

## Mech 4191

### Chapter 4191 Sacred Temple

Ves was right to suspect that the Sacred Temple encapsulated the essence of the Spiritual Ascension upgrade track.

The System literally created this place in order to help Ves, or at least an incarnation of himself, ascend to godhood!

The revelation that so-called True Gods were able to absorb faith energy in order to grow stronger was a massive revelation!

It explained so much why exceptional individuals such as Star Designers and god pilots were so different from everyone else in human space.

They were so powerful and developed their extraordinary natures to such a great extent that they were truly apart from normal humanity.

"Maybe the transition from a pre-divinity phase to a post-divinity phase is the common barrier that stops the vast majority of ace pilots and Master Mech Designers from going a step further!"

Ves had the impression that True Gods were life forms that managed to ascend to a post-divinity phase without specializing in any specific professions.

This produced many differences as True Gods weren't able to function like Star Designers and god pilots. Each of them stood at the same height, but they all excelled in different areas.

"So what use is this Sacred Hearth to me?" Ves asked as his thoughts turned to his own development.

[As you prepare for your journey to ascend to godhood, you must lay the foundation step by step by building up your Divine Cores. Before you or an incarnation of yourself reaches divinity, your Divine Cores are weak and limited. The Sacred Hearth provides protection as well as limited support to

your Divine Cores, allowing you to develop them with greater ease, but you must vigorously cultivate yourself as well as your incarnations in order to transcend your mortality.]

That sounded rather vague, but he guessed that the Sacred Hearth might actually provide a lot of help to him as he reached the later stages.

Given how few Star Designers and ace pilots managed to make the critical leap, Ves could use all the help he could get to maximize his own chances of success!

"Wait a minute." Ves suddenly said. "If True Gods are a separate class of divinity from Star Designers, a single person shouldn't be able to become both. If this Sacred Hearth is helping me become a so-called True God, does that mean I will no longer be able to become a Star Designer?!"

This was an extremely important question to Ves! The answer directly determined how much he would make use of the Sacred Temple and all of the more esoteric functions of the updated System!

[This is not the case, user. As a Journeyman Mech Designer, you are able to progress to a Star Designer but not a True God unless you undergo drastic changes. However, your most direct incarnation Blinky is able to develop into a True God if he continues to develop according to his most fitting trajectory.]

"I see!"

Ves relaxed. As long as the possibility to become a Star Designer still existed, he cared little about anything else. Hearing that it would actually be Blinky and potentially other incarnations that would be able to advance to True God in the future was nice, but not that interesting to him. Just because the System called them like that did not mean it was correct!

Now that Ves had become exposed to a different and more general way of classifying the power of extraordinary individuals, he tried to recall how many people or entities he knew that had reached the post-divinity phase.

"If I take someone as powerful as the Polymath as the standard, then I may have met a few existences that qualify..."

Though Ves had never been able to get in touch with his mother in person now that she had assumed the guise of the Oblivion Empress, he deeply suspected that she had become a True God!

"There is no way she can reign over the Nyxian Gap and beat up all of those 'dark gods' if she isn't as powerful as the top enforcers of the Five Scrolls Compact!"

From what Ves had gathered from studying the descriptions at the Divine Bazaar and the Tree of Possibilities, he was pretty certain that the Compact had managed to cultivate quite a number of individuals whose strengths had reached the post-divinity phase.

It was logical that Cynthia Larkinson had managed to grow to this point. If she was merely as strong as an ace pilot in spiritual terms, then she would have never been able to win all of the battles that Helena described!

What Ves found curious was that the Superior Mother had yet to reach this phase. The incarnation was powerful in her own right, but was still too young and lacking to be worthy of the title of True God.

The same applied to Helena, who admitted herself that she was not able to boast that she was a proper goddess of death.

As far as Ves was concerned, none of his design spirits were qualified to call themselves True Gods either. He knew for a fact that while they were able to harvest a lot of spiritual feedback, they were far too weak to harvest faith energy!

There was one exception, though.

"Gaia is pretty powerful..."

Ves couldn't explain it. Though he may have gone overboard by investing all of the universal life energy contained within an entire vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum in her creation, this was definitely not the only factor that could have transformed her into what he now recognized to be a True God!

Even though Gaia was probably still in the process of transitioning to this state last he noticed, Ves became increasingly convinced that he may have inadvertently created a True God by accident!

This was because she was already able to get into contact with faith energy, which was one of the key factors that set True Gods apart from weaker spiritual entities!

"I see!"

Ves wondered whether Star Designers and god pilots also became dependent on faith energy in order to advance further.

On one hand, it didn't seem likely that this was the case considering that the MTA was a secularist organization that never erected any churches centered around its greatest figures.

On the other hand, the MTA did an awful lot to publicize its Star Designers and god pilots. Their biographies were widely available and they frequently showed up in the news.

Given how many people looked up to both groups, Star Designers and god pilots managed to amass an enormous number of fans, many of which were so fanatical about them that their behavior was hardly distinguishable from that of incredibly devout believers!

Ves' expression turned odd for a moment.

"Is the MTA a disguised church?"

This might actually be the case! Perhaps the mechers were keeping everyone fooled in order to prevent humanity from going too crazy again.

"Well, I still have a long way to go before I can become a Star Designer, so there is not much reason for me to think about this matter."

Ves needed to focus on his more immediate goals. All of this talk about godhood and divinities were way too far away to his current self.

While he recognized that the Spiritual Ascension upgrade track was meant to give Ves additional help in advancing further, the entire premise of the Sacred Temple was to facilitate the growth of a True God.

There was nothing about this place that could directly help him advance to Star Designer!

"If Vulcan is able to become a True God like Gaia, then that doesn't really help me all that much." He guessed.

This was similar to how Cynthia's advancement to True God did not help the Superior Mother catch up. The reason why one did not automatically bring the other up to the same level was because there were lots of requirements to meet all of the conditions to transition to True God.

Star Designers needed to design incredible mechs that incorporated unheard of technological innovations.

God pilots needed to be able to shed everything except their willpower and hope that what remained was enough to keep them alive!

Neither of these two feats sounded easy. Only the most worthy individuals in their respective professions were able to succeed in reaching the post-divinity phase!

Ves figured that becoming a True God was also as difficult. If this was not the case, then True Gods would have flooded human space a long time ago since they were not a new phenomenon!

He suddenly came up with an interesting idea.

"If the Sacred Temple can help Blinky become a True God, does that mean that I can use my close relationship with my companion spirit to reduce the difficulty of becoming a Star Designer?"

This was a viable theory!

Ves remembered that when Ketis advanced to swordsmaster, she also advanced to Journeyman Mech Designer in the same time frame!

Her double breakthrough was a legendary event. Ves realized that it was actually the first case where someone with a companion spirit had made a major breakthrough!

This was important because the strength of the companion spirit often reflected the strength of the principal.

Sharpie was not stronger than Ketis. Alexandria was no weaker than Gloriana. Blinky was roughly just as powerful as Ves.

If this was the case, then accelerating Blinky's spiritual development with the help of the newly-upgraded System might allow him to advance to Senior, Master and even Star Designer at a much faster rate!

Ves suddenly made another important recollection!

"Is this how the Polymath was able to break every record in the mech industry and become a Star Designer before she reached a hundred years old?!"

This didn't make any sense unless the Polymath was able to obtain a companion spirit or make use of another clever loophole!

As far as Ves could guess, the Polymath chose to specialize in pure technology. She shouldn't have been able to create or obtain anything comparable to a companion spirit during her rise to power.

"She probably received her own opportunities." Ves concluded.

Every Star Designer experienced an exceptional life. Though the records mentioned a lot of details about their lives, Ves knew better than to believe the public accounts were complete.

For example, the Polymath's biography did not mention anything about possessing a fragment of the Metal Scroll!

In any case, whether the Polymath served as an example to Ves or not, he was convinced that nurturing Blinky into a True God might allow him to satisfy one of the most difficult requirements to become a Star Designer with greater ease!

While Ves still needed to satisfy other requirements such as developing a fantastic innovation of creating an exceptional grand work, all of it would become a lot easier if his other self was already a True God with all of the power that entailed!

"Blinky, I'm counting on you to blaze a trail and help me become a Star Designer in the future!"

Mrow mrow mrow?

Blinky appeared from Ves' head and looked confused. What the hell was a True God exactly and how was he supposed to grow into one? He was just a spiritual cat that was formed out of a fragment of a dark god!

Ves momentarily became confused as well, but quickly remembered what he had just seen during his journey to the summit of the mountain.

"Did you forget about all of those strange scriptures locked within the enlightenment fruits hanging from the Tree of Possibilities? Many of the more powerful ones all claim to be able to turn someone into a god! We just have to keep our eye out for a scripture that aligns with your spiritual attributes. Once we have obtained a compatible enlightenment fruit, you can eat it and know exactly what to do in order to advance to True God! Together with this Sacred Hearth, your ascent to godhood will be smooth sailing!"

Mrow...

Blinky did not look as confident as Ves. Nothing should be this easy!

### **Chapter 4192 Parallel Development**

Ves completed his exploration of the new Mech Designer System.

His overall impression was that its name was not that accurate anymore.

While the System still offered plenty of ways to further his ability to design mechs, it gained an entirely new facet that almost completely overshadowed its older uses.

The Divine Bazaar and the Tree of Possibilities were already outrageous enough. Both of them granted him a backdoor to all of the goods and secrets hoarded by the hidden cults that were apparently rife in human space!

All of these scattered cults that may or may not have ties to the Five Scrolls Compact all possessed their unique advantages. Few people ever got in touch with these obscure cults so it was impossible for Ves to learn about them, let alone hunt them down and compel them to cough up their secrets.

With the new System upgrades, Ves did not need to take action and provoke a lot of powerful new enemies. He could conveniently obtain what he needed as long as he was willing to pay the necessary Ascension Points!

"The name of the new currency is a telling indicator of what the System is truly trying to accomplish." Ves surmised.



At first, Ves was able to earn Design Points by designing mechs. Simple as that.

Now, he was able to earn Ascension Points through multiple means. While he still retained the ability to earn points through designing mechs, he could also acquire them by completing strange missions and recruiting Chosen Envoys, whatever that exactly meant.

Although the latter two methods sounded a lot different from designing mechs, Ves was able to see the common thread that connected all of them together.

"The point of doing all of this is to ascend to godhood." Ves concluded. "Mech designers aspire to advance to Star Designer, which is an existence on the same level as a True God. Doing all of that other stuff such as practicing a cultivation scripture or filling up my Chosen Courtyard with Envoys are all different roads that lead to the same destination. The purpose of the System is to help its user reach the post-divinity phase and beyond."

This description did not necessarily fit the Mech Designer System, but completely sounded natural if it was related to the Metal Scroll!

After Ves chose the Spiritual Ascension upgrade track, the System appeared to be encouraging him to adopt a specific development strategy, one borne out of the fact that he possessed multiple incarnations.

Ves could still work towards becoming a Star Designer as usual, but his incarnations were both capable of evolving into True Gods!

The fact that Blinky and Vulcan could reach this powerful state opened up a lot of new possibilities that few people could have imagined.

"I can adopt a diversification strategy!"

Traditionally, the Larkinson Clan achieved initial success by forming a strong mech army and building up a successful mech business.

However, if either of these two activities began to stall, the Larkinson Clan would get into deep trouble.

This was why Ves and the leadership of the clan invested a lot into hedging their bets and diversifying their business activities.

Initiatives such as the Larkinson Biotech Institute, the T Institute, the homegrown shipbuilding operation centered around the Diligent Ovenbird, the Open Consortium, the Creation Association, the First Star Mech Academy and all kinds of other smaller business activities comprehensively added more insurances to the Larkinson Clan.

Though the Living Mech Corporation definitely brought in more money than all of those other business ventures combined, if the mech company ever collapsed one day, the Larkinson Clan would not become destitute all of a sudden!

"The best part about all of this is that as long as everything is going well, my clan is earning a lot more money than normal!"

Ves saw that he had the opportunity to pursue a similar strategy with regards to his spiritual development.

From the moment he obtained Blinky, he had already noticed that the growth of his Spirituality attribute vastly exceeded that of his immediate peers.

Though his wife, Ketis and a few other people had managed to close the gap after Ves gifted them with their own companion spirits, it was clear that incarnations granted him a powerful advantage over more conventional mech designers!

After years of designing mechs and working alongside other gifted mech designers, Ves had developed a pretty good understanding of the consequences.

A stronger spirit not only comprehensively improved a mech designer's understanding, learning ability and affinity towards mech, but also allowed them to imprint their design philosophies onto mech designs to a stronger degree.

In fact, Ves' growth in this aspect was so strong that he was pretty certain that his Spirituality attribute already exceeded the minimum threshold of that of a Senior Mech Designer!

What did this mean?

Ves already satisfied one of the requirements to advance to Senior!

Of course, the reason why he had been stuck at Journeyman all of this time was because the career path of a mech designer centered more around knowledge and ability rather than spiritual accumulation. It was a highly intellectual and cerebral profession by nature, which meant that brute force was not enough for him to reach the next rank.

In this regard, Blinky and Vulcan could provide relatively little help. While the latter possessed a lot of science and engineering know-how that Ves sometimes borrowed in order to solve difficult design problems, he was merely making use of theories and methods developed by other people in the industry.

Ves was confident that he had accumulated enough in other areas. He designed a lot of mechs over the years.

With no events or crises that could take Ves away from the design lab, he was able to complete one mech design project after another.

The only real distractions were his kids. As someone who felt strongly about family, he insisted on accompanying his cute little children as they enjoyed their childhoods.

Even so, Ves could not allow this sentiment to compromise his passion for mech design. He had heard plenty of cases where mech designers lost their drive to design mechs because they became too domesticated.

"I'm pretty sure I designed enough mechs considering how productive I've been in the last five years."

However, that was still not enough for Ves to feel that he had reached the turning point of his remaining time as a Journeyman Mech Designer.

Seniors reached their position by relying on their inventions. Ves had already asked for advice from numerous mech designers who completed the same journey.

Whether it was Termanao Dervidian or Benedict Cortez, both of them told him that his time would come sooner or later. He could not rush the process because it mostly came down to waiting until he received enough inspiration to know how he could substantially push his design philosophy to the next level!

It was because of this limitation that Ves did not put too much emphasis on developing Blinky and Vulcan in parallel.

"I could be wrong, though."

There was a possibility that advancing to Master Mech Designer or Star Designer made it a lot important to possess enough spiritual accumulation.

If that was the case, then having a couple of powerful spiritual incarnations would provide Ves with an immensely valuable advantage!

Of course, it would take many years for that to become relevant.

"I need to take care of my more immediate needs."

He left the Sacred Hearth and went back to the Pantheon in order to check his Status. It had been years since he last inspected it, and a lot of subtle changes had occurred over the years.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Mutual Growth

Ascension Points: 34

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.7

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.6

Creativity: 2.5

Concentration: 3.2

Spirituality: 10.6

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

...

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available (Used in Bardo Star Cluster). Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Available. Can be activated a single time.

[Time Gate]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

"Damn I'm good."

Ves did not need to inspect his Status to know how much he improved. He was able to use his own judgment to determine how much his attributes had improved and how many Sub-Skills he acquired over time.

Still, he felt a lot of psychological satisfaction when he was able to compare his new figures with the older ones that he recalled from his memory.

The most notable change aside from switching his Design Points with Ascension Points was the massive increase in Spirituality.

Since the Status page merged both his and Blinky's numbers together, it had exceeded the score of 10, which was probably an important threshold!

"It's too bad that my Skills and Sub-Skills haven't improved as drastically." Ves sighed.

He was too lazy to study each of the improved and added Sub-Skills in detail, but no matter how much he had managed to absorb during his time in Davute, he had yet to make a breakthrough in understanding that was significant enough for him to advance to Senior.

Ves paid special attention to two new Sub-Skills.

[Phasewater I]

[Offensive Phasewater Technology I]

"Damn it! I spent so much time on studying Phasewater, but all I managed to do was get my foot in the door!"

The difficulty of learning enough about phasewater theory in order to develop a basic understanding of the exotic was too great!

Ves was actually one of the faster mech designers to comprehend phasewater. There were many other Journeymen who had spent just as much time and effort on studying phasewater theory and failed to reach half of his level of understanding!

Compared to expending years worth of time on trying to understand how this mysterious dimension-manipulating exotic worked, Ves would rather pluck an enlightenment fruit from the Tree of Possibilities and absorb everything he needed to know in an instant!

"The problem is that I need to wait for the damn tree to spawn the right enlightenment fruit!"

Ves had scanned all of the available enlightenment fruit during his first visit to the Tree of Possibilities and failed to find anything related to phasewater technology.

This was the downside to covering so many different scientific and spiritual fields! The tree only grew a couple of hundred fruits at a time, so the chances of stumbling upon the ones he needed the most were low!

"Even if a phasewater enlightenment fruit is available, it is not certain that I can pay for it." Ves admitted with a sigh.

The System was absolutely fair in this regard. Rarer, more exotic, more powerful and more novel knowledge cost far more Ascension Points to obtain.

Ves couldn't afford all that much with just 34 AP to his name at the moment!

Just as he began to think about setting his sights lower and starting off with a few modest purchases to set him on the right path, he suddenly remembered that he still had a bunch of lottery tickets that were begging to be used.

His eyes lit up again.

"Yes! How could I have overlooked them? The golden lottery tickets might not be that precious, but the radiant lottery tickets are absolutely fantastic!"

Based on what little he obtained from a radiant lottery ticket in the past, he guessed that the value of goods they spit out ranged from 100 to 10,000 AP!

In fact, it may very well be the case that the radiant lottery tickets could potentially give Ves items that were worth far more than the upper boundary, as he hadn't used them often enough to figure out their distribution pattern.

"No matter whether I can get a prize that is worth 500 AP or 500,000 AP, I will always be able to obtain a windfall!"

Compared to what he could gain from spending 34 AP, the potential prizes he could win from using up his lottery tickets were far better!

#### **Chapter 4193 Gambling On Fruit**

When Ves decided to make use of his lottery tickets right away, he immediately left the summit of the mountain and raced all the way down the steps.

He had to run almost all the way down the bottom in order to reach the Wishing Fountain again.

The place hadn't changed since he last visited it. The large ornate fountain still spouted water as usual while an atmosphere of chance and fortune continued to encourage him to try his luck.

Ves briefly hesitated for a moment. His luck had always been a bit inconsistent, especially with regards to lottery tickets.

There was a huge degree of variance of what he could obtain from the Wishing Fountain today. With 9 golden lottery tickets and 4 radiant lottery tickets, he could obtain successive jackpots, but he could also be met with a lot of underwhelming gains.



"There's no reason to delay, though."

Unlike before, Ves fully understood what he could obtain from the updated System. The Divine Bazaar and the Tree of Possibilities had shown him many possible ways to spend his Ascension Points.

He had noticed plenty of goodies that he deeply desired to obtain but couldn't afford the Ascension Points to redeem them from the System.

The Wishing Fountain offered him a bit of hope of being able to obtain these valuable goodies on the cheap.

Of course, Ves did not expect the Wishing Fountain to spit out the exact items that he lusted after. He was already content if he obtained a prize that was similar or better than what he was aiming for. He wouldn't even be too disappointed if he obtained a slightly inferior product.

Ves briefly went over his development strategy.

Even if he cut down all of his greater and more long-term ambitions, he still had too much on his plate!

"First, I need to progress my design philosophy."

"Second, I need to enhance Blinky and Vulcan's spiritual development."

"Third, I need a way to strengthen my mech army in the short term in order to increase the success rate of the Trailblazer Expedition."

"Fourth, I have to supply valuable and useful knowledge to the Golden Cat, the Illustrious One and Lufa to boost their capabilities."

"Fifth, I need to obtain a useful scripture that my children can practice in order to sharpen and boost their already potent spiritual growth."

"Sixth, I need to obtain valuable materials so that I can upgrade my personal gear as well as a couple of important expert mechs if possible."

When Ves reviewed all of these priorities, he tried to think about what category of prizes he should try for first.

"I can set aside the need to obtain more spiritually reactive materials." Ves decided. "My gear is already strong enough and my expert mechs aren't weak after I have upgraded them recently."

What he needed the most was knowledge. Scriptures, manuals, design-related Skills and so on could all give Ves a glimpse of brand-new possibilities that were previously unattainable!

"Wishing Fountain, please allow me to draw from the pool of enlightenment fruits!"

As Ves spoke and thought about his desires, he felt that the Wishing Fountain responded to his request.

When he tried to narrow down the pool of prizes to scriptures that could help individuals hone and develop their spiritualities based on specific spiritual attributes, the Wishing Fountain did not oblige this time.

Apparently, that was way too much. Ves could only settle for obtaining any random enlightenment fruit no matter whether they were relevant or not. It was not the Wishing Fountain's problem if he had no use for the awarded prizes!

"Well, here goes nothing."

He started off small by expending another golden lottery ticket.

Just like before, the ticket melted into the fountain water, causing the liquid to turn golden while at the same time getting charged with energy.

Though Ves appreciated the theatrics of this ritual, he was impatient to find out what he managed to gain from the lottery ticket he had earned from his only completed Supply Mission.

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

"..."

Damnit!

The System was up to its usual shenanigans again.

"It's a good thing that I have 8 more golden lottery tickets. I have to be able to get at least one good prize out of this ordeal."

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! You have obtained a Shadow Dance Dagger Style Enlightenment Fruit.]

[Congratulations! You have obtained a Olthori Sacred Cleansing Ritual Manual Fruit.]

[Congratulations! You have obtained an Imperial Thornix Salamander Breeding Manual Fruit.]

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! You have obtained a Senior-level Stealth and Cloaking Enlightenment Fruit.]

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! You have obtained a Beast Mech Design V Enlightenment Fruit.]

"Five prizes!"

When paired with the Black Demon Steel he obtained the last time, that meant that he managed to obtain something from the Wishing Fountain 6 out of 10 times.

Just as promised, the Wishing Fountain exclusively spat out enlightenment fruits, each of which would grant valuable knowledge to those who ate them. This was a massive relief as his desire for other possible benefits was not as high for the time being.

The winnings were mixed between design and spirituality-related enlightenment fruits.

As a mech designer, the former attracted his attention first. He restrained the urge to eat them right away and studied their descriptions first in order to confirm that they truly contained what he needed.

[Senior-level Stealth and Cloaking Enlightenment Fruit]

Grants Senior-level Stealth and Cloaking Enlightenment to a mech designer regardless of their prior understanding of this field.

Requirements: Apprentice Mech Designer. Intelligence must be 1.5 or higher.

[Beast Mech Design V Enlightenment Fruit]

Grants Beast Mech Design V to a mech designer regardless of their prior understanding of this field.

Requirements: Apprentice Mech Designer. Intelligence must be 1.5 or higher.

"I can swallow these right away!" Ves jubilantly cheered.

Both fruits were useful to him! Though they weren't as great as enlightenment fruits that allowed him to vastly improve his understanding of phasewater technology, he did not want to look a gift horse in the mouth.

While Ves had managed to elevate his Stealth and Cloaking Skill to Journeyman-level a long time ago, he never invested much time and energy into improving it further.

He had hardly designed any stealth-oriented mechs in the past five years aside from a few sneaky machines designed for the Black Cats.

The rest of the Larkinson Clan preferred to fight battles upfront rather than engage in dishonorable tricks. Stealth mechs generally didn't get sold on the open market either. They were almost exclusively used by state actors or large organizations that already functioned like one to a degree.

Even now, Ves still did not have any immediate plans to design a batch of stealth mechs.

That didn't mean that the related enlightenment fruit was useless.

On the contrary.

"Understanding how to design a good stealth vehicle also allows me to figure out how to counter them! This is the true value of this enlightenment fruit!"

Ves had always been paranoid about stealthy bastards creeping around in his clan's vicinity. The most technologically advanced groups harnessed stealth technology to such a fantastic degree that they could fly an entire formation of mech through his fleet without getting exposed!

By ingesting this enlightenment fruit, Ves could significantly increase the chance of detecting such shenanigans by developing specific sensors and scanners that countered the more sophisticated applications of stealth technology!

"This is a great way to improve the safety of my fleet during the upcoming Trailblazer Expedition!"

It was well-known that numerous indigeneous alien races had become quite good in developing their stealth technology. There were plenty of stories of how exploration and raiding fleets collapsed from within after alien saboteurs managed to infiltrate and explode key starships from within.

"This other fruit is also useful."

Ves had not designed a lot of beast mechs over the years.

Even if the Design Department started up a related project, he mostly handed responsibility over to the Power Pair. Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone had become so enthused about designing beast mechs that they always called dibs whenever the Larkinsons needed to design a new animal-shaped machine.

This left Ves bereft of opportunities to exercise and improve his beast mech design capabilities. When he studied his Status a time ago, he recalled that his Beast Mech Design had only reached tier II at the moment.

This meant that while his understanding of beast mechs was respectable, he was far from a specialist who could draw out greater advantages from alternative mech shapes.

The story would be different if he ate the Beast Mech Design V Enlightenment Fruit. As long as he absorbed all of the knowledge it contained, he could probably design beast mechs that were just as good if not better than the ones designed by the Power Pair!

Ves saw no problem with eating them right away. Though he could make an argument that his wife Gloriana might be able to benefit more if he gave her one of the fruits, Ves did not want to share his bounty this time!

"I need to get stronger first before I can think about providing welfare to others!"

He did not delay any further and promptly ate the two fruits.

Absorbing the knowledge in the System Space turned out to be a lot more convenient than in reality.

Due to his special state and the rules governing this interaction method, Ves was able to absorb a flood of new and interesting design theories and other study material in a span of a couple of minutes!

"Whoa! What a rush!"

Just like before, Ves completely understood the theory and as well as many different practical applications.

Now, he just needed to practice his newly-improved Skill and Sub-Skill in reality to maximize his utilization rate and comprehensively master all of the interesting new ideas in his mind.

"That was easy."

What wasn't as easy was how to make use of the other enlightenment fruits.

He wasn't as familiar with them as the ones that contained various design-related Skills and Sub-Skills. He was a mech designer who had never been formally introduced to the world of spiritual sorcery.

"Let's go over them one by one."

[Imperial Thornix Salamander Breeding Manual Fruit]

Grants thorough understanding of the biological and behavioral properties of Imperial Salamanders as well as detailed instructions on how to breed them in order to cultivate specific subspecies.

Requirements: Intelligence must be 1.2 or higher.

"Useless."

Ves had never heard of Imperial Thornix Salamanders. His chances of encountering one in the flesh was virtually nil. Why would he need a breeding manual?

That did not mean the enlightenment fruit was useless.

Even if the Larkinson Clan could never get its hands on one of these special creatures, Ves guessed that the manual also contained a lot of broader and more universal knowledge!

"Director Pesca Aduc would love to eat this enlightenment fruit! Ranya would love it as well!"

Both of them were engaged in the cultivation of mutated beasts. If this manual was as thorough as he thought, then either of them would probably gain a lot of useful know-how on cultivating mutated beasts!

Ves briefly fell into a dilemma. Who should receive this fruit?

"The knowledge contained within the enlightenment fruits isn't exclusive." Ves reminded himself. "As long as one of the directors absorbed the fruit, there is no rule that prevents them from writing out everything they have recently learned."

Even so, there was a major difference between studying a thick textbook and direct integration! The person that ate the fruit would definitely gain the most!

"I'll decide this later once I have exited the System Space and called the two directors for a meeting. Let's handle the remaining fruits first."

### **Chapter 4194 Ves The Fruit Manager**

[Olthori Sacred Cleansing Ritual Manual Fruit]

Grants complete understanding of the Sacred Cleansing Ritual obtained and refined by the Olthori Sect. The Olthori Sacred Cleansing Ritual is used to



cleanse priests after conducting blood sacrifice ceremonies and purify warriors after they have unleashed their bloodlust in battle.

Requirements: Intelligence must be 0.7 or higher.

???

"What kind of ghost thing is this manual?"

The System's descriptions were always accurate, but they didn't always clarify what Ves wanted to know.

Ves had never heard of the Olthori Cult and did not pay any attention to the name. What he truly wanted to know was the benefit of using this so-called Sacred Cleansing Ritual.

"Is this just a guide on how to clean your body after getting drenched in blood?"

If that was the case, then Ves might be able to wash off the stink off his body a bit easier if he accepted that Mission that involved killing and bathing in the blood of a hundred different alien individuals.

He did not think this ritual was that simple, though. A reward from a golden lottery ticket shouldn't be this shabby, and it was impossible for this supposed Olthori Cult to write up a formal manual on how to use a bath.

"This is probably a method to cleanse the mind and spirit of those that have gone too far in engaging in a wretched activity!"

If that was the case, then this might be a pretty useful manual to multiple people, including himself.

However, Ves already had a better recipient in mind for this method.

"This should be a helpful enlightenment fruit for Lufa."

Even though Lufa's very nature already possessed a purifying quality, much of it was instinctual by nature. Lufa did not actually possess a lot of systematic theories and understanding on how his powers worked.

This meant that while he was able to enhance his brute force by mindlessly collecting spiritual feedback, he still had to do the hard work of developing his own methods and techniques from scratch.

Many design spirits were in the same boat. Only a few more special ones such as the Illustrious One and the Superior Mother inherited or obtained systematic knowledge from other sources.

Therefore, granting this manual to Lufa should definitely allow him to take his ability to negate harmful and unwanted effects even further!

Ves was ultimately satisfied with the enlightenment fruit. He was able to meet at least one more goal with the help of this lottery prize.

He turned his attention to the remaining fruit. He instinctively guessed that it was the most powerful of the bunch, so he saved it for last.

[Shadow Dance Dagger Style Enlightenment Fruit]

Grants complete understanding of how to master the art of the Shadow Dance Dagger Style, a combination fighting style that combines knifemanship, silent fighting, assassination and exploitation of shadow and darkness. The Shadow Dance Dagger Style can only be fully practiced by talented individuals who are limber, are implanted by specific augmentations and have developed an affinity for shadow or darkness. This enlightenment fruit allows an individual to ignore these conditions.

Requirements: Strength must be 0.9 or higher. Dexterity must be 1.3 or higher. Endurance must be 1.3 or higher. Concentration must be 1.5 or higher.

"This... is quite powerful."

If Ves wasn't familiar with Ketis and the Heavensworders, then he wouldn't have taken a dagger style so seriously.

After all, he was just a mech designer who knew little about fighting. His profession also predisposed him to believing that battles were mainly won by fielding better mechs and superior equipment into battle. The individual fighting skills of mech pilots only played a relatively smaller role in the outcome.

However, the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders proved that investing a huge amount of time and effort into perfecting a specific fighting style could earn great dividends in battle.

This was especially the case for the extraordinary sword styles that adhered to traditional swordsmanship!

From what Ves was able to gather from the description, the Shadow Dance Dagger Style was probably a derivative of the same tradition, or at least shared a common root!

That made this enlightenment fruit immensely valuable!

He supposed that he could swallow it himself as he certainly met the attribute requirements.

"It's a complete waste, though."

Ves was not a fighter. When would he ever be in a position that he would have to fight his way out of a sticky situation with a dagger?

Even if he ended up in a scuffle, he was more inclined to use the Amastendira than a pitiful blade!

He had two different candidates in mind for this enlightenment fruit.

"Venerable Tusa should be able to make excellent use of this fruit." Ves concluded. "His combat effectiveness has been slipping. Even if I tried my best to bring up his combat power by upgrading his expert mech, all of the other ones got better as well."

Compared to the more powerful melee mechs such as the Riot, the First Sword and the C-Man, the Dark Zephyr was inherently less impressive in frontal combat.

Though the expert light skirmisher performed fairly well when dueling against expert heavy mechs, it was not a fantastic fighter against expert medium mechs.

It couldn't be helped. The volume and capacity of a light mech was inherently limited. Ves simply couldn't stuff as many expensive toys in the frame of the Dark Zephyr as with other mechs.

If Ves wanted to make his first proper expert mech stronger, then he either needed to implement a more drastic design innovation or replace its cheaper parts with more expensive versions.

He had already done both during the last upgrade round, but even if he had inflated the design budget as much as possible, there were limits to how much he could spend to improve just a single expert mech.

Ves felt rather guilty about that as Venerable Tusa had persistently requested to boost the performance of his expert mech to the point where he could keep up with his peers.

"Light mechs don't necessarily have to be strong in frontal combat, but... Venerable Tusa is quite an avid duelist."

While it was clear that the Shadow Dance Dagger Style was a personal combat style that never took mech combat into account, Ves still believed that

Tusa would gain a substantial improvement in combat effectiveness if he swallowed this enlightenment fruit!

"My upcoming grand expedition will become a bit more secure if Tusa is able to outfight more opponents!"

Ves spotted one concern issue, though. According to the description, the Shadow Dance Dagger Style was mostly attuned to assassins and fighters who possessed an affinity with shadow and darkness-related spiritual attributes.

This caused Ves to doubt whether it was a good idea to feed this fruit to Venerable Tusa.

Venerable Tusa could be rather sneaky when he wanted to be, but stealth and shadow was never really a big component in his piloting style.

Ves was afraid that if Venerable Tusa began to practice the Shadow Dance Dagger Style, the expert pilot would be led astray and develop in a different direction than what fit him best.

"That doesn't necessarily have to be the case, though."

Expert pilots possessed a lot of mental fortitude. They could easily maintain their own stances in the face of overwhelming temptation.

The more likely outcome was that Tusa would learn enough about knife fighting from the enlightenment fruit that he could upgrade and refine his own fighting style. There was no obligation for him to practice the Shadow Dance Dagger Style as faithfully as possible.

"This still sounds like a waste, though."

A fruit as precious as this should go to a warrior or an expert pilot that was much more compatible with the properties and attributes of this special fighting style.

It would have been much better if his clan had a more assassin-oriented expert pilot on retainer, but that was not the case at the moment.

Should Ves feed it to Tusa anyway or wait for a more appropriate expert pilot to emerge?

When Ves thought about the latter, he suddenly came up with a special candidate.

"Andraste!"

If Andraste managed to become a potentate and develop a liking for melee mechs, then feeding her this enlightenment fruit would give her a wonderful boost to her piloting career!

She would be able to become an incredibly powerful light skirmisher or assassin mech pilot if she managed to master this fighting style!

Ves began to like this idea more and more.

Due to Helena's influence, Andraste's companion spirit had developed quite a close affinity towards death.

Since Andraste had the potential to wield this potent and lethal attribute in battle one day, her lethality would be incredibly potent!

It was more than enough to compensate for the lack of combat power of typical light mechs!

However, piloting these thin and fragile mechs was precarious business. If his daughter was able to wield vastly greater skill in combat, then Ves would become a lot more reassured about sending his daughter off into combat!

"With a name like Shadow Dance, this fighting style probably emphasizes evasion and obfuscation over pure lethality."

In other words, it was an excellent fit for Andraste!

The problem was that Ves was not certain whether his red-headed daughter would develop to a point where it made sense to feed the fruit to her. What if she couldn't interface with a mech? What if she wanted to become a ranged mech pilot instead?

"Another problem is that it will take a lot of years before she meets the requirements of this fruit!"

The benefits brought by this enlightenment fruit were great, but so were demands!

Ves frowned. He fell into a difficult dilemma.

If possible, he wanted to wait a number of years and see how Andraste would develop.

Yet keeping this powerful fruit in his Vault of Eternity sounded like a wasteful course of action. It wouldn't be helping anyone while it remained unused.

There was a powerful argument to be made about offering it to Venerable Tusa. This way, the expert pilot would be able to gain an immediate boost in strength and continue to refine his combat style in the following months and years.

This was an excellent way to increase the strength of his clan in the short term. Tusa would be able to put his new lessons to quick use once the Trailblazer Expedition commenced!

"Well, if it comes down to it, I can always tell Venerable Tusa to teach my daughter the style that he has learned."

Teaching the Shadow Dance Dagger Style the conventional way was a lot slower, but perhaps it was for the best. It might be too much to overwhelm a teenage girl with a huge influx of foreign knowledge!

Now that he fully reviewed the gains from his golden lottery ticket, the time had come for Ves to start the main course.

He took a deep breath as he plucked out a precious radiant lottery ticket. He had managed to earn four of them. The System had credited each one of them to him after taking part in the fabrication of a masterwork expert mech.

Unlike a golden lottery ticket that often delivered iffy and inconsistent rewards, a radiant lottery ticket should be a lot more reliable when it came to awarding fantastic prizes!

Knowing that his chances of winning a fantastic prize would be much greater this time, Ves briefly considered what he should aim for before deciding to maintain the same approach.

"Give me another enlightenment fruit, a good one this time!"

Without further ado, Ves tossed the radiant lottery ticket into the fountain water.

Rainbow lights immediately escaped from the Wishing Fountain!

It was as if a dormant volcano had slowly risen from its slumber. The water boiled and bubbled even as it reflected every color of the rainbow.

Once the Wishing Fountain accumulated enough energy, it began to shoot out a large rainbow spout of water!

What was remarkable about this spout was that a glowing enlightenment fruit was hovering right on top of this spout!

### **Chapter 4195 Explosive Fruit**

The Wishing Fountain certainly liked to put on a show. While its theatrics were not as unique as the previous time he used a special lottery ticket, Ves still held a lot of expectations for his potential prize.

The greater the lightshow, the more valuable the prize!



"C'mon Wishing Fountain, please give me something good. I haven't been able to use any of my radiant lottery tickets for years. You've got to compensate me for all of the time that I have lost!"

Since the facility was called the Wishing Fountain, Ves suspected that need and desire might be vital components to tilting the odds in his favor.

Still, he did not have much hope of being able to alter the scales. Luck was ultimately an elusive quality to Ves. Only a freak like Jovy Armalon was able to manipulate this mysterious concept.

"Still, my luck shouldn't be too bad this time!"

As soon as the Wishing Fountain produced a glowing enlightenment fruit, Ves developed a strong guess that he had obtained a truly powerful prize this time!

The only variable that he was concerned about was whether it was useful to him. If the enlightenment fruit provided benefits that weren't useful to him and his closest confidantes, then that would seriously devalue his current gain.

Therefore, he desperately hoped that the System did not mess around with him by giving him a golden lemon.

As the glittering rainbow water spout finally lowered to a more reasonable height, Ves was able to grab the glowing fruit and study it for himself.

"Strange."

The fruit did not look that appetizing to be honest. It resembled a cerulean pear that looked like it had become radioactive. Ves would have never thought about putting it into his mouth if he didn't already know that it was an enlightenment fruit!

"Let's see if its properties are any good."

[Alfari Corps Detonation Code Manual Fruit]

Grants a complete understanding of the Detonation Code. Developed by the Alfari Corps, the Detonation Code is a deep method that allows its practitioners to understand how to convert different energies into explosive potential. The Detonation Code can only be practiced by talented individuals who are fit, possess excellent control, possess an affinity for energy or explosions and possess specific augmentations that have been exclusively developed by the Alfari Corps. This enlightenment fruit allows an individual to ignore these conditions.

Requirements: Strength must be 1.2 or higher. Endurance must be 1.5 or higher. Intelligence must be 1.2 or higher. Concentration must be 2.0 or higher.

"Powerful!"

That was his first conclusion. The Detonation Code Manual sounded like a powerful combat method!

As a mech designer, Ves understood the boundless power and versatility of the concept of energy extremely well. His in-depth study of luminar crystal technology had given him an even greater appreciation of how he could transform ordinary electrical energy into all kinds of exotic and dangerous damage types.

Although converting energy into explosions sounded like a rather ordinary process, Ves had a feeling that the Detonation Code went much further than that! If this method was as extraordinary as it sounded, then all kinds of powerful warriors could utilize it as a way to defeat stronger opponents because of better utilization of energy!

"What is the Alfari Corps, though?"

Just like before, Ves had never heard of the mysterious organization that had made the Detonation Code, but from the way the System mentioned it, this Alfari Corps was probably a frighteningly powerful elite combat force!

Since the Detonation Code was included in the pool of prizes that could be drawn by a radiant lottery ticket, then that was probably a faint indication that the Alfari Corps belonged to a class above the ones mentioned by the lesser enlightenment fruits.

Ves held the cerulean enlightenment fruit with a tender grasp. Even though its appearance did not seem to match the Detonation Code, he became a lot more affectionate towards this precious prize.

Now that he determined the power and usefulness of the Detonation Code Manual Fruit, the question now was who he should feed it to. There was only one of these fruits, and due to the high requirements of getting started with the powerful method, it was unlikely that the recipient could pass it on to others.

"Damn. This is a hard choice."

Given the priority to enhance the strength of the expeditionary fleet in the short term, Ves first thought of handing it over to an expert pilot.

"It has to be a ranged specialist, and one that preferably works with energy or explosive ordnance."

The Larkinson Clan possessed a bias for energy weapons so it did not have any expert pilots that majored in missile weapons or explosive cannons.

His choice therefore came down to enhancing the offensive combat power of Venerable Davia Stark, Venerable Joshua Larkinson, Venerable Casella Ingvar or Venerable Isobel Kotin.

Ves immediately struck out Joshua and Casella from his list.

"While they both wield energy weapons, they are more focused on other stuff."

That left the two expert pilots who piloted two powerful expert rifleman mechs.

The Amaranto was an old classic that had recently received a major upgrade. Its lethality had always been fairly high before, but now it had turned into an even more potent threat against opposing expert mechs and alien starships!

"Does it need to hit even harder?" Ves wondered.

There was no such thing as too much overkill. Ves would rather bring too much firepower to a fight than too little.

The problem was that Venerable Davia Stark was not actually a member of the Larkinson Clan.

While he did not mind giving her numerous powerful benefits in order to gain more protection during the time she fought for the Larkinsons, he was not as willing to waste a valuable glowing fruit that he had obtained from a precious enlightenment fruit!

This was also why Ves did not take Venerable Brutus Wodin or Patriant Reginald Cross into consideration.

Venerable Brutus was actually a great candidate for this fruit. He was family, sort of, and he was highly committed to protecting Gloriana and by extension Ves. The man could always be counted upon to do his duty in battle.

The Detonation Code was also incredibly useful to Brutus. The man focused more on evasion and maneuvering than pure firepower, which meant that his offensive power fell a bit behind.

If his Star Dancer Mark II was suddenly able to unleash explosive energy blasts, then that would make the Glory Seeker champion a lot deadlier in battle!

"The same goes for Reginald, but with much greater results!"

If Ves wanted to turn Saint Reginald and the Mars into the ultimate ship breaking combo, then feeding them this fruit was the way to go. His Trailblazer Expedition would definitely gain a more explosive edge in a short amount of time!

He did not give in to this temptation, though. As much as Ves considered Reginald a friend, the powerful ace pilot ultimately placed the interests of the Cross Clan over the Larkinson Clan.

"What about Venerable Isobel Kotin, then?"

If there was any expert pilot that played with fire, then it was definitely Venerable Isobel!

Her expert mech functioned as both a rifleman mech and a striker mech. Each attack launched by her Promethea, the completed version of the Firestarter Project, was able to leave a burning purple fire behind that hungrily devoured any flammable mass within its reach!

As such, Venerable Isobel had turned into an excellent sieging element that possessed a knack for burning down large starships and astral beasts.

"Her ability to deal direct damage is a lot more limited, though." Ves briefly frowned.

She needed time in order to spread more fires and allow her empowered flames to do their work.

This meant that the Promethea was not as good in duels against opposing expert mechs. The enemy expert pilots were often able to negate Venerable Kotin's force of will and snuff out her empowered flames before they could do much damage.

"Giving her this Detonation Code should definitely plug this shortcoming!"

Venerable Kotin would be able to gain another attack method that neatly complimented her existing one. Rather than allowing her energy attacks to spread and burn everything in the way, she could convert her output so that they dealt all of the damage upfront.

This made it much harder for opposing expert pilots to mitigate the incoming damage!

"If there aren't any better candidates, then this fruit should go to Venerable Isobel." Ves decided.

It did not really make any sense to give the Detonation Code to other expert pilots. While he was pretty certain that melee expert pilots such as Venerable Rosa Orfan and Venerable Vincent Ricklin could use this enlightenment fruit to add an explosive impact to all of their blows, it was more difficult for them to apply as much damage as a ranged specialist throughout an entire engagement.

"Who else should fall within my consideration?"

He couldn't think of anyone that could make good use of it outside of maybe Legion Commander Taon Melin.

Disappointment appeared on Ves' face as he thought about the former soldier of the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Though the man had come far, Commander Taon Melin had yet to advance to expert pilot throughout all of these years.

Not even the transcendence glow of Lufa or the realistic training challenges provided by the increasingly more sophisticated MSTS was able to stimulate him into breaking through.

"Some things simply can't be forced."

Ves figured that Taon Melin was not mentally up to standard as of yet. He still looked up to Ylvaine a bit too much to be able to stand up for himself.

It also didn't help that Taon was in charge of the Eye of Ylvaine Mech Legion. That added a lot of administrative burdens on his shoulders.

Unlike Commander Casella Ingvar, Taon was not a natural leader and he did not study for it before he assumed his current rank.

"It will probably take a while before he is ready." Ves estimated.

This was not necessarily a mark against him. It was fairly normal for expert candidates to take five years or ten years to advance to the next rank.

However, Ves would have liked it if Commander Taon broke through because that would mean that the Larkinson Clan would gain its first expert pilot that specialized in heavy artillery mechs!

"If Taon is able to pilot an expert heavy artillery mech right now, then this Detonation Code would have been an excellent match!"

Perhaps the Detonation Code might only be icing on the cake at first, but Ves already started to think ahead.

As long as Taon grew stronger and piloted more powerful mechs, the amplification brought by the Detonation Code would also become far greater, thereby turning him and his expert mech into an ultra-lethal sieging combination!

Ves briefly thought about keeping this enlightenment fruit in reserve before he shook his head. "I need to make use of it immediately instead of letting it grow stale in my vault."

Just as he was about to put the fruit away, he suddenly came up with an unusual suggestion. He took another look at the description and focused on the 'energy' keyword.

Blinky excelled at manipulating energy. It was the primary reason for his existence.

What if Ves bestowed the Detonation Code to his own companion spirit?

"He'll become a lot more dangerous in fights!"

This would be the ultimate selfish decision as empowering Blinky would not be able to meaningfully affect the course of major battles.

There wasn't much of a point in boosting Blinky's lethality unless Ves wanted to enhance his self-defense capabilities.

Though Ves felt enormously tempted by the notion of adding another personal trump card to his personal arsenal, he did not think it was the best way to profit from this precious fruit.

When he thought about all of the future enemies the Golden Skull Alliance might encounter during the upcoming Trailblazer Expedition, he eventually settled for giving it to one of his expert pilots.

"I'm sorry, Blinky, but you'll have to miss out this time."

Mrow mrow mrow!

### **Chapter 4196 Steel**

After dealing with the Detonation Code Manual Fruit, Ves drew out his next radiant lottery ticket and tossed it into the Wishing Fountain.

"I hope you can give me a fruit that is more relevant for me this time." Ves earnestly wished.

While he had little doubts about the power of his last prize, the most direct beneficiary was one of his expert pilots.

This did not particularly make him enthusiastic because he felt that he missed out to an extent.



"The System is ultimately about facilitating my growth. Using it to strengthen others is fine as long as I don't go overboard."

While Ves needed to rely on others in order to enable and facilitate his own ventures, he still knew that his own efforts were responsible for making his clan successful.

The reason why he was so eager about using the System again was because Ves desired ways to amplify his strengths and speed up his progression.

He deeply wished that he could finally obtain what he wanted from his next prize!

"C'mon, System! Give me a reward that can incentivize me to fabricate more masterwork mechs! This is what you want me to do, right? Make it worth my while!"

The Wishing Fountain grew just as colorful and spectacular as before. As the fountain pool released another large spout of iridescent water, Ves could see that it had produced another glowing enlightenment fruit!

This time, the fruit did not seem edible at first. Resembled a giant metallic strawberry that was flecked with dark spots. The soft silvery glow surrounding its form was the only obvious clue that it was more than just a metal ornament.

Ves grew a lot more hopeful about the possible benefits brought by the fruit. While it was sometimes true that appearances could be deceiving, he strongly suspected that this fruit was related to the metal element!

[Heart of Steel Mantra Fruit]

Imparts a complete understanding of a mantra that allows its practitioners to form a Heart of Steel. The Heart of Steel's primary advantage is that it can gradually increase its holder's compatibility and affinity towards metal and

anything related to this element. The mantra is also capable of strengthening the willpower, mental fortitude and resistance against all attacks. However, the practitioners of this method are also prone to weakening their empathy and compassion.

Those who practice this mantra to the fullest will turn into gods that are able to transform, manipulate and clad themselves with the hardest and most powerful metals. The Heart of Steel Mantra can only be fully practiced by humans that possess specific genes, a specialized mechanical heart implant, an affinity towards metal and have not practiced any other cultivation techniques. This enlightenment fruit allows an individual to ignore these conditions.

Requirements: Strength must be 1.2 or higher. Endurance must be 2.0 or higher. Intelligence must be 1.0 or higher. Concentration must be 1.7 or higher.

"JACKPOT! I'VE THE JACKPOT THIS TIME!"

Ves didn't know whether his earlier pleas had any effect, but the enlightenment fruit that he received this time was definitely the kind of reward he was hoping to acquire from a radiant lottery ticket.

Of all of the possible enlightenment fruits that he could obtain, the ones that claimed to turn its practitioners into gods were definitely among the high-end ones that Ves could acquire!

While Ves wasn't able to determine whether the Heart of Steel Mantra was stronger than the Atmer Guardian Mantra that he had seen before, he suspected that this was likely the case since it came in the form of a shinier fruit.

Regardless of how much stronger it was, the Heart of Steel Mantra was definitely more relevant and useful to Ves than any of the other fruits that he had obtained up to this point!

Even if his remaining two radiant lottery tickets did not yield any helpful prizes, Ves still would have been happy with his haul for today.

As Ves read the extensive description once again, he already decided that there was no way he would give it to anyone else but himself.

Who would be able to make better use of it than Ves?

His wife? Nope.

Ketis? Nope.

Any other mech designer in his employ? Nope.

It made even less sense to give it to any expert pilots given that none of their domains had anything to do with metal.

Still, as much as he felt tempted to swallow the metallic enlightenment fruit right away, he did not hurry up to do so because of various misgivings.

"It's clear that the Heart of Steel Mantra is a cultivation technique developed to allow humans to ascend into True Gods."

There was nothing in the description that had any relations to mech design. While the System did not tell Ves the group or cult that developed it in the first place, he was certain that it had to be related to the Five Scrolls Compact!

"More precisely, this is probably one of the core cultivation methods of the worshippers of the Metal Scroll!"

Ves would not be surprised if the System pulled it out of its own internal database. The Heart of Mantra sounded exactly what the cultists devoted to the Metal Scroll would have practiced!

If this was the case, then it didn't make sense for Ves to ingest the fruit. He was a mech designer and followed his own development trajectory.

In order to become a Star Designer, Ves knew that he had to develop his design seed into something greater.

What would happen if he ate this enlightenment fruit?

If he was able to develop a new Divine Core that formed the Heart of Steel, then that didn't sound so bad.

If the new Heart of Steel went on to replace or transform his existing design seed, then he would definitely cry and regret his insanely stupid decision!

"I can't take the risk of compromising my career as a mech designer!"

Ves calmed down a bit when he realized that he didn't particularly need the Heart of Steel Mantra. His affinity for mechs would transform into an affinity for metal eventually as long as he kept advancing as a mech designer.

All of the vague powers associated with the Heart of Steel sounded as if they mostly enhanced the practitioner's combat capabilities as opposed to any productive capabilities.

The warning about reducing one's empathy and compassion were deadly defects to a passionate and caring mech designer like Ves!

"Even if nothing happens to my design seed, I will still come off worse if I'm not able to channel as much passion in my work anymore. Also, I don't want to lose my ability to love my kids and my other loved ones."

That did not mean that the Heart of Steel Mantra Fruit was useless for him, though.

While Ves might not aspire to become a True God with a Heart of Steel, the story was quite different for Vulcan.

His vertically-challenged incarnation was already on its way of evolving into a True God.

The issue was that Vulcan had little idea how to proceed forward just like most design spirits. All of that could instantly be solved if he received a mantra that completely mapped the way forward.

With such a complete high-end cultivation technique at his disposal, Vulcan could either practice it earnestly or derive all of the best parts out of the extraordinary method in order to form his own mantra that suited him the best!

While it was true that the defects that Ves was concerned about would also hinder Vulcan to an extent, it was not enough to stop him from going through with his idea.

"Vulcan doesn't need any feelings. He just needs to facilitate my own work. He'll be fine even if he can't make any friends."

Now that he decided to go through with this idea, Ves wanted to feed this powerful fruit to Vulcan right away.

He was incredibly curious at what a mantra was all about and how it was able to turn individuals into True Gods. There had to be a lot of secrets locked within the text that might expose a lot of new and shocking truths about spirituality and spiritual engineering!

"Vulcan! Come here and eat this fruit!"

The rules of the System Space were rather weird. Ves was the only person who could access it at the moment, but since Vulcan was his incarnation, the design spirit was able to manifest itself in this special area as well!

Vulcan appeared in the form of a dwarf in a typical blacksmith outfit. It was quite strange for Ves to come face-to-face with a design spirit that looked exactly like a stereotypical high gravity variant human!

"Gimme the fruit, laddie."

"Who are you calling laddie?! You're another version of myself!"

"Gimme the fruit before I bash your head with my hammer!"

Ves made an annoyed tone and tossed the metallic fruit to his incarnation. The dwarf looked even hungrier now that he received his fruit. He tossed it into his bearded mouth without any further delay and swallowed it without even bothering to chew the fruit apart.

Soon, a vortex of energy began to form around the dwarf. A bit of his special nature became exposed as his domain started to undergo a transformation!

Through his permanent connection with Vulcan, Ves could sense that the enlightenment fruit not only imparted a lot of new knowledge, but also gave the design spirit a head-start into forming a Heart of Steel!

The fact that the design spirit was not a human and did not even possess any physical attributes played no role in the process.

In fact, Vulcan was able to embrace the mantra with greater ease because his physical body did not pose any complications!

What truly mattered was the transformation and organization of the spirit.

Whereas Vulcan's spiritual makeup previously looked a bit disorganized and without purpose, now the mantra completely transformed it into a more structured form.

Ves' eyes lit up as he recognized a lot of familiar elements that he had seen from the spiritual constructs that he had worked with in the past.

To him, the Heart of Steel looked like a product of spiritual engineering!

"It's a machine!"

One that was expressly designed to enable average humans to evolve into a specific variety of True Gods!

Ves received a huge amount of clarification as well as greater understanding of cultivation techniques in general. He could readily access all of the knowledge that Vulcan had absorbed in a short amount of time, though he was not able to master it as readily as the actual recipient.

Even so, Ves received so much profound understanding about cultivation techniques that it was overwhelming!

There was no way that he could process all of this information in a short amount of time!

It was even less possible for him to harness all of this dense knowledge to form his own cultivation techniques. The amount of understanding and insight needed to do so was too much for someone who did not specialize in this aspect!

"That's not important at the moment."

His immediate concern was Vulcan's transformation.

As Ves continued to study his incarnation's drastic changes, it gradually became clear that the addition of the Heart of Steel was a comprehensive upgrade to the design spirit.

He could even see that the Heart of Steel actively incorporated the trace of high-level metal energy that Vulcan had already stored in his deepest part of himself!

This was one of the driving reasons why Ves gifted the enlightenment fruit to his incarnation. Vulcan had long been carrying a small quantity of metal energy that Blinky had originally siphoned from Cassandra Breyer.

Though Vulcan had succeeded in clinging tight enough on the metal energy that it did not dissipate out of existence, he was unable to leverage into anything useful.

Ves had a feeling that this was no longer the case!

As the Heart of Steel integrated genuine metal energy, its quality as well as its power received a substantial boost!

This was of vital importance to Vulcan as the metal heart had become his new Divine Core!

The stronger the Divine Core, the stronger its holder. With a Heart of Steel that was many times stronger and more structured than whatever mess Vulcan possessed before, the design spirit had received an enormous boost in strength and ability!

"Damn, this enlightenment fruit is far more valuable than the Grand Dynamo that I received in the past!"

#### **Chapter 4197 Remaining Draws**

The power of the Heart of Steel Mantra could not be overstated.

This was a method that fully justified its claim of being able to transform mortals into True Gods!

From the perspective of a mech designer and a spiritual engineer, Ves found the Heart of Steel to be one of the most exquisite and brilliant spiritual constructs that he had ever seen.

Its intricate harmony and its extremely refined methods of absorbing and transforming energy displayed a level of spiritual engineering that was far beyond his understanding.

Even so, Ves believed that he could learn a lot of ingenious tricks as long as he studied the design of the Heart of Steel for a time!



"The best part about it is that this is just the initial form. Once Vulcan is able to grow stronger with his new mantra, he will automatically evolve the Heart of Steel into an even more sophisticated spiritual construct!"

The Heart of Steel did not organically grow stronger like the living spiritual products that Ves tended to make. The mantra learned by Vulcan essentially possessed a complete blueprint that allowed the design spirit to upgrade his new heart step by step.

It was similar to buying a basic home and steadily renovating it so that the house became larger and more luxurious over time.

The process of upgrading its initial form into its final and most powerful state could take an incredibly long time!

With everything that Ves had learned from the System, he recognized that the Heart of Steel had become Vulcan's new Divine Core.

The strength and qualities of the Divine Core directly determined what Vulcan could do as an up-and-coming spiritual entity.

The better the Divine Core, the stronger its holder would become!

As the transformation settled down, Ves patiently studied the new spiritual construct and picked up a lot of interesting details.

For one, the trace of high-end metal energy that Vulcan had preserved all of this time had truly integrated into his being this time!

While it was still too powerful and high-end for him to harness directly, the Heart of Steel had smoothly turned it into the core of its new existence.

This suggested that Vulcan should probably be able to make much better use of the metal energy than before!

"Now that Vulcan has directly added a bit of pure metal energy into his new heart, his affinity and closeness to metal should have gained a substantial boost!"

Ves wasn't able to test this new effect while he was still residing in the System Space, but he eagerly planned to see what Vulcan could do with his new Heart of Steel as soon as he returned to reality.

The Heart of Steel possessed a lot of other powerful and useful functions. As the mantra that spawned it was mainly aimed at turning talented humans into powerful battle-oriented True Gods, Vulcan had become a lot more powerful in a fight!

Of course, Ves had no intentions of ever risking him in an actual battle against anyone.

Unless a confrontation couldn't be avoided, it was best for Ves and his design spirits to avoid repeating the mistakes of the dark gods.

The main reason why stupid entities such as the Unending One and the Inexorable One had lost their lives after clinging to existence after many eons was because they put themselves at risk in order to win a battle that they didn't need to fight in the first place!

"It's better to leave the fighting to grunts and more specialized combatants."

Ves had already learned that high-ranking mech pilots paired with the right mechs were much more powerful than any spiritual entity at the same level.

Their immense willpower and indomitable nature made expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots extremely resistant to any spiritual shenanigans. Their resonance-empowered attacks were also extremely difficult to mitigate by those whose wills were not as strong, so people like Patriarch Reginald Cross could probably beat up Vulcan in an instant if his incarnation dared to manifest in full form.

Ves shook his head. "Just treat all of that combat stuff as insurance, Vulcan. What you should be focusing on instead is to keep improving your understanding of craftsmanship and technology. Don't get distracted by any vain desires to become a warrior. True Gods are already outdated as far as combat is concerned."

The Five Scrolls Compact would have never been beaten black and blue by the MTA if their old and powerful transcendents were worth a damn in a fight!

The combination between a god pilot and a god mech sounded so strong that Ves could hardly imagine that anything else could defeat them unless the advantage of numbers was overwhelming.

Though Ves wanted to spend several straight days on studying Vulcan's new heart and condition, he still had two more radiant lottery tickets to go through.

"You can go and acclimate to your new condition. Don't be in a hurry to cultivate the mantra further. If you make your Heart of Steel stronger, I'm afraid that you will compromise your desire to create."

"You don't need to tell me that, laddie!" His bearded dwarven self raised his fist. "Craftsmanship is in my blood! How can I call myself the God of Craftsmanship if I don't utilize a heart of my own creation? I already have an idea on how to design a more fitting variant."

Once Vulcan went back to wherever he belonged, Ves drew his third radiant lottery ticket and paused for a moment.

"I think I've obtained enough enlightenment fruits this time. There are so many of them that it will take a while for me and my people to digest them all. There is plenty of new knowledge that I want to study."

Although knowledge was both powerful and incredibly helpful in increasing his comprehensive strength in the medium and long term, Ves also needed to

upgrade his more immediate capabilities in order to give him additional security.

"Let's go for a useful material this time."

He managed to obtain a modest quantity of Black Demon Steel from a golden lottery ticket. With the information that he currently possessed, he gained a bit more appreciation for this spiritually-reactive material.

If he could obtain an even more precious material, then he could truly boost his Unending Regalia to a greater height!

Ves briefly concentrated his mind and conveyed his latest desire to the Wishing Fountain. He then tossed the ticket into the fountain water and waited for it to resolve the lottery.

"C'mon. Give me a material that can make me more useful in different situations. It would be nice if you can give me an alloy that amplifies my spiritual exertions!"

The Wishing Fountain went to work as normal. The lightshow and theatrics were the same as before.

The only difference this time was that the fountain water unleashed a water spout that unveiled a new material instead of an enlightenment fruit!

As the spout lowered to a normal height, Ves immediately approached and took his latest prize in his possession.

He immediately frowned when he saw what he obtained this time.

He expected to receive a metallic substance such as an ore or a bar of refined alloy.

What he got instead was a broken piece of dark brown bark. It didn't even look that special aside from its hard and solid appearance!

"What the hell? I thought you were derived from the Metal Scroll, not the Wood Scroll!"

[Makian Tree Bark]

This is the bark of a Makian Tree. A Makian Tree is a rare mutated tree variant that has grown in an area that is saturated with a mixture of wood and despair. The bark of this tree is considered to be cursed due to its exposure to the environment and its distance from the core of the growth. The Makian Tree Bark can gain special properties when treated in a specific manner.

"..."

After obtaining the Alfari Corps Detonation Code Manual Fruit and the Heart of Steel Mantra Fruit, Ves thought that he could extend his luck even further.

The reality was much crueler, though.

The bark did not look or feel all that special to Ves. While he was able to sense a bit of that despair that the description referenced, it was not as strong as he hoped.

Apparently, Ves needed to process it in order to draw out the hidden potential of this Makian Tree Bark.

The problem was that Ves had no clue about this processing method! He was completely in the dark as far as he was concerned!

"If this stupid prize was a piece of metal, then I could at least use my existing expertise to figure out how to make good use of it by myself. A wooden material however..."

Mech designers were not known for designing mechs with wood products.

Sure, there were probably a few crazy and eccentric people that had attempted the challenge and succeeded in doing so, but those mechs probably weren't all that practical!

"This is goddamn useless to me! What the hell can I make with a piece of tree bark?!"

Even if the bark was special and possessed a lot of hidden potential, it was all pointless if he or anyone else in his employ did not know how to maximize its full value!

"Wait, maybe the Aducs might know how to utilize this bark."

If that didn't work out, then he could always request Gaia to see what she could do with this material.

Hopefully inspecting this Makian Tree Bark was not an activity that was beneath her. It shouldn't be as the bark was ultimately a product of a radiant lottery ticket.

The bark disappeared from his hand as he had silently sent it to the Vault of Eternity.

He lifted his last radiant lottery ticket and thought about drawing from another pool of prizes.

"I'm not going to gamble on any more precious materials this time. The chances of getting another obscure material that I can't use is too great."

A radiant lottery ticket was a precious opportunity to obtain powerful knowledge and goods that were normally out of his reach. He needed to be smarter about how to make use of his final chance to draw from the Wishing Fountain.

He thought about his children. Compared to other designer babies, Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine were much more powerful due to all of the advantages that Ves and his wife had secured for them before they were even conceived.

It didn't feel like it was enough.

If it was possible, Ves wanted to power them up even further!

"Give me an augment, a medicine, a powerful ingredient or something similar. Give me a way to set my children up for success!"

The Wishing Fountain did its work as usual when Ves tossed in his final radiant lottery ticket. He endured the theatrics and eagerly gazed at what the water spout produced this time.

His eyes lit up when he saw that the Wishing Fountain produced an ornate bottle this time!

From the moment he picked it up, he felt as if he picked up a container that restrained a highly potent object.

[Frost Talent Pill]

This bottle contains a single Frost Talent Pill. The Frost Talent Pill can grant a qualified and well-prepared human an immediate affinity for the element of frost that can grow over time.

Requirements: Endurance must be 1.5 or higher. Concentration must be 1.7 or higher. Spirituality must be 0.1 or higher.

"Uhhh..."

Ves did not expect to obtain such a weird pill. This was not exactly what he had in mind when he wanted to obtain a boost for his children.

While Ves recognized the potential value and power for acquiring a powerful affinity for a specific element, the problem was that he didn't have an obvious candidate for this pill.

The only one that he could possibly feed it to was his second daughter Andraste. Just because her companion spirit Yaika became biased towards death didn't mean that her own domain was already set in place.

One of the advantages of a companion spirit was that it could pursue a different direction from its principal!

Ves began to warm up to the idea of reserving this pill for his daughter Andraste. He could think of many powerful uses for a frost talent for a future expert pilot. The tricks she could pull off with a domain based on both frost were myriad!

When she combined this talent with Yaika's affinity's for death, she could become an even more lethal existence on the battlefield!

### **Chapter 4198 Resting In Bed**

Ves slowly woke up feeling warmer and more cozy than ever.

He did not even need to open up his bleary eyes to know that his second daughter was pressed up against his chest. His arms embraced her tiny and deceptively fragile body as if she was a teddy bear.

It was moments like these that made him feel more fulfilled than ever. Though he did not consider himself to be the perfect father, he loved the job and wished that his children grew up slower to prolong the experience.

He still remembered that Andraste had been just a tiny babbling baby a few years ago. Now she had grown up into a cute little girl that talked and jumped around a lot. Her energy was inexhaustible due to her genetic package.

"Papa..." Andraste grinned as she felt his love through her prematurely developed spiritual senses.

With all of the spiritual boosts that Ves, the Superior Mother, Gaia and a couple of other design spirits bestowed on her, her spirituality was already stronger and vastly more developed than most people.

She could already sense that Ves was awake and paying attention to her. She cuddled even closer to his body as a response.



"I love you, baby."

"I love you too, papa~"

Andraste wasn't the only child who had decided to sleep close to her parents this time.

On the opposite side of the bed, Gloriana and their youngest son Marvaine were laying in a similar arrangement.

Marvaine was considerably smaller than his older sisters, but that made him even cuter. Gloriana often felt the urge to treat him like a doll to the point of wanting to dress him up in all kinds of playful outfits.

This time, she had dressed little Marvaine up in a green dinosaur onesie. He looked especially cute in it when he was wearing up his hood that gave him the illusion that he was a cute lizard that made a failed attempt at looking ferocious.

"Mama~"

"There, there, my baby. Mama is here. You can always come to me when you want a hug." Gloriana smilingly said as she stroked her youngest child's back.

Aside from Andraste and Marvaine, Aurelia was present as well.

As the oldest sister, she occupied the center of the large bed. Two cats pressed up against her as if she was a little queen that was surrounded by her bodyguards.

"Miaow~..."

The soft and furry form of Clixie rested in Aurelia's embrace as usual. The collared cat constantly maintained an active bond with the oldest and most spiritually-developed child, allowing the two to deepen their bond even when they were asleep.

"Meow..."

Though Lucky might not share the same intimate bond with Aurelia, the gem cat was also a part of the family.

The whimsical cat pressed up against Aurelia's back, his metallic form offering no discomfort after he made adjustments.

As light levels in the bedroom slowly rose as the morning light of Davute's star increasingly shone through the large windows, everyone slowly gained the energy to start off their long and fruitful days.

Ves was in no hurry to rise from his bed and shave his developing stubble.

His thoughts still lingered on the massive changes that he had experienced in the past period.

The return of the System, the choice of upgrades, the new and impressive System Space, the enormous upgrades to the old System functions, the addition of the Sacred Temple, the explosive revelations concerning divinities and True Gods and more all gave him a lot of food for thought.

He had plenty of time to process the massive implications of all of these changes and additions to his life.

What actually occupied his thoughts at this time was the massive gains he obtained from using up his lottery tickets.

The lottery tickets he had earned from completing the last Supply Mission as well as fabricating four masterwork mechs truly reminded him that it was worthwhile for him to please the System.

He managed to obtain an enormous windfall of goodies yesterday, so much so that he still couldn't wrap his head around what he could do with all of the stuff!

There were a number of goods that he didn't know what to do with. The Makian Tree Bark was an especially vexing lottery prize to him because he did not possess the expertise to make the most out of this organic material.

That was frustrating to him because the Makian Tree Bark was ultimately a prize obtained from a radiant lottery ticket!

Fortunately, there were plenty of other prizes that didn't share the same problem.

He already swallowed three different enlightenment fruits, each of which dumped a huge amount of knowledge in his head.

Though the integration process was seamless, Ves still felt relieved after he enjoyed a deep sleep.

It was only now that he could truly wrap his mind around all of the new and interesting theories and practical information that had taken up residence in his growing memory.

Ves was still new to Beast Design V and Senior-level Stealth and Cloaking. Much of the new theories were rather dry and boring, but there were still plenty of new insights and interactions that compelled him to work out a couple of new mech designs.

He wanted to start a new design round as soon as possible so that he could start on designing a couple of interesting beast mechs and stealth mechs!

However, mech design only occupied half of his thoughts.

The other half was devoted to the more mysterious and mystical enlightenment fruits that he had managed to obtain from the Wishing Fountain.

Swallowing the Heart of Steel Mantra Fruit had already changed Vulcan on a fundamental level.

With the knowledge that he possessed today, Ves recognized that Vulcan's previous spiritual composition was pretty messy.

It was not bad per se, but the incarnation's organic nature as well as his unstructured growth had caused his spiritual makeup to evolve into a complex but rather unfocused arrangement.

What the new and powerful mantra had done was take all of the important building blocks that were previously stacked into a messy hill and piled them up so that they looked like a pretty house!

In other words, Vulcan did not gain any additional power, but became much more efficient at utilizing his existing strength!

This was the power of a mantra that could reshape a life form's entire Divine Core.

It was awfully similar to mech design in a way. When two different mech designers had to develop a machine out of the same stack of materials, the better of the two would undoubtedly be able to make a significantly more powerful machine!

This was the entire reason why mech designers existed in the first place. The mech industry would never be able to accommodate so many different competitors if mechs were simple to the point where alternate designs were incapable of outperforming the initial ones.

While Ves had understood this truth a long time ago, he never really applied the same mentality to other living entities until yesterday!

When Ves thought of all of the design spirits he had made up until now, he wanted to palm his face.

He had overlooked so many details when he initially designed spiritual products such as Trisk and Gaia!

While it might have been inexcusable for him to barely know what he was doing when he just started out, he had been doing this for quite a few years now. The fact that he had yet to think about structuring the Divine Cores of his living spiritual products was a massive oversight!

He wasted so many opportunities to tighten up and speed up the growth rate of his design spirits!

Of course, even if he discovered that he could shape the Divine Cores into a more structured form, that didn't necessarily mean his efforts would be fruitful.

What the System referred to as a Divine Core was the essence of an individual. Any mistake would have serious consequences to the person that relied upon it. The sheer amount of complexity and other intricate elements in the design of the Heart of Steel already made it clear that it took a lot of expertise in order to make focused improvements!

One of the advantages of Ves' unique approach to spiritual engineering was that making his products alive automatically filled up the gaps in his spiritual designs.

By letting nature shape the Divine Cores of his spiritual products, his new design spirits always became functional.

The lack of control along with the reduced efficiency of these entities were hardly a problem to Ves. He had always assumed that their growth function would allow them to correct the flaws in their designs.

That wasn't true enough. While their growth indeed closed up the most obvious gaps, their evolution did not go far enough in improving their existing Divine Cores.

Focused design was able to accomplish a lot more than unstructured growth!

Vulcan agreed with this as well, because his incarnation spent all of his time on studying the Heart of Steel Mantra. The dense amount of information it contained was both mind-boggling.

Much of it was difficult to decipher. While the System granted Vulcan enough understanding to practice its formulas and so on, it did not help with understanding the spiritual principles and mechanisms that made the Heart of Steel so strong!

This was unacceptable to a crafter like Vulcan. The incarnation did not wish to shape his Divine Core around someone else's ideas and concepts.

Though the Heart of Steel was undoubtedly an exquisite design that had probably been perfected over many generations, Vulcan would rather break the equilibrium and settle for a weaker Divine Core if that was the only way he could shape it to his own liking.

This was why Vulcan had already begun a new personal design project that was centered around modifying the existing design of his Heart of Steel!

Of course, doing this was exceedingly risky, so Vulcan did not expect to make any gains in the short term. He had barely advanced his understanding of the most important principles that made the Heart of Steel work, and that was concerning.

Vulcan had already conveyed a request to obtain more knowledge on spiritual engineering in order to facilitate his attempt to reverse-engineer his new heart.

Ves silently nodded. He wanted to prioritize this effort because he had formed a plan to upgrade the Divine Cores of all of his design spirits in the future.

They were already powerful enough when they were in their current organic states. If Ves was able to augment them by designing specialized Divine Cores for them all, then it would be as if he had upgraded a bunch of mechs with vastly stronger parts!

Both Ves and Vulcan needed to work together in order to accomplish this goal. They might even have to involve the T Institute if their own efforts proved to be insufficient.

"What are you thinking about, papa?" Andraste curiously asked as her big eyes looked up at his face.

"Oh, stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Important stuff, like thinking about your next birthday gift! You've grown a bit bigger, haven't you, Andraste?"

"Um, hihih!"

Ves smiled and kissed his redheaded daughter on the head. He loved her so much and wanted to boost her strength for the possible life she might lead in the future.

He already had a couple of enlightenment fruits in mind for his little girl. He already decided to reserve the Frost Talent Pill until Andraste grew strong enough to meet the requirements.

It was a bit more difficult for him to decide what to do with the Shadow Dance Dagger Style Enlightenment Fruit. He struggled to decide whether he should prioritize safety and hand it over to Venerable Tusa or whether he should be selfish and save it up for Andraste.

However, when he thought about the uncertain risk factors of his upcoming Trailblazer Expedition, he acknowledged that it was too much to deprive this powerful fruit from Venerable Tusa.

His cousin had not only contributed a lot to the clan over the years, but he was also an indispensable guardian of the Larkinson Clan. Making him stronger ultimately benefited every Larkinson under his protection.

Andraste would also be able to enjoy her life with fewer worries as long as Venerable Tusa ripped apart the enemies that tried to do her harm!

"I'll never let the monsters eat your body!"

"Papa!"

### **Chapter 4199 Dark Zephyr Version 2.0**

Ves thoroughly enjoyed his morning as he and his immediate family rose from their bed.

They washed up and dressed themselves up in their own outfits before enjoying a rich and sumptuous breakfast.

Gloriana had managed to hire even more skilled chefs from Davute lately. The quality of food prepared for the most important family of the Larkinson Clan had improved even further as the new hires knew exactly how to work with different specialized ingredients.

Ves, Gloriana and their children all possessed different dietary requirements.

Though Ves and Gloriana wouldn't die if they ate regular food, their children required a lot more energy as well as foodstuffs that were laced with different exotics while their bodies were still growing.

Fortunately, the chefs always managed to make the food look nice and taste even nicer. The hungry little children eagerly devoured their breakfasts before Gloriana brought them to kindergarten.

Ves kissed his wife and children goodbye before he headed over to the underground complex built underneath the surface of the Cat Nest.

He smiled and nodded at the many clansmen who he met along the way before he reached a tightly guarded underground hangar complex.



This was one of the sites where a handful of Larkinson expert mechs could be found. The clan always made sure to station at least three of them at the Larkinson Branch while the remainder protected the main fleet.

Several notable expert mechs graced his sight. Ves was intimately familiar with each of the frames considering that he personally designed and upgraded them over the years.

He spared a brief glance towards the Shield of Samar and the Promethea before he headed over to the Dark Zephyr.

The mech had undergone a fairly extensive overhaul recently. Ves still wasn't entirely accustomed to its beefier and deadlier form.

Whereas the initial version of the Dark Zephyr boasted a sleek and tidy shape, the upgraded version looked a bit busier but considerably better armed!

The entire expert mech had been improved inside and out. Pretty much its entire internal architecture had been renewed. Ves and his wife had ripped out most of the internal architecture in order to put much more powerful heartland-level components into the machine.

The Larkinson Clan did not spare too much money in order to obtain the most powerful high-end mech systems for the Dark Zephyr!

Ves even approved the decision to exchange small quantities of phasewater to various development companies in order to obtain the most cutting-edge mech parts and mech systems!

A lot of different performance parameters experienced drastic improvements as a result. The sensor suite, the ECM suite, the power reactor, the mech engine and most notably the flight system performed several times better than before.

Of course, this was not the extent of the changes made to the Dark Zephyr.

Venerable Tusa had complained so many times on how he was unable to make meaningful contributions in certain scenarios that Ves and Gloriana had made a few additions to address these issues.

The most obvious of them was the new modular armored grenade holsters. Four of them were mounted on the Dark Zephyr by default, though they could always be removed if Tusa felt they were unnecessary and weighed his mech down.

Each holster possessed enough capacity to accommodate 5 mech-grade grenades, which meant that the Dark Zephyr was able to sortie with 20 of them in total!

Naturally, the grenades at Tusa's disposal weren't the cheap and boring explosives handed out to regular mech forces.

The Larkinson Army invested quite a bit of money and resources to build up a sizable reserve of high-end grenades. Some of them were even custom-made by the Design Department in order to equip the Dark Zephyr with grenades with more exotic payloads!

The point of equipping the Dark Zephyr with these grenade holsters was to change its role and increase its versatility in the face of different threats.

Unlike energy-based weapon systems, grenades were incredibly useful because people were able to choose the power and effect of the payloads before deploying into battle.

The ability to carry 20 potent grenades into battle completely elevated the offensive power of the expert light mech!

Tusa could pick and choose different types of grenades to handle different jobs.

For example, if he needed to clear out a dense formation of mechs, the Dark Zephyr could toss out a bunch of incendiary grenades that spread flames over larger areas!

If he needed to breach the armor of a well-protected bunker, he could opt for a directional explosive grenade that excelled at punching through layers of dense materials.

If he needed to defeat an expert mech, he could equip his Dark Zephyr with high-explosive grenades, plasma grenades, or even phasewater grenades!

Of course, the latter should only be brought out when the Larkinsons faced a truly overwhelming opponent. The cost of building a grenade with a payload that was laced with phasewater was not cheap to say the least!

Venerable Tusa eagerly embraced the grenades when he received his upgraded Dark Zephyr again. In his initial live practice sessions, he went mad with joy by tossing the wildest and most powerful grenades at different practice targets!

He had been repressed by his lack of firepower for too long!

Ves quickly had to rein in his overenthusiastic cousin before he single-handedly bankrupted the Larkinson Clan!

"If you want to toss around high-end plasma grenades and phasewater grenades, then go do that in the MSTs! I know it's not as real as you would like, but you can experience the effects of all of those grenades against many different types of simulated opponents."

The Dark Zephyr used to be the cheapest and least resource-intensive expert mech to maintain.

Now that it was equipped with consumable equipment, Ves anticipated that the expert light skirmisher would impose a much higher financial burden on the clan.

This was no problem, though. With the success of his business ventures, he had more than enough money to pay for this burden.

He would rather lose a lot of money than to lose a lot of mechs and combat assets in situations where he needed to preserve as much strength as possible.

There was no way to defeat enemies on the battlefield with stacks of MTA credits! All of the money accumulating in his bank accounts would not help him when a giant phase whale was about to crunch his entire fleet into pieces!

As much as Venerable Tusa was ecstatic with all of the upgrades and additions to his expert mech, he did raise a point of concern a few days after receiving his renewed machine.

"I'm happy with the Dark Zephyr Version 2.0, Ves. I really am." He said.

"There's just one issue that is bothering me. When I fought with it during the more difficult battle scenarios of the MSTs, my expert mech has a tendency to get shot a lot by powerful opponents. If my Dark Zephyr got struck, then I could always rely on its Unending alloy armor plating to withstand the blows. This time is different. If my expert mech gets saturated with incoming attacks, and if enough of them strike a grenade holster..."

"Most of the grenades are designed to stay inert when they are struck." Ves responded.

"That is not always the case. There have been times where the grenades inflicted at least some damage to my mech when the holsters that held them got blown apart. Look, these grenades are great when at shorter ranges when I can actually use them to blast my targets apart, but they're not as helpful when my enemies are thirty kilometers away. I've actually stopped carrying the grenade holsters in the training scenarios where I know that I will face a lot of enemy fire. It simply isn't worth the risk to bring the explosives along."

Ves did not look too surprised by this. He already accounted for the problem of trying to protect the volatile payloads under heavy fire.

"There is one more upgrade that I haven't shared with you yet." He told the expert pilot. "Did you notice the new slot at the back of your Dark Zephyr? We upgraded and strengthened it so that your expert light skirmisher can mount an optional new backpack module."

Venerable Tusa became a lot more enthusiastic all of a sudden!

"Are you saying..."

Ves grinned. "Your suspicions are correct. Your expert mech will be the first Larkinson machine to gain access to a minidrive!"

Tusa was overcome with so much joy at hearing this news that his force of will made a metaphorical dance!

Obtaining a minidrive had been his greatest wish. The Dark Zephyr was all about mobility, and nothing could enhance its combat effectiveness more than the ability to zip through the battlefield at vastly greater speeds than before!

While it was true that the massively upgraded flight system already allowed the expert light skirmisher to push its acceleration to another level, it simply wasn't enough when squaring off against a squadron of nuns' warships.

A minidrive significantly reduced the time that the Dark Zephyr was underway, which meant that it would be exposed to far less intercepting fire!

Being able to approach his destination faster also allowed Venerable Tusa to take out priority targets earlier, thereby preventing the enemy from dealing as much damage as before.

"Where is it? When can I test it out?!"

"Whoa there! Don't be in such a hurry. Our clan commissioned a new combat drive for your Dark Zephyr from Morton Tech. The developers suffered a brief

delay, hence why we couldn't bring it to you when we completed the upgrade to your mech. The good news is that it should be arriving straight from the laboratory of the development company today."

Morton Tech was the company that the Larkinson Clan ultimately chose to obtain a few combat drives. While the company was fairly new, it was staffed by numerous powerful researchers who had already made a lot of strides in figuring out alien warp drive technology.

The company had managed to develop numerous powerful new transluminal travel solutions in a short amount of time. It was able to supply the most well-off groups in Davute with different varieties of superdrives, warp drives and minidrives.

"The Stiletto AS-1 Combat Drive is a fairly compact minidrive that is able to generate a warp field that can effectively allow your expert mech to traverse more distance in a shorter amount of time." Ves briefly explained. "That classifies it as a combat drive. It does not function as a cruise drive, which means you can't effectively use it for interstellar travel. You won't be able to travel from one star system to another star system. This might become possible in an updated version of the Stiletto Drive, but don't count on it. The sole purpose of this expensive module is to speed up your travel time on the battlefield."

"I'm already happy with that, Ves. How much faster will my Dark Zephyr be able to travel with this new combat drive?"

"We still have to test that, but we have worked together with Morton Tech to make sure your new Stiletto Drive will do its utmost to speed up your Dark Zephyr. That said, you should take into account that it is only a first-generation product that is based on brand-new technology. Everything will be a bit rough at first. According to our simulation results, your expert mech should be able to travel up to 50 times faster at most. However, it takes a lot of time for your

combat drive to ramp up to this degree of warping. Your mech should still be able to reach 10 times amplification in a short amount of time."

"T-Ten times!" Tusa gasped!

As a veritable speed freak, being able to move an order of magnitude faster was already a revolutionary change!

He had so many new ideas on how to fight his enemies if his mech was able to sprint an order of magnitude faster!

### **Chapter 4200 Anti-Ship Capabilities**

The addition of the new Stiletto Combat Drive completely transformed the combat effectiveness of the Dark Zephyr.

As a short-ranged mech that needed to be within tossing distance of its target in order to make meaningful contributions to an ongoing battle, speed had always been its greatest strength and limitation.

On one hand, it was by far the fastest mech in the Larkinson Army.

On the other hand, other expert mechs such as the Amaranto and the Promethea could easily deal more damage to distant targets without moving from their places.

Venerable Tusa had always been afraid of losing relevance on the battlefield. The rising trends of the Red Ocean posed a grave threat to him as light mechs were not as suited to fight against large enemies as other machines.

The new customized combat drive solved most of his concerns.

As long as the Dark Zephyr mounted this extravagantly expensive module onto its back, it could activate it at any time, allowing the expert mech to warp the surrounding space and effectively speed up its flight.

There were only two major flaws to the Stiletto Combat Drive.

The first major flaw was that it was a fairly vulnerable component. Tusa needed to pay close attention to incoming attacks. None should ever be allowed to strike the rear of the Dark Zephyr without any mitigation.

In order to help the Dark Zephyr protect this sensitive and valuable module, Ves and Gloriana had worked hard to integrate a compact emergency shield generator inside the frame.

It was not easy to stuff such a component inside the chassis of a small and cramped light mech, but they somehow managed to succeed by replacing many other components with miniaturized alternatives.

By default, the small and fairly weak shield generator was tasked with serving as an additional layer of defense for the Stiletto Drive.

Since the combat drive integrated 70 grams of phasewater, the Larkinson Clan would have to pay Morton Tech almost double this amount in order to obtain a new Stiletto Drive!

Ves had tried his best to negotiate a more favorable deal with the high-tech development company, but he had failed to make much progress.

There weren't that many companies out there that were qualified to develop minidrives, and there were even less of them that were based in Davute!

All of these companies spent phasewater like water, so none of them were eager to compete against each other based on price.

The result was that Ves and the Larkinson Clan would have to pay the same amount of phasewater no matter which company he approached!

Settling for going into bed with Morton Tech was a helpless decision on his part. Rather than go for a company that offered slightly more attractive conditions but was based in a completely different zone, Ves might as well



partner up with a local company that he could at least pay a visit to if anything went wrong with the Stiletto Drive.

Ves had made it abundantly clear to Venerable Tusa that he should never put the Stiletto Drive at risk. If it somehow broke to the point where the Larkinsons couldn't salvage the pieces, then they needed to pay 135 grams of phasewater to Morton Tech in order to supply a replacement!

Though the clan's reserves of phasewater was still fairly abundant at this point, Ves did not want to squander this strategic material too quickly.

"Let's see how much better he has become now that he has been able to practice with his upgraded mech for a longer time." Ves muttered as he brought his mind back to the present.

He concentrated his mind in order to get in touch with Vulcan.

His incarnation effectively functioned as the server of the Mental Simulation Training System, so Ves could conveniently access it at any place and time.

He quickly sought out the scenario that Tusa and the Dark Zephyr were engaged in and dove in to spectate the ongoing battle.

Explosions immediately overwhelmed Ves' senses as Tusa and a portion of the Larkinson Army fought against a powerful alien fleet!

Although the enemy force did not field any starfighters that could dogfight against human mechs, the formidable array of weapon systems were more than enough to swat out one Larkinson mech after another!

The threat posed by these warships was incredible. The dense web of firepower thrown out by these warships easily intercepted every mech that attempted to push forward.

Without a sufficient quantity of ranged solutions of their own, the Larkinson mechs were unable to take down the enemy warships fast enough.

The alien vessels were simply too well-protected!

However, even as the beleaguered ranks of Larkinson melee mechs tried and failed to get closer, a single expert mech managed to bridge the gap.

The Dark Zephyr had quickly and speedily managed to cross the void between the two fleets in a remarkably short amount of time!

It had even done so while circling around instead of taking the shortest possible route!

While it would have been faster if the expert light skirmisher went straight from point A to point B, it would have been too easy for the enemy warships to bombard the speedy machine with accurate fire.

By circling around and approaching the alien fleet at a different angle, it became a lot harder to land a blow on the Dark Zephyr.

This was especially the case when it had activated its signature Untouchable resonance ability!

The mass of kinetic rounds fired by the enemy's abundant cannon batteries occasionally struck the apparent form of the Dark Zephyr, only for them to pass by harmlessly as it turned out that they hit a mirage.

It took over a minute of futile effort for the alien commanders to figure out that the real Dark Zephyr was hiding in the vicinity!

After adjusting their targeting strategy and firing solutions, the alien fleet finally managed to land real blows onto the Dark Zephyr.

Unfortunately for them, the human expert mech had already completed over half of its journey at this time!

This was absolutely remarkable because it would have been forced to cross a much longer distance in the past.

The reason for all of this progress was the active Stiletto Drive equipped by the Dark Zephyr!

Venerable Tusa made sure that he always kept up a resonance shield around his machine. He also oriented the Dark Zephyr so that the alien warships received the least amount of opportunities to strike at its rear.

Unfortunately, the heavy blows from the enemy warships seriously depleted the resonance shield of the Dark Zephyr!

Even if most of the warship cannons tasked with intercepting the lone expert mech missed their mark, a single hit was enough to put a mean dent onto an armored starship.

The Dark Zephyr couldn't afford to withstand all of this firepower for too long! Venerable Tusa had already accounted for this, though.

At the start of this run, his Dark Zephyr traversed the battlefield 10 times faster than normal, but that was hardly the limit.

One of the general rules of any form of warp drive was that the longer it was running, the more it was able to ramp up its warp effect.

The Dark Zephyr was only able to speed up 10 times at shorter distances, but now that its Stiletto Drive had taken up the time to ramp up, its current amplification was had surpassed 30 times!

What did this mean?

It only had to remain in travel for less than a third of the time in order to reach the enemy fleet!

The simulated battle indeed proceeded in this fashion.

Though the Dark Zephyr continued to slam into one shell after another despite Tusa's best attempts to evade them all, it had managed to arrive next to the nearest enemy warship at record time!

This was an extremely serious problem to the enemy fleet. The closest warship couldn't even orient most of its gun turrets at the expert mech.

The ones that were further ahead did not dare to fire their heaviest armaments because they would do far more damage to their own side!

This left Venerable Tusa free to act as he wished!

The expert mech did not even disengage its Stiletto Drive at this point. Unless the alien opponents were able to disrupt the active warp field, there was no easy way to knock the Dark Zephyr out of its accelerated state!

The only problem was that all of the rapid turning and other extreme maneuvers reduced the Stiletto Drive's amplification factor.

It didn't matter though as the Dark Zephyr only made a single attack pass before it flew towards the next enemy warship!

Even though the expert mech had already departed its initial target, the warship subsequently fell into a crisis as three transphasic grenades completely blasted all three of her main gun turrets!

Though the alien vessel was still able to stay in the fight by firing her mostly-intact secondary armaments, knocking out her biggest guns provided the Larkinsons with a lot of relief!

Those main cannons had been pounding the capital ships of the Larkinson Clan for a while now. If they continued to do their work, then the Larkinsons were liable to lose all of their carriers before they lost their mechs!

In the next few minutes, the Dark Zephyr repeated the same trick. All of her grenade holsters were filled with insanely expensive transphasic grenades.

Ves, who had been observing this scenario for a while now, winced each time Tusa threw around those transphasic grenades like candy.

"Don't you know how much they are valued on the open market? You're throwing away thousands of MTA credits with every toss!"

The price was worth it, though. The grenades were extraordinarily potent. Much of their destructive potential bypassed many layers of thick hull plating and easily demolished the vulnerable internal components that made the gun turrets work!

Even if the gun turrets were clad with transphasic armor plating that could partially resist this effect, the grenades still would have done a lot of damage since they contained an extravagant mix of explosive materials!

Soon enough, the Dark Zephyr managed to defang six enemy warships in quick succession.

Though it was still being fired upon by lots of secondary gun batteries, the Dark Zephyr cleverly utilized the enemy hulls as cover, thereby frustrating most attempts at taking it down.

By now, it only had two transphasic grenades left. The Dark Zephyr rapidly flew towards an undamaged warship but did not choose to take down any of her main cannons.

The expert light skirmisher instead tossed the grenade towards the side of the hull.

Soon, a powerful blast opened up a hole which the Dark Zephyr eagerly dove in. This time, it drew out its Unending alloy daggers and began to carve deeper through the less sturdy internal structural bulkheads.

If the Dark Zephyr had to breach the interior of the enemy warship with its daggers, then it would have probably taken at least a minute to carve a large enough hole!

However, the transphasic grenade allowed it to bypass all of this work and save precious time.

Most starships were built like eggs. Their toughest part was their exterior. As long as the shell had been breached, it was much easier to mess up the insides!

The Dark Zephyr clearly experienced this as its resonance-empowered daggers, which were ordinarily lackluster against large targets, easily tore into the warship, cutting apart everything that looked important until the entire vessel lost power!

Venerable Tusa soon brought his expert mech back out and jumped towards another nearby warship and tossed the final transphasic grenade in order to repeat the same routine!

Ves steadily watched as Tusa single-handedly tilted a major battle in the favor of the Larkinson Clan through his own efforts.

The training scenario wasn't so much of a challenge as it was just the latest attempt of Tusa to indulge in the powerful new upgrades of his revised expert mech.

When the Dark Zephyr deployed onto the battlefield in its most powerful loadout, its threat towards enemy warships was not that much inferior to the Mars when it was bombarding a hostile fleet from a distance!