energy and little else, Ves hoped to create a 'Tree of Life' that could produce an endless amount of its main ingredient, thereby ridding him from his dependency on extremely rare and expensive serum!

This was a much more efficient way of producing universal life energy than squeezing it out of the brains of high-ranking mech pilots as if they were oranges!

"It's too difficult, though!"

As far as Ves was aware of, most spiritual life forms were unable to handle such high-end energies. They were too powerful and high quality to be handled by low-order life forms.

The thought of creating a life that could produce universal life energy right away was an incredibly arrogant goal!

The biggest challenge to creating this so-called Tree of Life was to ensure that the new spiritual entity did not instantly expend all of its high-end universal life energy into nurturing its low-end spiritual energies.

"Difficult! Difficult! Difficult!"

While Ves had a few ideas on how to start with nurturing this extremely special Tree of Life, it would probably take decades if not centuries for this remarkable life form to fulfill all of its functions!

Compared to the extremes that Ves needed to go through in order to progress his ultra-ambitious Spiritual Uplift Project, it was a lot easier for him to achieve similar results by designing mechs!

This was what his epiphany was all about.

"I was putting the cart before the horse. Before I can think about helping every human transcend their limits, I should focus on a more attainable goal such as making mech pilots stronger!"

As Ves turned his thoughts in this direction, he realized that even without the use of spirit fruits, he could use another medium to nurture a human's spirituality.

"The answer is mechs!"

Although the limitation of using mechs was that his solutions were solely confined to mech pilots, this was still a good start.

Ves recalled the fundamental creed of every mech designer. It was a goal that the MTA forcefully hammered into his head and that of his fellow colleagues.

"Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots."

It was a simple statement, but not it gained an additional meaning through the epiphany he had obtained.

The conventional way for mech designers to fulfill their creed was to design good mechs that provided immediate battle strength to mech pilots.

A strong weapon allowed mech pilots to put up a better fight!

"However... that's not the extent of my style."

Sure, his living mechs always provided immediate advantages that could help a mech pilot win a battle. The increased cooperation between a living mech and a mech pilot along with the remarkable properties of glows usually resulted in better results.

Yet what Ves actually fixated upon was imparting his mechs with growth potential. By making them alive and giving them the possibility to grow stronger over time, they could become stronger and more useful weapons that could help their mech pilots achieve even greater victories!

"That's not the extent of what I can do, though!"

He didn't realize it until now that he was mostly prioritizing the growth of the mech.

His latest attempts to make the weapon stronger such as developing increasingly more sophisticated living mechs and increasing his use of design spirits all served to strengthen one part of the equation.

He had subconsciously neglected the other part of the equation, yet that was illogical.

As a mech designer who was obsessed with man-machine symbiosis, how could he leave out the growth of the mech pilot!?

"If I treat my living mechs as spirit fruits, how much help can they provide towards my mech pilots?"

The results would be massive! Any mech of his design that could induce targeted growth to its mech pilot would be at least ten times if not a hundred times more valuable than a competing machine!

In fact, the allure of piloting a mech that could actively help a mech pilot grow stronger was a fatal attraction to the entire soldier profession!

Ves wanted to smack his face for missing this incredibly promising possibility!

Unlike his previous ideas, it was a lot more attainable for him to realize all of these amazing new growth-oriented mech models.

The reason why he was so confident about it was because they had already come into existence!

"My Chiron, my Quint and my Enlightened Warrior are already growth mechs in a sense!"

Even Ketis joined the party. Her Monster Slayer and her Second Sword was imbued with a portion of her swordsmanship which they could pass on to their mech pilots!

All of these existing mechs proved that the idea of using machines to actively nurture the strength of mech pilots was viable!

In truth, Ves had only scratched the surface of growth mechs up until this point. He had been too ignorant of the possibilities. All the times he spent on improving the performance of his mechs had caused him to neglect the greater potential of design philosophy.

If he turned his main products into the mech industry's version of spirit fruits, then he could revolutionize the mech community a lot sooner!

The entire body of mech pilots would become profoundly grateful to his contributions as he introduced a much more accessible method for them to improve their talents and exceed their congenital limitations!

As long as his growth mechs lived up to their promises, they could change the face of the mech market!

Who would want to buy a mech that wasn't capable of actively nurturing mech pilots?

"The mechs that lack this essential feature will all turn obsolete overnight!"

The only way for other mech designers to compete against machines that served mech pilots the best was to incorporate Ves' solutions into their own work!

As far as Ves knew, the only way to make that possible was for Ves to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer and 'realize' his design philosophy!

His eyes widened as his passion burned even hotter than before!

He no longer felt confused about his future direction as a mech designer.

Ever since he became a Journeyman, he explored his design philosophy and developed a lot of new applications. He continually created more and more methods and techniques while at the same time fleshing out his theoretical framework.

Yet no matter how much he expanded his spiritual toolbox, he never felt that any of them brought him closer to advancing to the next rank.

This was no longer the case.

Ves felt it in his bones that the concept of growth mechs could be the key he was looking for all of these years.

It was not the key that he could use to unlock the gates that allowed him to realize his design philosophy.

Every mech designer could come up with many different ideas to progress their design philosophies.

However, not all of them were as good. Some were more attainable. Some were easier to research. Some fit a mech designer better than others.

Ves had no doubts, though. From the moment he formally conceived of the concept of growth mechs, he already knew that it was the best and most fitting innovation that he could embrace!

"This is it! This is the one! This is my path that will lead me to Senior and Master!"