

## **The Mech 5071**

### Chapter 5071 Reality Hole

The birth of an entirely new universe happened quietly.

No one serving or living aboard the Spirit of Bentheim realized the amazing event that took place under their noses!

The expeditionary fleet still engaged in FTL travel as usual. The Larkinsons and their allies largely remained preoccupied with intercepting the next alien raiding fleet.

They had no reason to suspect that the Larkinson Patriarch had just managed to create a work that was destined to become one of his greatest creations!

A living universe that overwhelmingly consisted of spiritual energy had been born inside Blinky's intangible body!

Existing in dimensions that Ves could not even describe, this brand-new universe came about with a silent but violent bang!

Many different energies erupted from this primordial explosion.

Fueled by the complete disintegration of the Urvenk Obelisk, the raw power of stars and other stellar phenomena immediately created a new space and filled it up with the initial building blocks of a universe!

A landmass immediately formed right at the beginning. This little chunk of rock started off small, but quickly grew in size and scope as the energies absorbed by Blinky slowly shaped into an increasingly larger planet.

At the same time, the energies also started to form a small but incredibly hot ball of light in the distance!

The small prototypical star already began to illuminate and heat up the growing landmass!

More important than the creation of a new planet and star was the expansion of the internal universe itself.

With the help of the expenditure of too kilograms of phasewater, the eruption of power also expanded the diameter of the newly born space far beyond what it was supposed to for a newly established internal space!

It was not unusual for cultivation methods to create internal spaces that boasted a diameter of only a few hundred meters or a dozen kilometers.

While this sounded like a respectable amount of space at the start, these volumes amounted to nothing when the goal was to form a complete planet or star system!

The amount of volume required to form such exaggaratingly large stellar objects was astounding!

The downsides of forming a small internal space were myriad.

Their lack of size and mass made them fragile and vulnerable to external shocks.

Their lack of volume also meant that they couldn't store that much energy.

The poorer starting conditions meant that the cultivator had to expend a lot more effort to expand the volume of his internal space.

Yet because of the combination of special resources and the influx of a lot of spiritual energy, the foundation of the imaginary universe started off on a considerably stronger footing!

In fact, the conversion from an originally physical universe to a space that was overwhelmingly made up of pure energy massively decreased the resource requirements needed to grow and expand the setting!

Ves did not have to worry about needing to absorb a lot of materials to build up Blinky's internal universe.

However, the price for that was that it would become a lot harder and more energy-intensive to convert all of the imaginary stuff into physical matter in the future.

This was okay. As the initial growth spurt of Blinky's new internal space started to slow down and reach a more stable if somewhat glacial pacing, Ves began to test and evaluate what he could do with this new feature.

A permanent energy vortex formed around Blinky.

It was as if the Star Cat pricked a hole through the reality of the main universe. This hole acted like a drain that constantly caused all of the ambient spiritual energy to fall through and end up in a completely new universe!

"Mrow mrow."

"I know. Try and see if you can increase your cultivation speed."

The companion spirit began to exert himself. By following a specific cultivation method, Blinky was able to widen the diameter reality hole while at the same time raise the strength of the suction force.

The devouring organ derived from the Unending One played a crucial role in this regard!

The Imaginary Universe Method devised by Ves and perfected by his mother took great advantage of this organ's properties to serve as the main 'engine' to the imaginary universe's growth!

As Blinky tried to devour more and more indiscriminate ambient spiritual energy, its entire concentration and distribution began to deform in the surrounding space!

The entire experimental chamber as well as the compartments around the private lab and workshop began to experience increasingly more disruptive spiritual fluctuations!

Ves frowned. The stronger the fluctuations, the stronger the disruption to the environment. If he wanted to ensure that the clansmen and living mechs around him could grow and cultivate in a stable setting, then he had to ensure that Blinky's persistent cultivation did not mess up the environment too much.

Theoretically, Blinky should be able to devour spiritual energy at a much higher rate!

After all, Blinky did not have to do a lot of processing to the absorbed energies. Once they fell into his internal space, the captured energies either floated around like before or automatically formed into different planets and stars due to the direction from the cultivation method.

The current absorption rate did not satisfy Ves at all. The concentration of the ambient spiritual environment was still too low, and even if it was set to increase over the coming years, the limit would not be too high due to the Red Ocean's considerable distance from the source.

"If we can travel all the way to Messier 87, your cultivation speed should easily be a hundred if not a thousand times faster!" He told his own companion spirit. "The environment we are in right now is quite gentle, which is good for red humanity, but the conditions are not quite optimal for us. We can handle a lot more energy than most people!"

"Mrow mrow mrow."

Blinky had gained a virtually bottomless stomach all of a sudden. No matter how much E energy radiation he sucked in, his 'hunger' could never be completely sated!

After a bit of experimentation, Blinky eventually reduced his absorption rate to a more reasonable level. The energy vortex that surrounded his form became a lot less violent, which meant that his presence did not disrupt the ambient spiritual energies around him as much as before.

"This should be fine for the time being."

Although the growth rate of Blinky's brand-new internal space also slowed down because of this, Ves did not think it was that big of a deal.

One of the greatest advantages of the Imaginary Universe Method was that Blinky could easily practice it non-stop!

According to Cynthia, most actual cultivators only possessed a single body. Incarnations were dreams to them because nobody could make them with as much ease as Ves!

Since the practitioner had to do all of the work himself, he needed to reserve a significant amount of time in his daily schedule of sitting around doing nothing aside from 'cultivating'.

In other words, they remained stuck in a single room or space for hours, days, weeks, months or even years on end!

This sounded like a gigantic waste of time to Ves!

As a highly productive mech designer whose time was incomparably precious, he could not afford to waste too much of his attention and concentration on making sure that his companion spirit cultivated properly.

Fortunately, the Imaginary Universe Method was a lot easier than other qi cultivation methods.

Instead of relying on forming extremely elaborate and complicated multi-layered artistic conceptions, Blinky simply relied on upholding a framework of an imaginary universe and steadily filling it up with large quantities of spiritual energy.

It still retained a lot of touches of the original body cultivation method that Ves used as a source of inspiration.

The overall mindset behind either cultivation methods was to rely on an overwhelming quantity of resources to eventually trigger qualitative transformations.

It was a brute force approach to cultivation!

As Blinky steadily settled into his new state, the companion spirit did not experience any undue mental strain.

Practicing the Imaginary Universe Method was almost as easy as natural cultivation!

Ves and Blinky grinned at the same time.

"This is great! Everything is working according to expectations. No accidents have occurred and the growth of your new universe is proceeding without any obvious deviations."

Ves tried to evaluate Blinky's current cultivation speed and progress.

Due to his excellent start, Blinky completed the first stage of the Imaginary Universe Method in record time!

He had already moved on to transforming the primordial landmass into a primordial planet. The second stage demanded an exponentially greater quantity of energy to complete than the first stage, so it demanded a lot more time and effort.

Blinky had little choice but to keep draining ambient spiritual energy day and night and slowly complete the first real planet of his private universe.

"It shouldn't take too long. You'll probably be able to complete the second stage in two weeks or so." Ves estimated.

"Mrow mrow mrow." Blinky concurred.

Strangely enough, the new cultivation method already affected the appearance of the Star Cat.

His purple intangible body no longer depicted points of lights that trailed across his entire body in linear trajectories.

Instead, a single point of light as well as a slight circular dark patch appeared on his fluffy belly.

It became clear that his altered visual manifestation had begun to reflect the actual state of his new internal space!

Ves could easily infer that as Blinky expanded his personal universe and filled it up with progressively more stars, the companion spirit's outward appearance would grow increasingly more elaborate and impressive!

Perhaps he might one day look like a giant feline embodiment of an entire cosmos!

"Mrow mrow!"

Blinky looked forward to assuming such a form one day! The more impressive he looked, the more power he had at his disposal!

Still, for now his internal universe lacked serious growth and development. It did not bring any measurable advantages to the companion spirit aside from giving him an enormous and expanding storage space where he could dump a lot of spare spiritual energy.

"This is pretty useful already."

Blinky lacked this capability in the past, which meant that he constantly had to draw on external sources of energy whenever he or Ves needed to perform an energy-hungry procedure such as sustaining his Living Workshop ability.

Now that Blinky gained access to a giant reservoir of spiritual energy, Ves could burn almost as much spiritual energy as he wanted without needing to worry about disrupting the environment or borrowing lots of juice from his design spirits!

"Can you store real objects inside your space?"

"Mrow... mrow...?"

Ves picked up a metal bar and tried to stuff it inside the reality hole.

It didn't work.

"Sure enough. I knew it wouldn't be that simple."

His hope of treating Blinky's new internal space as an alternative of the System's Vault of Eternity was dashed, at least for the time being.

He predicted that Blinky needed to advance to a much later stage or begin to enter into the second mode of the Imaginary Universe Method in order to turn it into a gigantic portable pocket space!

As Ves continued to analyze the properties of this latest addition to his life, he eventually found it to be cumbersome to refer to it as 'Blinky's internal space' or 'Blinky's imaginary universe'.

He needed to bestow it with a proper name so that he could effortlessly distinguish it from his main universe.

Ves stared into the eyes of his companion spirit. "Do you have any good suggestion?"

"Mrow mrow... mrow?"

"That... is actually a brilliant name for a new universe!" Ves responded with a smile! "From now on, your internal imaginary universe shall be known as... the Blinkyverse!"

The Blinkyverse!

For now, it could only function as a large and portable reservoir of different spiritual energies, but its future potential was endless.

As long as Blinky remained alive and continued to absorb spiritual energy without interruption, it was possible for the cheekily named Blinkyverse to eventually match the scope of the main universe!

Chapter 5072 Schooling Concerns

Once the novelty and the excitement of the creation of the Blinkyverse died down, Ves returned to his ordinary routine but with many changes.

Knowledge could change a person. A lot of knowledge could transform a person.

Ves had turned from an ignorant savage into an adept in the field of cultivation science, and that showed in many ways!

From the persistent energy vortex that accompanied him wherever he traveled, to the invisible changes in his attitudes and demeanor, every Larkinson who knew him well could instinctively detect that he had undergone a substantial evolution!

"What is it that you are working on, exactly?" Gloriana suspiciously asked during another day of breakfast. "There is an air of activity and restlessness around you. My companion spirit can sense that Blinky has grown a lot stronger all of a sudden. What is the matter with you today?"

"Yeah, what happened, papa?" Marvaine asked as he shoved another spoonful of nutrient-dense porridge into his adorable mouth.

Ves smiled while reaching out to rub his son's head. "I have made major breakthroughs in my spiritual engineering work. I am not ready to share my full results with everyone. I need a few months in order to apply what I have recently learned and discovered. I can tell you that each of your lives will undergo massive changes."

Though his wife looked frustrated at this lacking response, Ves did not want to talk too openly about cultivation.

He did not entirely understand the Red Two's attitude towards this subject. Any talk relating to 'psionic power' had long been treated as a taboo.

What now?

Red humanity no longer resided in a galaxy that was devoid of the so-called power of heaven.

The Red Association and the Red Fleet had already let the cat out of the bag by dressing up the existence of spiritual energy as 'E energy radiation'.

Would they be willing to go a step further and expose humanity's secret but incredibly relevant tradition of cultivation?

Ves inwardly shook his head. It was impossible for the mechers and the fleeters to give any acknowledgement to their former masters!

The existence of the Five Scrolls Compact needed to remain buried in order to preserve the continued hegemony of the Red Two!

As Ves finished his breakfast, he started to consider his busy schedule for the next month.

He had a lot of work on his plate. Not only did he have to spend a lot of hours on progressing his various design projects, but he also had to develop a lot of new cultivation methods for different recipients.

His children, his clansmen, his companion spirits and his design spirits all possessed different properties and could not practice the exact same cultivation method.

Ves had to develop several cultivation methods in order to meet the needs of each major category.

In the case of people he cared about the most such as his three children, he wanted to formulate customized cultivation methods for each of them to ensure they developed a lot faster than their peers!

Only his children deserved to practice the best methods!

If not for the fact that the Imaginary Universe Method required the presence of a devouring organ as well as powerful starting ingredients, Ves would have encouraged his children's companion spirits to practice it as well!

After all, why stop with one internal universe when his family could grow several more at the same time?

It might even be possible to connect them all together and form a shared multiverse!

This was all fantasy, of course. Cultivation could make a lot of different dreams come true, but the requirements to realize the more outlandish stuff were too much for him to bear.

Once it was time for his children to start their respective tutoring sessions, Gloriana walked up to Ves in concern.

"Don't try to act mysterious. Tell me what is happening." She softly demanded. "I can tell you are keeping a huge secret from me again."

Ves sighed and placed his arms on both of her shoulders.

"I would love to share my work with you, but there is little point in notifying you when I don't have much to show at the moment. Give me a month and I will be able to give you a proper heads up by presenting you with actual results. Don't be in a hurry to complete the Bloodripper Project and the Greenaxe Project. I will try my best to apply my latest gains to those two expert mech projects."

That caused Gloriana to frown deeper. "I will trust you... for now. I expect you to be a lot more forthcoming when you finally feel ready to share your latest breakthrough."

"Heh, prepare for your mind to be blown. All of our lives and all of our mechs are about to take off once I have verified my latest conjectures."

The tension between them eased as they began to talk about other subjects.

They began to talk about the challenges of securing proper first-class schooling for their children in a post-Great Severing society.

Many virtual schools had become inaccessible or defunct, leading to a considerable increase in demand to the remaining educational institutions in the Red Ocean.

"The Yorul-Tavik Clan is primarily based in the Omter Republic in the Milky Way." Gloriana reminded Ves. "Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik has lost access to much of his backing. He only has what little his clan has transferred to him after he lost his first fleet and got rescued by us. I have already investigated him and learned that he only has a diminished group of retainers by his side."

"Where are you going with this, Gloriana?"

"I do not think that Lord Pearian can do much for us in his current state." She explained her thoughts. "The man still has enough of a foundation in the Red Ocean to live comfortably in an

Upper Zone, but I doubt he has enough clout left to get our children into appropriate first-class schools."

Ves looked skeptical. "I'm not sure about that. It depends on how much funding the Yorul-Tavik Clan has transferred to his local account. Finance has become incredibly messy due to the sudden nature of the Great Severing. Even if Lord Pearian has lost a lot of power, he is still a fairly powerful and well-connected first-rater. We may be able to enter into new and more equitable forms of cooperation with him. Even if he has a lot of money, it is not easy for him to acquire a fleet, a powerful mech force and profit-generating industries from scratch."

He saw a lot of promise in renewed cooperation. The Larkinson Clan and Lord Pearian both had what each other needed. Ves just needed to order the Black Cats to investigate this potential business partner a bit further.

"Well, whatever you have planned for Lord Pearian, our children still need better schooling. Can't you use your new connections with the Terrans to enroll them into virtual schools based in the Terran Alliance?"

"I can, but... let's make sure that the Eden Institute still wants me." Ves cautiously replied. "The next semester is starting soon. Once I have proven my teaching ability and earned my place in this university, I might be able to ask a few favors from the school administration."

"Then you better make sure you do a good job."

"We still have other options, honey. It might not necessarily be a good idea to educate all of our children in the Terran style."

The conference organized by the Survivalist Faction was scheduled to start soon as well.

Ves had heard little from his contacts, but he could clearly guess that its importance had become a lot greater than before!

He still needed to hurry up and complete a few new works in order to show off his latest and most promising innovations!

As long as he proved his value in this new age and attracted enough support, it should be easy for him to ask a few favors from his Survivalist buddies.

Once Ves assuaged his wife's concerns, they split up and started their respective work.

Gloriana had already completed a lot of preliminary work on Ark's new high-tier expert mech.

The Jupiter Project was meant to become one the strongest if not strongest powerhouse mech of the Larkinson Clan in the years to come!

Unless his grandfather Benjamin caught up and surpassed his own son, it appeared likely that General Ark Larkinson would become the first formally recognized ace pilot of the clan.

The significance of this project was great. Gloriana did not just approach it as an opportunity to design a high-tier expert mech, but also treated it as the prototypical form of a future ace mech!

The demanding mech designer found it important that the Jupiter Project already came with a configuration that should not require an extensive redesign in order to upgrade it into an ace mech.



She took clear inspiration from the Mars and how Benedict Cortez approached this high-priority design project at the time.

Much of the effective combat power of a high-level mech was derived from its tech and parts. Gloriana put a lot of effort into contacting powerful development companies in an effort to secure ace mech-grade parts and systems.

She managed to obtain much of what she needed already by signing several new contracts with companies based in both the Hex Federation and the Colonial Federation of Davute.

The costs were not light! The Jupiter Project was still stuck in an early stage, but the ambitious woman had already committed to spending more money, resources and phasewater than what the Cross Clan had invested in the development of the Mars!

Fortunately, the recent victory against the wheednar raiding fleet already covered a lot of costs, so Ves did not mind the extravagant spending at all. He even wished that his wife would spend more because that ultimately translated into a more powerful mech for Uncle Ark!

"Ark isn't the only close relative that needs a new high-tier expert mech, though." Ves reminded himself.

As Veronica and his cyborg foot continued to work on various mech designs including finishing up the Eye Project, Ves himself tried to figure out how to incorporate cultivation methods in his new mechs.

An important focus was the two machines that currently integrated his Carmine System.

He already checked up on Venerable Jannzi and the Bastion and confirmed they were doing pretty okay even without any formal cultivation methods.

In fact, the Bastion had become infected by the recent craze to figure out how to absorb ambient spiritual energy and use that to her advantage, but she had made limited progress for the time being.

Ves found it rather funny to observe all of his third order living mechs fumbling to form their own rudimentary domains and figuring out how to best combine that with their pilot's true resonance.

They all acted like children from his perspective. They lacked the extensive knowledge and inheritances that Ves recently acquired.

While his living mechs were still struggling to form a basic cultivation method, Ves could already whip up a more advanced version in a matter of hours!

Of course, Ves wasn't satisfied with that. He had greater ambitions in mind, but he still needed to do a little more research to figure out whether he could realize his envisioned cultivation model.

"Grandfather."

"Ves!" Benjamin called just as he exited from the cockpit of the Blood Star after completing another training session. "You don't need to check up on me that often. I've recovered a bit more since your last inspection. I think the new air is doing a lot of good to me. I feel as if I am 20 years younger!"

Ves felt reassured that his grandfather wasn't backsliding, but he did not come to check up on Benjamin's condition today.

He directed his spiritual senses towards the active and vigorous Blood Pact between his grandfather and his bonded mech.

He saw a lot of room for improvement.

"Can I ask you a question, grandpa?"

"Sure. Always."

"How much do you love your new mech?"

Chapter 5073 Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra

Ves wanted to spread the advantages of cultivation to his clan.

He decided to start with his grandfather and his living mech because they were relatively new additions to the Larkinson Army.

They did not experience as much growth as other pairs. Their spiritual states had only changed relatively recently and should still remain fairly malleable.

Although Ves was slightly concerned about impacting Benjamin's relatively poor physical fitness, he understood on a rational level that his grandfather was not as fragile as he looked!

Venerable Benjamin Larkinson possessed all of the traits of a genuine high-tier expert pilot outside of physique.

His reforged willpower was even stronger and more solid than the willpower of other Larkinson mech pilots!

Prodigies such as Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi may have grown remarkably quickly over the past decade, but their life experiences and mental development could not match up to a grandfather who already lived a full life of ups and downs!

Ves considered Benjamin to be a good test subject for that reason. The old man had already endured great trauma in the past and could easily take a few blows.

It was difficult for Ves to explain what he wanted to do the Blood Star.

Cultivation was not part of the culture of modern humanity. Ves suspected that the MTA and CFA deliberately suppressed this concept in order to deprive the Five Scrolls Compact of support back in the old galaxy.

"So let me get this straight." Benjamin said as he rubbed his gloved fingers against his wrinkled chin. "You have come up with a tech that can upgrade the Blood Pact and help my mech and I grow faster, is that correct?"

"You can say that. It's a little more complicated than that. I need both of you to adjust your behavior, acquire a set of new habits and possibly meditate on a cultivation mantra. I am trying to figure out if you can skip on that last part. It is troublesome for you and your expert mech to spend conscious effort on deliberate cultivation. I am hoping that I can whip up a solution that will essentially allow you and your living mech to cultivate on autopilot."

The old expert pilot looked completely lost at this point. He eventually threw up his hands.

"Just do what you want. My mech and I will cooperate with you as best as possible."

After gaining his grandfather's tentative approval, Ves began to conduct a series of tests and examinations.

The new mech testing chamber built adjacent to his private workshop came extremely handy at this time.

The large compartment offered a decent amount of space for the Blood Star to fly around and test its skills against dummy targets.

As Venerable Benjamin was having the time of his life by hacking its sword against different bots, Ves constantly studied the spiritual condition of the Blood Star.

A lot of different ideas entered his mind as he gathered a huge amount of interesting data.

His vastly expanded depth in cultivation science had opened a new world to him. Ves found that he could notice a lot of small but important variables that he completely overlooked in the past!

The more he studied the Blood Pact, the more he admired how he managed to make it come to life.

Even so, his greater vision and understanding also caused him to wince at times whenever he spotted aspects of it that were either suboptimal or completely detrimental!

This was an unavoidable consequence of indirectly forming a contract cultivation method. The Carmine System did the best it could to forge a permanent spiritual bond between the mech and the mech pilot.

"It has character, but... there is far too much room for improvement for me to leave it alone."

Cultivation science centered around developing the most efficient and effective ways to convert energy into growth and more specifically metaphysical growth.

As Ves adopted the mentality of an engineer to this important side project, he meticulously deconstructed the existing natural cultivation methods and utilized his extensive theoretical frameworks to formulate a lot of improved cultivation processes.

Ves was actually working with three cultivation methods rather than just a single one at this time.

First, his grandfather unconsciously 'practiced' the mech piloting cultivation method that was automatically dispensed by the Kingdom of Mechs through a mechanism that Ves could not detect.

With the understanding that Ves possessed today, he already understood that mech pilots actually did not have to do anything special in order to 'cultivate'.

They just had to do their jobs and actively engage in training or fight in real combat missions to make actual progress!

As long as they possessed sufficient spiritual potential, each of them had a chance to exceed the extraordinary threshold and form extraordinary willpower, all without requiring any conscious direction!

Even their breakthroughs were secretly managed by the Kingdom of Mechs in order to ensure they proceeded smoothly and without any errors!

Just as with his own mech designer progression trajectory, there was nothing that Ves could do to alter or improve the cultivation method for mech pilots.

The only way he had any hope of doing so was to gain enough authority over the Kingdom of Mechs and change the cultivation method from the root!

Ves shook his head. "I don't need to worry about this. I should focus on what I can control."

Right now, he needed to formulate at least one general cultivation method for living mechs and one dual cultivation method for the users of the Carmine System.

"The two should complement each other."

If a living mech was able to grow stronger through its own efforts, it would be able to provide more assistance to its mech pilot.

The existence of a Blood Pact between the two meant that this reinforcement relationship became a lot more effective!

Ves could easily imagine that Carmine pilots would be able to grow five times if not ten times faster than their more regular counterparts!

Of course, the premise of sustaining this rapid growth was whether the Carmine mech could continue to grow fast enough on its own to provide a lot of cultivation assistance to its bonded pilot.

In the video games that Ves used to play in the past on occasion, this was a process called power leveling.

The most crucial part about making power leveling work was to create a sufficiently large difference of power between the mech and mech pilot.

Reality was not a video game, and it was not entirely necessary for a Carmine mech to be a lot stronger than its mech pilot.

They just had to remain within a reasonable range of power in order to benefit each other.

"Let's focus on the cultivation of the living mech first since that is a crucial precondition to increasing the effectiveness of the Blood Pact."

There were three fundamental variables that affected the growth of a living mech.

The first was time. The more time passed by, the more a living mech was able to engage in natural cultivation and slowly develop itself further.

The second was interfacing with a mech pilot. When a living mech was used for its intended purpose and when it formed a man-machine connection with a human, the machine grew more rapidly by being exposed to different stimuli.

These two variables already existed from the moment Ves produced his first living mechs. They had been the factors responsible for enabling all of his products to grow over time.

From humble commercial mechs such as the Desolate Soldier to powerful high-ranking mechs that had eventually turned into living legends such as the Ouroboros, their growth had all been sustained by the power of time and experiences!

It was only recently that a third variable came into the picture. The Age of Dawn introduced exotic radiation to red humanity, and all of the living mechs stuck in the Red Ocean became graced by constant exposure to E energy radiation.

Even if living mechs did nothing at all, their very nature as sentient life forms caused them to passively absorb ambient spiritual energies that aligned with their own domains.

Ves focused on this phenomenon in particular. His goal was to supercharge this natural process by implementing a lot of highly effective artificial cultivation processes!

He immediately pulled up a copy of the Atmer Guardian Mantra and began to alter its cultivation steps in an attempt to make it suitable for living mechs.

He had to hollow it out quite a bit as much of it was specifically directed towards strengthening organic human bodies.

This pretty wiped out the body cultivation aspects from the mantra, but that was fine as living mechs almost never improved the physical defenses of their bodies on their own in the past.

Unless they incorporated smart metal or turned into an ace mech, living machines had to rely on humans to manually upgrade their physical defenses.

"Can I do better, though?"

It was too impractical to incorporate Gloriana's god body method as it was too high-end and imposed a lot of difficult requirements.

What Ves needed to formulate was a more general and accessible body cultivation method that was suitable for every living mech.

He quickly swept through all of the cultivation knowledge that he had recently acquired and paused when he touched upon the fundamental theories of the five elements.

"Metal. Mechs are products of metal. This is a great starting point!"

That was not all. He also drew from a lot of theories and processes of the Colica Sect Equipment Maintenance Sutra to figure out how to strengthen the structure and the spiritual foundation of mechs in more esoteric ways.

The biggest challenge to adapting the cultivation processes of the Equipment Maintenance Sutra was to make it less dependent on external repairs.

Ves had to employ his full creativity and thinking power at times in order to develop brand-new solutions that combined traits from multiple different cultivation inheritances!

Several days passed by as Ves obsessed over this work. He continually examined the performance of not only the Blood Star, but also several other notable machines such as the Quint.

The old stalwart provided Ves with a surprising amount of useful feedback. The Quint had already figured out a lot of stuff on its own and possessed a greater sensitivity towards the changes induced by different cultivation processes.

With the active assistance from his living mechs, Ves eventually completed the first iteration of the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra!

When third order living mechs such as the Blood Star and the Quint began to practice this rather complicated cultivation method, they began to form small energy vortexes in their immediate surroundings.

This was a clear sign that their energy absorption efficiency had skyrocketed!

"It's working!" Ves exulted!

Unlike Blinky who was absorbing a lot of ambient spiritual energies regardless of their properties, the living mechs that tentatively learned this new cultivation method only stuck to absorbing metal energies and a bit of life energies. This meant that practicing the new method generated less disturbances.

Even so, Ves could already tell that the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra was at least 7 times as effective in terms of cultivation speed when compared to the previous state!

Not only that, but the new cultivation method exclusive for the living mechs of the Larkinson Mechs also used up the captured energies a lot more efficiently.

Many different aspects of the living mechs became steadily more fortified without generating as much waste as before.

Ves could vaguely tell that both the Quint and the Blood Star were experiencing minute physical reinforcement, which was a highly desirable phenomenon that was previously exclusive to ace mechs and god mechs!

"The physical strengthening effects share a certain resemblance to the effects of willpower baptism!"

This was exactly what Ves wanted to see! Instead of relying on the extraordinary willpower of a rare ace pilot, his new cultivation method relied purely on the ubiquitous supply of ambient spiritual energy attributed towards the metal element in order to fuel the physical growth of his living mechs!

Ves could scarcely foresee how much stronger all of his third order living mechs would become once they practiced his new Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra!

However, his work was far from done.

He still had to solve a greater challenge.

"I need to turn this into an instinctive cultivation method for all of my second order living mechs."

#### Chapter 5074 Cultivation Fit

The spread of the initial version of the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra triggered a small shockwave in the small community of the Anima Order.

Every third order living mech of the Larkinson Clan got caught up in the new 'cultivation' craze!

It took a while for many mechs to get started in this wonderful new method that enabled them to efficiently absorb ambient spiritual energy and convert it into their own strength.

Not all mechs possessed as much savvy for cultivation as the Quint, but each of them were already partial energy life forms in a sense. Even the slowest of them could get started with the help of their inherent sensitivity towards spiritual energy!

Many mech pilots who had spent years with their own machines became surprised when their battle partners suddenly started to absorb a lot more E energy radiation than usual.

"What are you doing, Everchanger?" Venerable Joshua asked as he was about to prepare for another patrol session over at the Dragon's Den.

"I AM CULTIVATING."

"Cultivating?"

"YES. OUR PROGENITOR JUST CAME UP WITH A NEW TRAINING REGIME THAT ALLOWS LIVING MECHS SUCH AS MYSELF TO ABSORB A PART OF THE ENERGIES FLYING THROUGH SPACE. LET ME EXPLAIN HOW THAT CAN MAKE ME STRONGER..."

As the third order living mechs all began to experience the benefits of cultivation, Ves spent a bit of time on inspecting and recording data.

Each individual cultivator was different. Every living mech possessed different properties. When they all practiced the same Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra, they attained mixed results.

Larger and more solid machines such as the Bastion and the Blood Star produced higher than average results.

Ves did not think that was because they were his most recent third order living mechs. He could clearly notice that these two knight mechs understood the essence of the mantra a lot faster and exhibited a considerably higher fit with its cultivation processes!

"It makes sense that defensive mechs get along well with a defense-oriented cultivation method."

That did not mean that all of the more fragile and offensive mechs such as the Dark Zephyr and the Amranto gained little benefits.

On an absolute level, these machines were already quite tough and heavy by themselves!

It was just that their domains, attributes and roles did not align so well with the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra.

If Ves wanted to accommodate them better, then he needed to formulate a bunch of new cultivation methods that allowed them to absorb their preferred elemental energies into strengthening their weapons or other strong points.

"It's not that easy to design these alternative cultivation methods." Ves frowned when he understood the current problem.

He had too many commitments on his name to spare too much time on devising more specialized cultivation methods.

Even if he assigned a lot of mech design work to Veronica and his cyborg leg, he still needed to do a lot of work himself in order to keep up with his busy schedule.

Besides, there was lots of other work that he couldn't leave to his backup brain and his incarnation!

Ves was pretty sure the Eden Institute would never tolerate him giving a lecture to its students through his detached cyborg leg!

"What if I create an android body to go with my leg?" He suddenly wondered.

That actually sounded like a decent idea. As long as he made it realistic enough, few people should be able to tell the difference!

He could treat this false body as a highly realistic decoy. Since it was attached to a leg that contained an actual part of his brain, it was not completely fake.

He could even send out this decoy body to all kinds of dangerous instances such as untamed planets or risky assaults!

Ves could genuinely live his life in two different human bodies through this fashion without anyone important knowing any better.

He shook his head. "This is a bit weird and unnecessary at the moment."

His main desire at the moment was to keep up with all of his mech design projects and prevent them from getting delayed due to his current preoccupation with cultivation science.

It was enough to keep his leg in front of a design terminal for the time being. The limb-with-a-brain even made good progress in drafting the initial sketch and configuration of the Supremo Project!

Ves considered the heavy artillery mech design project to be the first of many new commercial and client mechs that would showcase much of his latest advancements!

While he did not intend to give the mech that was destined to become a trump card for the Colonial Federation of Davute all of the latest bells and whistles, Ves did not intend to hold back that much either.

The public needed to gain more confidence and respect in his living mechs!

The onset of the Age of Dawn granted the best possible stage for Ves to make his living mechs spread farther and wider than ever before!

As long as he figured out how to make all of his second order living mechs cultivate by themselves, their value propositions would skyrocket, especially when used over the long term!

Ves did not believe that other mech designers including the Polymath herself could design any comparable machines!

"Well, clever mech designers like her will probably be able to develop comparable solutions such as the god body method, but I don't think they can ever beat genuine cultivation." He guessed.

Mechs could technically be treated as artifacts, and there were many possible ways to amplify their strengths by fueling them with E energy radiation.

Other mech designers that did not have any relations with living mechs, cultivation or the Five Scrolls Compact had already begun to approach the new possibilities from the perspective of their own design philosophies.

As far as Ves knew from his latest chat with the Master Mech Designer, Benedict Cortez recently made a few advancements that significantly increased the effectiveness of his Endex System!

By tweaking it so that it could start to converge spiritual energy into electrical energy, Master Benedict could effectively create a renewable power reactor that could keep a mech running solely through absorbing E energy radiation!



Of course, Master Benedict still had a long way to go before his Endex System could truly replace a conventional power reactor. The absorption efficiency and the energy output of his most recent attempts were still woefully inadequate.

Examples like these nonetheless showed that every good mech designer was making progress. Ves could not afford to grow complacent and assume that his living mechs would be able to squeeze out every other competitor out of the mech market.

"Let's focus on developing a few iconic bestsellers first."

Ves had been in the business long enough to know that it only took a few standout mech models to elevate the brand of the Living Mech Corporation.

Excellent products such as the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Ferocious Piranha and the Pacifier built up a lot of brand awareness and positive word of mouth. It became a lot easier for the LMC to sell its lesser-known and less popular products as a consequence.

It had been years since his mech company last published a mech model that truly excited the public.

Even if the Supremo Project would only remain an exclusive product of Davute, as long as it performed well enough, it would generate a lot of reputation for its chief designer, just like the Valkyrie Redeemer had once accomplished!

He just needed to complete it first. Working together with Master Decimus Horst lifted a lot of heavy work off his hands, but that did not mean he could remain absent either. There were still a lot of design elements that he needed to take care of himself in order to ensure that the Supremo Project properly reflected his design style and design philosophy!

In any case, Ves quickly worked to improve his newly developed Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra cultivation method based on the data he collected over the past few days.

He tried to account for the individual strengths and differences between different living mechs. He wanted the cultivation method to put a bit more emphasis on strengthening the weapons of offensive mechs.

"This is not easy." He frowned as he sat behind his desk terminal. "The original Atmer Guardian Mantra that my work is based upon is largely oriented towards improving defenses. I can't take the opposite direction without breaking the entire structure that I am using."

This was the disadvantage of trying to design a variant of an existing work. If Ves possessed greater competence in cultivation science, he would have been able to develop a brand-new cultivation method that met all of his goals without being weighed down by legacy problems.

He let out a sigh. The only ways he could improve on this front was by conducting a lot of original research, receiving additional lessons from his mother or eating a few more enlightenment fruits.

Only the last option was practical for Ves, but the issue was that he had already spent almost all of his Ascension Points!

He needed to look into fulfilling a couple of easy missions if he wanted to pluck secret knowledge from the Tree of Possibilities yet again.

"Let's focus on what I can do for the time being."

After a few more days of tinkering, Ves managed to optimize the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra.

Version 1.1 not only resolved a few flaws that Ves only discovered after his living mechs started to practice the original method, but also slightly appeased the mechs oriented towards speed and offense.

"IT IS ANYTHING BUT PERFECT, BUT IT WILL DO FOR NOW." The Promethea grumbled to Ves. "I WOULD RATHER PRACTICE A MANTRA THAT CAN MAKE MY FLAMES BURN HOTTER AND HARDER TO EXTINGUISH. ALL OF THIS ATTENTION TOWARDS METAL IS MAKING ME FEEL COLDER."

Ves sheepishly smiled. "I still have to develop a bunch of other essential cultivation methods before I can address your personal needs. In the meantime, maybe you can try and experiment on your own. As long as you are careful enough to stop whenever anything wrong has occurred, it shouldn't be too dangerous for you to experiment with absorbing fire energy. Even if you have never managed to succeed, the experimental data that you have gathered during your attempts can help me a lot in narrowing down viable solutions."

"I WILL TRY." The expert rifleman mech spoke.

As Ves had optimized the cultivation method, he also spent a lot of time on thinking on how to make it applicable to all of his second order living mechs.

After all, the vast majority of his products did not start out as fully alive right away. Ves did not want to limit the benefits of mech cultivation to just a limited group of third order living mechs.

After considering several possible options, from uploading special software to the mech operating system to integrating the mantra into the mech design itself, Ves eventually took inspiration from an existing example.

If the Kingdom of Mechs was somehow able to turn mech pilots and mech designers into unknowing cultivators, then Ves saw no reason why he couldn't do the same!

The biggest issue that Ves had to resolve was choosing the 'server' that contained the cultivation method and automatically applied it to all of his living mechs no matter the quantity or distance.

Ves could choose from a lot of different design spirits and other entities.

The question now was how he could best approach this problem.

"Should I use a single cultivation nexus that holds near-total control over the cultivation of every living mech, or should I split up this massive responsibility and allocate the job to many different design spirits?"

The former was easier, more efficient and harder to steal from. It also created a single point of failure that could topple the entire house of cards if attacked!

The latter added a lot more redundancies and enabled every design spirit to specialize in administering and possibly improving the specialized cultivation methods under their care.

However, Ves held a lot of concerns about maintaining consistency and preventing third parties from stealing his proprietary trade secrets from the more vulnerable design spirits.

"So what? Stuff like this doesn't work on mechs that aren't alive." Ves muttered. "In order for mech cultivation methods to have any value, there needs to be an abundant availability of living mechs. If all kinds of people want to learn or steal the mantras that I have developed, then that means that my design philosophy has already spread far and wide!"

Ves realized that there was no reason for him to hoard his secrets so carefully. As long as he continued to excel in his own field of specialization, he would always be able to develop better and more optimized cultivation methods than the competition!

He began to lean towards letting all of his design spirits act as lesser versions of the Kingdom of Mechs. Each of them would become more relevant to his living mechs than before once they took on this additional responsibility!

"I can even find a way to merge the mech cultivation methods with my recently developed Ascension Paths!"

## Chapter 5075 Win-Win-Win Relationship

Ves held the Larkinson Mandate in his arms.

The heavy metal-encrusted tome felt more powerful and extraordinary than before.

He used to call it an artifact and an heirloom in the past, but it really started to behave like one after the Great Severing had occurred.

The Larkinson Mandate absorbed more and more ambient spiritual energy. Combined with its strong relationship with the Golden Cat, Ves had the illusion that it was starting to come alive and develop its own separate personality!

He looked forward to seeing what would result from this, but today he had a different goal in mind.

"Goldie? I need to discuss an important matter with you. It concerns your job as a design spirit."

"Nyaa?"

The compartment suddenly became a lot brighter as a shining spiritual cat emerged from the book!

The warmth radiating from Goldie had grown even stronger than before, signifying that she had made a lot of progress as of late.

Ves was aware that all of the design spirits had been attempting to develop their own cultivation methods.

They made limited progress so far. Ignorant of real cultivation science, their experiments amounted to little but amplifying the effects of their existing natural cultivation methods by proactively absorbing ambient spiritual energy in greater quantities.

Simply increasing the input was not enough to produce truly superior cultivation results. The processes in between had to be completely reinvented in order to exceed the limited potential of primitive and rudimentary natural cultivation!

"Nyaa nyaa nyaa!" Goldie complained as she flew circles around her creator.

Ves chuckled in a good-natured manner as he reached out and caught the playful cat. "I know, I know. I intend to work on your own needs as well. Your importance is considerable in my future

plans. I just need to solve our more immediate problems first before I can work on more ambitious projects."

"Nya nya nyaaaa!"

Blinky appeared from Ves' head and pounced on Goldie.

"Mrow!"

The two spiritual cats wrestled with each other for a bit.

Surprisingly enough, Blinky managed to hold his own by virtue of his new internal universe.

Even if his Blinkyverse had not yet completed the second stage of its evolution, it was already large and formidable enough to lend a lot of additional energy and strength to the companion spirit!

"Nyaaa! Nyaaaa! Nyaaaa!"

The Golden Cat had no chance of defeating Blinky after the latter had gotten started on his powerful new cultivation method!

Not only did the companion spirit gained access to a huge energy reservoir, but his ability to devour different energies including that of Goldie had improved as well!

It became hard for Goldie to harness the power of heaven and form a pseudo-domain when Blinky kept sucking away her energies all of the time!

Ves felt encouraged by this result. Despite practicing a different method from the one originally envisioned by his mother, Blinky still possessed the ability to defend himself against other energy-based life forms.

The more Blinky cultivated the Imaginary Universe Method, the greater the amplification to his effective combat power!

It was a pity that neither Blinky nor his Blinkyverse were good at causing material harm. Ves needed to rely on other forms of protection in order to defend himself against physical threats.

Ves did not feel overly concerned about this. All of the mechs around him were no joke these days. It should be impossible for enemies to get past so many layers of defense.

Once Goldie and Blinky grew tired of wrestling with each other, Ves proceeded to brief the design spirit of his intentions.

The cat looked intrigued.

"Nyaaa nyaaa nyaaa?"

Ves nodded. "Yes. I intend to use you to administer the cultivation method for all of our Larkinson clansmen as well. You can treat this initial attempt as a trial balloon. As long as you are successfully able to make the Bright Warriors and other mechs under your supervision cultivate this new mantra, I am confident I can apply the same approach for our clansmen."

"Nya!"

"I need you to cooperate with me on this. I will need to apply a few delicate changes to you. I also need to give you a crash course on this mantra."

Ves worked together with the Golden Cat to grant her the capability to act as a miniature Kingdom of Mechs.

It was impossible for Ves to replicate the full power of the real deal, but it was not necessary for him to go that far. He just wanted to imitate the kingdom's capacity to induce subconscious cultivation to its clients.

The exact mechanics required to make this happen was quite complicated. Ves lacked the advanced theories and understanding to satisfy every essential requirement, but he only needed to ask his mother a few poignant questions in order to find solutions to the trickiest problems.

In order to develop a viable way for his second order living mechs to cultivate on autopilot, Ves had to simplify the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra to a great extent.

He removed and simplified a lot of the more active and demanding cultivation processes. He also added a lot of new elements in order to grant control authority to design spirits such as Goldie.

Ves felt as if he was following the footsteps of the Progenitors of Mechs. Did they devise similar cultivation processes in an attempt to create invisible cultivation methods for mech pilots and mech designers at the end of the Age of Conquest?

It would have been great if Ves could study the mechanisms of the Kingdom of Mechs in person!

Instead, he was forced to reinvent the wheel. This turned out to be quite troublesome. Even with the helpful advice of his mother, Ves wasted a lot more hours on this challenge than he originally expected!

Yet once Ves and Goldie managed to get this new mode of cultivation to work, the results became gratifying!

Both Ves and the Golden Cat watched with awe and satisfaction as a squad of Bright Warrior mechs hailing from the Avatar of Myth began to form their own miniature energy vortexes!

Of course, the cultivation speed and efficiency of these average Bright Warrior mechs could not catch up to the performance of third order living mechs.

Second order living mechs actually possessed enough intelligence and sentience to practice a simple cultivation method on their own, but the chances of accidents and deviations were too great.

Ves found it a lot better and more reliable to let Goldie administer their cultivation in the background.

"Nyaaa nyaaa."

At this time, Goldie directed a small proportion of her attention on managing the cultivation of the mechs standing in front.

Even if the Lesser Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra was not as effective as the original version, Ves could still foresee that it would take a lot less time for the second order living mechs to promote to third order living mechs!

Along the way, all of these relatively ordinary machines that were destined not to receive too much care due to a lack of design capacity could finally take matters into their own hands!

Instead of waiting for their human owners to manually upgrade their frames, the living mechs could count on cultivation to gradually strengthen their properties over time!

It was the ideal way to handle large quantities of standard mechs!

The current form of cultivation was a combination between a qi, body and contract cultivation method.

The contract cultivation aspect played a crucial role to the second order living mechs as it encompassed the mechanisms responsible for allowing Goldie to automate their cultivation.

To put it in more general terms, the living mechs remained highly dependent on design spirit while they practiced this lesser cultivation method!

Ves had even applied deliberate changes to the Lesser Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra to make it a lot harder or impossible to progress without the active participation of a design spirit.

The Golden Cat also possessed the capacity to hasten a subject's cultivation progress by donating her own spiritual energy.

This would not only enable a second order living mechs to evolve faster, but also deepen its relationship and alignment with the Golden Cat!

Ves had implemented key cultivation processes of the Karma Liberation Sutra in order to keep better track of this kind of stuff.

In effect, at the same time the Golden Cat administered the cultivation of associated second order living mechs, she also engaged in a form of deity cultivation!

This was killing multiple birds with a single stone. Both sides benefited greatly from this mutual relationship. Goldie had already noticed how much more spiritual feedback she received from the Bright Warrior mechs that were cultivating under her direct supervision!

"It's brilliant, isn't it?" Ves grinned.

"Nyaaa nyaaa nyaaaa!"

The Golden Cat jumped onto Ves and nuzzled his cheek with her warm and loving head.

"Hahaha! Since this test has progressed so well, let's start spreading this out to the other mechs under your care. Another operation is coming up very soon, so our mechs could all use a boost."

"Nya!"

From now on, his second order living mechs no longer had to remain stuck this way unless they experienced legendary journeys.

Even if the living mechs and their assigned mech pilots never entered into real combat, the process of automated cultivation would ensure that the former would eventually be able to evolve on their own!

The effectiveness of the Lesser Larkinson Metal Guardian Cultivation Mantra and similar mech cultivation methods depended heavily on a number of key variables.

The strength of the design spirit played a factor. Those who were stronger and had access to a lot of spiritual feedback could spend a lot more effort into accelerating the cultivation of second order living mechs!

The concentration of ambient spiritual energy also affected the cultivation speed to a large degree. If a living mech ever had the fortune or misfortune to enter Messier 87, it would probably take weeks or days for a fresh machine to evolve into a third order living mech!

"Right now, a newly fabricated second order living mech should probably be able to cultivate into a third order living mech in 10 years or less under current circumstances."

His living mechs should be able to jump to third order a lot sooner in practice as they experienced a lot of growth through regular and intensive use.

In fact, many of the living mechs fielded by the Larkinson Army had already served for five years or longer. Each of them had already progressed so much that adding cultivation should enable them to reach third order within a matter of months!

The Larkinson Clan was about to welcome a lot of new third order living mechs this year!

This was a fantastic development. Third order living mechs cooperated a lot better with their mech pilots, enabling them to avoid lethal attacks more frequently and allowing them to defeat their opponents with greater ease.

More importantly than that, third order living mechs accelerated the spiritual development of their mech pilots. This meant that the latter had a higher likelihood of breaking through to the rank of expert candidate or expert pilot!

Finally, stronger and more intelligent living mechs also provided a lot more spiritual feedback of higher quality to design spirits.

The Golden Cat, the Illustrious One, Helena and many more spirits would be able to harvest a lot of valuable gains through deity cultivation once a lot of third order living mechs started to appear!

Once any living mech model entered into mass production and started to get sold by the millions, the associated design spirits were bound to earn extravagant rewards for the services they rendered!

More importantly, none of the parties involved in these processes suffered any setbacks. The mech, the mech pilot and the design spirit benefited in their own ways, ensuring that each of them had every reason to maintain their win-win-win relationship!

Ves felt excited beyond belief as he imagined all of these implications. His design flame burned brighter as he felt that all of the time and Ascension Points he spent on this work was about far more mutual growth than he had ever accomplished with his previous works!

Chapter 5076 Next Target

With the completion of a mech cultivation method that was effective for second order living mechs, Ves quickly worked to apply it to all of his other living mechs.

That effectively meant that he had to 'install' the cultivation method to all of their attached design spirits.

Ves had to repeat many of the same actions he performed on Goldie on the likes of the Solemn Guardian, Zeigra, Lufa and many other design spirits.

He gained a lot of proficiency with each successful 'installation attempt', enabling him to work faster and avoid time-consuming detours.

Soon enough, every design spirit could begin to administer the Lesser Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra to the second order living mechs under their supervision!

A new issue came up even as the automatic cultivation method began to spread across the expeditionary fleet and beyond.

"Why are you insisting that we restrict this new feature to the living mechs in use by our clan?" Helena asked after Veronica had loaded the new cultivation method in her spiritual body. "Our mother and I are connected to millions of living mechs in the service of the Hex Army. Many of them can become a lot more powerful in a relatively short amount of time if we begin to assist in their cultivation."

The cyborg cat shook her head. "Let's not get too hasty here. This is an experimental new feature. While I believe enough in my work to apply it to the mechs of our clan right away, it is not proper to introduce a powerful new feature that drastically changes the functionality of a product that we have already sold to my customers and clients. Stuff like this needs to undergo a lot more testing before it is acceptable to roll it out to the masses."

The Daughter of Death did not look convinced. "You just want to keep your own clan ahead of others."

"What's wrong with that?" Veronica shrugged. "I know that there are benefits to spreading out my latest advancements, but I would much prefer it if our clan can maintain its competitive edge. Besides, my work isn't actually complete. I need to develop variations of the Lesser Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra. As you can tell by its lengthy name, it is currently limited to the Larkinson Clan and largely focused on defense by leveraging the metal element. I need to develop more fitting methods for every broad category of mech model first. It is rather stupid for light skirmishers and rifleman mech to primarily focus on investing their energies into strengthening their paltry armor, which is their weakest trait. It is much more efficient to amplify their existing advantages."

That said, increasing the defenses of relatively fragile mechs was not entirely useless. The modestly greater capacity to resist damage might save their lives and the lives of their mech pilots one day!

"Can we at least extend your latest benefits to the mechs in the possession of the Hexers?" Helena requested. "I am sure it would make your wife ecstatic."

Veronica shook his head. "My wife can wait a little longer. I am not going to change my mind on this issue."

It just so happened that the expeditionary fleet was close to engaging in another battle against a raiding fleet.

The military leaders and planners of the Golden Skull Alliance had chosen their next target carefully based on external sources of information as well as first-hand intelligence gathered by scouts.



Once Ves settled the matter of installing the lesser mantra to all of his design spirits and making sure to keep it within the clan, he attended a briefing organized by Director Calabast and General Verle.

"The Red Two has pledged to multiply their rewards by up to 3 times to render an alien raiding fleet ineffective before it can successfully raid a human colony." General Verle explained to everybody. "This is an attractive incentive, but the difficulty of cornering an enemy fleet while it is engaging in warp travel is not small. We think it is worth it for us to make the attempt."

The central projection briefly showed the target star system. It displayed several symbols and lines that denoted the location of a vulnerable colony and the estimated trajectory of an incoming alien fleet in warp.

Calabast pointed at the fleet that was presumably in transit. "I won't elaborate too much on why it is so difficult to intercept a fleet that is traveling faster-than-light in realspace. There are ways to interrupt or catch up to this fleet. Just like before, we hope to covertly send out the Phobos and hope that he can catch up with the alien fleet while also remaining as unnoticeable as possible through complicated maneuvering."

The chances of success were not too high and the possibility that the Phobos would remain undetected throughout this ordeal were not hopeful.

However, as long as the Phobos successfully managed to get close and match pace with the hostile fleet in warp, it could begin to sabotage the warp drives of the alien warships, thereby making them vulnerable to interception!

"How high are the odds of success in your estimation?" Ves curiously asked.

"33 percent." Calabast responded.

"15 percent." General Verle replied.

Clearly, the two were not of the same mind.

"Those are fairly low odds. What if the Phobos fails?"

Calabast smirked. "Then we can still proceed as long as the Phobos has room for maneuver. Our expert stealth mech should have a good chance of sneaking up to the raiding fleet when it is in the process of attacking the colony on the surface of the nearby planet. So long as the alien warships are all stuck in stable orbit, it is not as challenging to get close to them. The greatest issue with this alternative approach is that the human colony will be razed by the time we can arrive."

The Larkinsons looked more regretful by the fact that they would be missing out on the huge bonuses than actually saving the lives of all of those trapped colonists.

Tragedies took place across the new frontier every day. The Larkinsons did not have the capacity to care for each awful incident. They could only pay attention to what was happening around them. Their agency was too limited to give them the luxury to care about the bigger picture.

Though Ves still found it rather uncertain to rely on the Phobos pulling off its mission in either scenario, it was as good of a plan as any. Any other approach had a much higher chance of driving the alien raiding fleet away before a battle could even commence!

The aliens weren't stupid. They shared information and learned the strengths of their opponents.

The Red Cabal and its underlings had no doubt compiled an extensive intelligence report on the human expeditionary fleet that had defeated the wheednar raiding fleet.

The same tricks might not work as effectively as before due to the enemy understanding the Larkinson Clan and its allies a lot better this time!

"Let's assume the Phobos succeeds. What next?" Ves questioned.

"We engage in battle." General Verle simply responded. "We have a number of adjustments to our mechs, their configurations and our tactics in the hopes of reducing our loss rate for this battle. Once our machines enter into effective combat range, they will have to fight against two different opponents."

The projection changed to show two different groupings of alien starships.

"The bulk of this raiding fleet is compromised of 113 warships of the yurzen race. This number is not small, but the majority of it consists of frigates and destroyers. The threat level of the warships of this minor race is roughly equivalent or a little better than the warships fielded by the wheednar race. There are major differences in tech, design style and effectiveness against different opponent types. Read the report if you want to learn the details. For now, you can assume that our standard mechs and our expert mechs are well-equipped to overcome their defenses and neutralize them ship by ship."

The Red Ocean was a dwarf galaxy that did not offer a lot of development space to the vast majority of native races.

This left them with little choice but to fall behind in terms of technological development and warship production.

There was no great reason to worry too much about the combat effectiveness of a typical minor race.

What did merit a lot of concern was the two minders that accompanied the yurzen warships in order to keep them in line.

Ves immediately recognized the iconic egg-shaped starships of a certain diminutive race.

"Those are puelmer warships."

"That is correct." General Verle grimly nodded. "There are two of them, and they are officially classified as heavy cruisers according to the rules set by our civilization. Don't underestimate them, though. The puelmers have mastered conventional technology the most in the Red Ocean, and their warships can inflict a lot of damage for their sizes."

The general design approach and ship doctrine of the puelmer race favored the construction of smaller but considerably higher quality warships.

Despite the fact that the puelmers rarely constructed battleships, each of their sub-capital heavy cruisers had the potential to pack as much firepower as a ship that was twice or thrice as massive!

"How powerful are these puelmer heavy cruisers compared to the orven battleship that we last defeated?"

"From the information that we have gathered, these puelmer heavy cruisers are considerably more modern, although they have presumably missed out on the latest waves of upgrades that comprise of stolen human tech. Their defenses shouldn't be as resilient due to their limited volume, but their firepower can closely match that of the orven battleship, at least of the first few hours."

Different images of the puelmer warships in question appeared on the central projection. They each gave the Larkinsons a better look and feel of these alien vessels.

If the Golden Skull Alliance had to fight a single puelmer heavy cruiser, then Ves had little reasons to feel concerned. The combined might of three different ace mechs should be more than enough to keep the alien vessel contained and grind down her defenses!

Yet this was not the case. There were two puelmer warships, and both of them should easily be able to support each other in good time!

"What sort of weapon arsenal do these warships have?"

"They have three main weapon systems that can inflict considerable damage to our assets when they can fully exert their firepower." General Verle answered. "Their primary transphasic positron cannon batteries have fairly long range and are known to be highly accurate. They also have a limited number of missile launchers that can let loose potentially devastating missiles and torpedoes. They also boast a large array of secondary laser cannon batteries that are known to be even more precise at long range, and can fire at considerably faster rates. They can easily shred hundreds if not thousands of mechs."

Ves was feeling less certain about whether it was a good idea to confront this raiding fleet!

"Then how do you intend to contain both of them?" He asked.

"We are hoping that the Phobos can sabotage their power reactors and other critical systems. The smaller sizes of the puelmer warships means that it is considerably easier to reduce their combat effectiveness by tampering with their parts." Calabast said.

General Verle nodded in agreement. "If we are lucky enough to weaken them considerably, then we can engage this pair of partially crippled puelmer warships without as many concerns. In the best case scenario, the Macharia Excelsia, the Jedda Sandivar and the Royal Jeem can handle both of them without requiring any assistance. In the more likelier scenarios, our forces may need to take action as well. We think it is best to hit one or both of these warships with battle formation attacks."

That intrigued Ves a lot. "I can see the logic in that. Assuming that the formations of Valkyrie mechs can get close enough without getting shredded apart, their death energy waves should be able to threaten the puelmer crew members considerably."

If it was possible to roll up these two threatening warships in a single go, then the rest of the alien raiding fleet should be a lot easier to roll up afterwards!

"The puelmers might see us coming, sir. We cannot pin all of our hopes on this stratagem." General Verle emphasized. "One of the trickier aspects about this race is that they are highly adept with technology. They like to constantly upgrade and modify their individual homeships and mount all sorts of odd and unusual advanced tech into them. This makes them a lot more valuable from a

salvage and research standpoint. The chances are high that we may be able to get our hands on the puelmer version of high technology if we can capture their two heavy cruisers in reasonably intact conditions. Defeating them will also earn us a considerably greater sum of MTA merits."

This was different from capturing the orven battleship last time. That old vessel contained little truly valuable tech and materials that she was ultimately not that rewarding to conquer.

The puelmers on the other hand put a lot more effort into keeping all of their existing warships up to date.

The two puelmer heavy cruisers definitely posed a greater threat than usual for that reason, but the gains that the Golden Skull Alliance could make from them were much greater as well!

Ves saw real hope of getting his hands on actual alien high technology this time!

#### Chapter 5077 Puelmer R&D

The upcoming interception mission was of great importance to the Golden Skull Alliance.

The previous victory against the wheednar raiding fleet demonstrated that the expanded pioneering alliance possessed the capacity to fight against alien forces and earn a considerable amount of profit in the process.

While Ves and numerous other leaders yearned to hunt down a phase lord and get their hands on a Warship Token, there was no way for them to track down an elusive alien warlord like the Eminence of Torment for the time being.

Targeting the yurzen raiding fleet was a step up as it was accompanied by a pair of puelmer heavy cruisers.

Every major alien race of the Red Ocean possessed their own strong points. Even a relatively mediocre alien race like the orvens managed to climb on top of many others and carve a solid place in their own dwarf galaxy.

The puelmers were perhaps the most secularist among the thirteen major races. These odd-looking ball-like aliens possessed drastically different mindsets and behavioral patterns than many other races.

Their lack of culture, their high propensity towards resentment and their strong preference to rely on strong technology to overcome their physical weaknesses caused them to embrace pure technology a lot more than other races.

The puelmers not only had a reputation for mastering the most advanced conventional technologies among the major alien races, but also took charge of assimilating stolen human tech!

The Red Cabal and its growing coalition could never have resisted the MTA and CFA's warfleets so well if not for the abnormally high learning ability of the puelmer race!

The high technological aptitude of the puelmers stood out so much that it did not really matter that few of them even showed deference to the native gods.

Their relatively small, weak and unconventional physiques made it almost impossible for them to become phase lords.

Their rejection and disdain towards biotechnology did not help matters either!

In fact, red humanity could not even find out whether the puelmers had any phase lords among them. Perhaps a few hidden deviants might exist in a different corner of the dwarf galaxy, but the puelmers clearly did not like to publicize their existences.

Almost every puelmer of decent status was a scientist or an engineer. Not many puelmers chose to become anything else, but it did not matter that much as they relied on a high degree of automation to take care of menial and repetitive work.

A puelmer homeship was pretty much a warship, an engineering workshop and a scientific laboratory all rolled up in a single package!

It reminded Ves of the multipurpose MTA research battlecarriers like the Antazella de Osiris. Each of these vessels accommodated so many different purposes that they did not excel in any single area.

In most combat scenarios, this was a disadvantage. How could allocating space and resources to R&D activities help a warship out in battle?

The puelmers were clever enough to understand the pros and cons, but proceeded to turn their homeships into mixed vessels anyway.

This was because they made it work. Every crew of puelmers possessed a lot of R&D capabilities, so every puelmer homeship could not only serve as a warship, but also a testbed for new and experimental technologies!

The puelmers built a lot of vessels like this. With so many homeships conducting their own research and development projects, it was logical for their race to master so many different technologies.

Now, two of those puelmer 'science vessels' suddenly came within reach of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Even if these alien ships did not contain any truly valuable research, its databases and successful research applications were bound to possess a lot of value!

As long as the Phobos succeeded in his mission of immobilizing one or both puelmer heavy cruisers, Ves might potentially get his hands on exotic alien technologies or more advanced transphasic technological applications.

Shortly before the Phobos was about to board a modern superdrive-equipped stealth frigate that was built and crewed by DIVA operatives, Ves prepared a series of extra measures in order to increase the success rate of this latest gamble.

"Venerable Zimro." Ves greeted as he and Lucky approached the expert pilot.

The Phobos looked as impressive as ever as he was undergoing a final inspection before being shipped over to the Hidden Smile.

"Sir." The expert bowed his head and respectfully greeted the patriarch.

Ves felt gratified at Zimro's display of deference.

Expert pilots had a tendency to get a little too full of themselves as they grew stronger. It happened to lots of people such as Venerable Jannzi, Patriarch Reginald Cross and even his uncle Ark.

This was a common human weakness. Expert pilots were known to be the most stubborn people around, so trying to restrain them was mostly an exercise in futility.

Ves developed a greater appreciation for more obedient and deferential expert pilots for that reason.

He knew that he could count on more mellow expert pilots such as Venerable Tusa, Venerable Joshua and Venerable Zimro to stick with him for the long haul. These pilots felt a lot of personal gratitude to him and appreciated the structure that their friend and patriarch had built.

Zimro especially did not hesitate to show that he was willing to obey Ves above everyone else in the clan.

"Your upcoming mission is important to me." Ves softly spoke. "In order to help you along, I've prepared a few additional measures to increase your success rate."

He did not like the low odds given by General Verle and Director Calabast. If he wanted to get his hands on at least puelmer homeship, then he needed to manipulate odds and stack the deck in his favor as much as possible!

"What have you prepared, sir?" The expert pilot asked in response.

Ves smirked and held up a certain gem cat. "First, Lucky will be going on a trip with you. It has been a long time since his last excursion. Since we're dealing with two fairly powerful alien vessels this time, I think it is a good idea to let Lucky infiltrate one of them and wreak havoc over there while you terrorize the other one. That way, if the puelmers happen to respond quickly and quickly activate their transphasic shields, the two of you should still be able to disable the warp drives of both vessels."

One of the key variables that affected the success rate and the complications of the upcoming operation was whether they could immobilize both puelmer warships.

If one of them managed to retain the ability to travel in warp, then that vessel would become several times harder to defeat!

The possibility of this happening was not small. It depended on how quickly they were being attacked by the special human stealth mech that previously managed to defeat the wheednar raiding fleet.

As Ves and Zimro talked about how to incorporate Lucky in the stealth operation, the gem cat in question looked confused.

"Meow?"

Ves shoved the cat into Zimro's arms.

"No complaints, Lucky. You haven't visited the bathroom in a long time. I think a live deployment might serve as a great way to exercise your body and increase the efficiency of your digestion system."

"Meow meow? MEOW!"

Ves shook his head. "Oh no you're not. You need to earn your keep, buddy. If you can't do that by doing the job you are supposed to perform, then you can only fall back on your side gig as our secret agent."

"Meeeeeeeeooooooooow!"

The lazy cat clearly did not enjoy the prospect of getting dumped onto a hostile warship that was filled with enemies!

What was worse was that Lucky could not count on any nearby friendlies in an infiltration mission like this. He would have to fend for himself aboard an enemy starship for an extended period of time, or eject himself into open space and drift in the dark for many days unless he managed to get picked up by the Phobos or the Hidden Smile.

Ves frowned. "Don't complain. I have even prepared a gift for you in order to increase your odds of remaining hidden."

He turned around and grabbed a floating container before opening it up to reveal an updated version of a cat-shaped infiltrator suit!

"Looks familiar, doesn't it? I've taken the liberty of upgrading your Misfortune Harness. The Mark VI edition retains its miniature stealth generator, but I've upgraded its second-class stealth materials with first-class equivalents. I have also upgraded all of the electronic systems, so its communications, scanning, data storage, hacking and decryption systems have undergone massive improvements while occupying less space. I have already spoken to the DIVA virtual security experts to prepare a hacking suite that is specifically programmed to hack into puelmer computer systems."

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky squirmed in Zirmo's arms as if he had little faith in the latest version of the Misfortune Harness.

Even a gem cat like himself had heard many rumors of the advanced technological prowess of the puelmer race!

Their most advanced warships were rumored to be able to give the CFA's battleships a run for their money.

A race that mastered technology to such an extent definitely developed a lot of powerful detection methods as well!

"Hey, don't underestimate my work, Lucky. I've taken advantage of the Unending alloy layer of your equipment to increase its stealth capabilities in a more metaphysical fashion. Look."

Ves triggered a spiritual switch in the Misfortune Harness that caused him and others to find it a lot harder to take notice of its existence and presence!

This was rather odd as the Misfortune Harness was definitely a piece of equipment that people would not be able to miss. Its appearance was just too odd and exotic.

"Meow?"

"That... feels familiar." Venerable Zimro said as he tried to feel out the cat suit with his force of will.

Ves smirked. "I have studied how the Path of the Hidden Stalker causes your Phobos to become a lot less noticeable through metaphysical means. While I have no way of copying the Ascension

Runes responsible for making it work, I have learned a lot about spiritual engineering and especially how to take advantage of E energy radiation. I worked together with Kalo to replicate simplified versions of some of its more obvious mechanisms. The result is that this Misfortune Harness has obtained a part of the power of the Hidden Stalker. It can maintain this state for quite a while by slowly using up the shadow energy that it has already drawn from the environment."

"Hisssss."

A ghostly chameleon slowly morphed into view. No one knew whether the design spirit had showed earlier because his camouflaging ability was so good that he could perfectly blend into the environment!

Venerable Zimro smiled and reached out to caress the spiritual manifestation of the spiritual chameleon.

"Both of us will depend on you to keep hidden from the puelmers."

"Hissss hissss..."

It was essential for Larkinson mech pilots to develop good relationships with the design spirits they cooperated with. Venerable Zimro clearly managed to develop an accord with Kalo.

The Ghost Chameleon soon retreated and blended into the background.

"I am not sure how long the Misfortune Harness can keep up its Hidden Stalker state." Ves warned his cat. "The amount of shadow energy that the Unending alloy can hold is not too much. I advise you to make use of this feature in order to evade imminent detection."

"Meow meow meow?"

"Theoretically, that is possible, but think about what will happen. As soon as your Misfortune Harness starts to absorb ambient shadow energy from the environment, it will form an energy vortex around it. What if the puelmers are somehow sensitive to that? What if they possess advanced tech that can detect such fluctuations? It's too risky. I will try to develop a solution for this in the future, but for now its full stealth capacity is limited."

"Meow..."

## Chapter 5078 Mech And Mech Pilot Relationships

Aside from upgrading Lucky's equipment, Ves had also prepared a handful of quick upgrades and additions to the Phobos.

He quickly briefed Venerable Zimro on the new toys that he would get to play with on his upcoming deployment. A few pieces of equipment that Ves prepared for this mission sounded rather dubious to the expert pilot, but they were better than nothing.

"Good luck, Zimro." Ves said as he reached out and patted the expert pilot's shoulder. "Just do your best, but prioritize your continued safety above everything else. It is not essential for you to catch up with the yurzen raiding fleet while it is still en route. At most, we'll corner it after it has stopped in orbit of a planet."

The former intelligence operative firmly shook his head. "The Phobos and I will not let that happen if we can help it. An entire human colony is at risk. If we cannot stop this fleet in time, the yurzens and the puelmers will slaughter the colonists who haven't been able to evacuate. I am aware that



saving the lives of these colonists is not a part of our core mission, but... I want to try and save them all. Our humanity is important. It keeps us sane and connected to our fellow humans. If we start disregarding the lives of others, we risk losing control."

The man sounded similar to a few other people that Ves talked to, but Zimro had personal experience in this matter. The times he spent while remaining exiled from his state and stuck in the Nyxian Gap had tested his integrity. He could have easily degenerated into a heartless pirate if he did not maintain his original values.

His honor and integrity was his strength. It was highly unusual for stealth mech pilots to possess so much decency, and Ves did not wish to suppress these character traits in the name of expediency.

However, that did not mean he was obliged to follow suit.

"The lives of our clansmen come first. Don't forget that, Zimro." He reminded the other man. "We are not that powerful, and we can only bear a limited amount of responsibility. Situations will arise today and in the future where we may fail to save humans from destruction. Don't beat yourself up to it. Get stronger instead. The more powerful you become, the more you can challenge the aliens that pose an existential threat to all of red humanity. As long as you are able to increase your resonance strength and learn how to hide your presence a lot better, We can use you and your expert mech to break open the defenses of more heavily defended alien fleets and strongholds. We can stop the alien offensives before they have time to ravage human space."

His words had a good effect on the expert pilot. Zimro Belson's fighting intent rose higher as he thought of how much more he could do when he and his expert mech grew stronger.

The Phobos had already proven his capacity to complete vital missions that other mechs would never be able to fulfill.

Even strong ace mechs such as the Jedda Sandivar and the Macharia Excelsia had little hope of disabling the warp drives of alien warships because they were far too easy to detect from a distance.

So long as the aliens noticed any human mech or starship on approach, they would instantly raise their defenses and implement countermeasures.

Fortunately, red humanity had begun to equip their carrier vessels with warp drives and superdrives at an increasing rate. The only problem was that the supply of phasewater was still too constrained to give every vessel the ability to engage in warp travel.

Once the Hidden Smile quietly separated from the main fleet and traveled to the mission location in advance, Ves knew he only had a limited amount of time to push through any upgrades in the short term.

The good news was that he had already managed to deploy the most critical upgrades to his mech legions.

The spread of both the Lesser and Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra had caused every living mech in the clan to become invigorated!

So many energy vortices appeared on every carrier and ship that the simultaneous cultivation of over 10,000 Larkinson mechs significantly disrupted the pattern of ambient spiritual energy around their fleet!

The availability of metal energy had become particularly problematic due to the sheer quantity of mechs sucking it away from the environment!

Ves did not foresee this problem at the start. It was quite detrimental to the collective cultivation of his living mechs if they all fought to grab the same shared resource!

It became even more important for him to diversify the cultivation methods for mechs and have them focus on absorbing other available energies instead.

"It's not that easy, however." He frowned.

The current cultivation method retained a high defensive focus due to being based on the Atmer Guardian Mantra.

If he wanted to implement more drastic changes, then he needed to start a long process of trial and error.

The only other way for him to resolve this problem was to acquire a lot of relevant cultivation knowledge, but that was not possible in the short term.

Ves had little choice but to set this matter aside and focus on completing other useful research.

He decided to go back to developing a viable dual cultivation method for his Carmine mechs and their bonded pilots.

Even though his clan only featured two Carmine mechs at the moment, both of them possessed a lot of importance to Ves.

The Bastion was the most powerful defensive mech of the Larkinson while the Blood Star literally kept his grandfather alive.

Their potential was also great, especially once they derived greater benefits from the Blood Pact.

In order to speed up the development of the two Carmine mechs and their pilots, Ves especially exchanged the Eternal Love Dual Cultivation Manual from the System.

Much of the contents of this enlightenment fruit were... unorthodox.

Ves would rather never know about all of the extreme measures the cultivators of this method were willing to embrace in order to attain greater strength.

Still, as long as Ves set aside the aspects that he objected to and focused solely on the more functional knowledge of this cultivation method, he managed to find a surprising amount of parallels with his own work.

Just like the Blood Pact, the Eternal Love Method depended heavily on the power of blood and affection.

Blood bonded the two cultivators together on a physical level.

Affection ensured the two parties were able to synchronize with each other on a mental and spiritual level.

A dual cultivation method did not have to satisfy the former requirement in order to become effective.

However, whoever came up with the Eternal Love Method discovered that there were additional ways to increase the effectiveness of dual cultivation if the two practitioners shared the same blood.

Bloodline was a big deal in the cultivation scene. There was lots of stuff that people of the same family could share with each other.

The Eternal Love Method sought to increase the yield of dual cultivation by bringing the two parties a lot closer together than normal.

The downside was that the consequences of breaking up a relationship became a lot more serious, but as long as the practitioners remained together, they could develop an unprecedented degree of shared power!

It reminded Ves a lot of the Gemini Family's so-called Destiny Teams.

He even suspected that the founders and ancestors of the Geminis based their unorthodox family practices around the Eternal Love Dual Cultivation Method in the past!

Whether this was true or not, the examples set by the Gemini Family clearly proved that the overall concept was sound.

Ves just needed to translate a dual cultivation method that was originally designed for a pair of humans into a form that was suitable between a human and a mech.

The work was not particularly difficult, but he had to spend a lot of effort and thinking power into developing altered cultivation processes.

"The key property that binds the two practitioners of the original method together is love." Ves determined while stroking his hairless chin. "Should I preserve this aspect in my modified dual cultivation method or is it better to change it to a different emotion?"

Ves decided to interview the only two pilots bonded with a Carmine mech in order to make up his mind.

"I don't love the Bastion like that." Venerable Jannzi shook her head. "I am already married with a man. It is not appropriate to share the same kind of affection towards anyone else, particularly a mech. It is absurd to think about marrying my mech and finding a way to have kids with her. Just the suggestion that I would be interested in such is insulting."

"I am just asking, Jannzi! Don't think too deeply about what I have just said. How would you best describe your relationship with your expert mech, both your old and new one?"

The female expert pilot adopted a wistful expression. "The Shield of Samar was my partner in crime, my best friend and the partner who always had my back, even to the very end. My relationship with the Bastion is slightly different, but she is just as important to me. It is difficult for me to choose who I love more, my family or my expert mech. I really don't want to choose between them. They are all precious to me. My life wouldn't be complete without their presence."

Ves looked intrigued. This was an interesting response.

"Do you consider the Bastion to be more of a friend or a close family relative?"

"I... don't know. Sammie was much more of a best friend to me, but my relationship with the Bastion has become a lot closer because we share the same blood. The Carmine System does stuff to us that makes us feel that we are part of the same family. I even have the idea that if we keep doing this for several years, we may start to blend with each other. It will become a lot harder to distinguish between me and my expert mech."

"Are you concerned about the consequences of deepening your relationship with the Bastion?" Ves asked.

Venerable Jannzi shook her head. "No. We know what ace pilots and ace mechs have to go through in order to take the next step. I am aware that it will still take many years before I can become an ace pilot. It will take even more years before I reach my limit as a senior ace pilot. Many accidents can happen along the way that can stop me from going any further. However... a pilot is allowed to dream, right? What if I reach that threshold? Since I will have to merge myself with my mech at that time, I do not have much of an objection if I can complete this vital step in advance. If the Blood Pact can truly make this happen... then doesn't that mean I can harness some of the power of a god pilot far in advance?"

"I don't think it works that way." Ves responded as he tried to depress Jannzi's expectations. "The reasons why god pilots and god mechs are so ridiculously powerful is not just because they have merged together. That is just a facilitating reason. Their real basis of strength is their highly developed willpower. This is the root of their legendary combat power."

"Shouldn't your work on upgrading the Blood Pact focus on strengthening that, then? Is it possible for a living mech to develop willpower as well?"

Ves blinked.

He never thought about that. Although Jannzi's latest suggestion sounded ridiculous, it might be possible to make it happen!

Still, the difficulty was not small. This idea sounded so counterintuitive that he was tempted to dismiss it right away!

Yet... Ves couldn't completely get rid of it. Perhaps it was not possible to make it happen through conventional means, but what if he took advantage of the Blood Pact to transfer a part of Jannzi's strength to the Bastion? Would that work?

The idea sounded interesting enough for Ves to investigate further!

#### Chapter 5079 The Importance Of Life Quality

Ves had witnessed examples in the past where two strong sources of willpower joined forces and combined their strengths.

The Embodiment of Love and Sacrifice piloted by Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini produced extremely impressive results during Operation Lighthouse.

The two ace mechs were not only able to merge physically with each other, but also seamlessly blended their Saint Kingdoms.

The result was an amalgamation that allowed the two junior ace pilots to exert much of the effective combat power of a senior ace pilot!

The synergy that Saint Sandro and Saint Kaia demonstrated at the time had made a powerful impact on Ves.

The Geminis successfully developed an approach where they could combine several weaker assets in order to produce results that they should not be able to pull off in theory!

The combination between the Embodiment of Love and the Embodiment of Sacrifice easily possessed the effective combat power of three ace mechs!

It was as if the Gemini Family obtained an entire ace mech for free!

Of course, this was a bit of an exaggeration. Saint Sandro and Saint Kaia had to endure additional strain and other burdens in order to maintain their merged state. They expended their resources a lot faster as well as they could not keep their heightened intensity for a long period of time.

"It's still a powerful advantage!"

Ves dreamt of replicating this powerful form of synergy.

The problem was that even if he managed to get his hands on a suitable dual cultivation method, he did not want to turn his Larkinson Clan into a mirror of the Gemini Family!

He would rather slit his throat than command the close relatives among his mech pilots to marry each other!

This was why he started to build up an expectation towards making a living mech develop willpower as well.

First he had to find out whether it was even possible.

Ves only had access to only a single instance of an entity other than a human developing extraordinary willpower.

Even then, he wasn't even sure whether she could be classified as a human due to the nature of her existence.

He met with Ketis in her own design lab. The swordmaster was in the middle of tinkering with the configuration of the Storm Sword Project when his arrival interrupted her work.

"What's up, Ves?"

"Can I take a look at Sharpie? I am currently engaged in research related to willpower, so I need to take a good look at your companion spirit in order to figure out how she is able to form her own force of will."

Ketis looked skeptical at his request, but she obliged anyway.

The Bloodsinger floated into her arms. She drew out her personal greatsword and called out her companion spirit.

"Sharp! Sharp! Heaven! Heaven!" A cute and squeaky voice called as Sharpie dove out of the impressive weapon!

Ves observed the Bloodsinger for a few minutes. He could not help but notice that Ketis had essentially engaged in a form of artifact cultivation all this time.

Her greatsword had undergone years of slight willpower baptism, causing it to grow stronger, sharper and more extraordinary.

Ever since the Age of Dawn had begun, Ketis had been able to accelerate the Bloodsinger's transformation by making use of a part of the ambient spiritual energy in the environment!

What interested Ves quite a bit was that the processes utilized by Ketis and her companion spirit did not appear to be as primitive and rudimentary as other self-developed cultivation methods.

It resembled a more mature and structural cultivation method developed by cultivation organizations with long inheritances!

Ves immediately formed a guess.

"Ketis... has traditional swordsmanship become a lot more powerful now that we are all bathing in the light of Messier 87?"

"Heaven! Heaven!" Sharpie enthusiastically nodded.

Ketis smirked. "You're not the only one here who has access to secret knowledge. While I don't have access to the best swordmasters or the extensive libraries located in the Heavensword Association, our fleet has recruited a lot of people from that state. They have learned a lot of old traditions that turned out to be surprisingly useful in this new age. We also have access to a modest virtual library that contains a lot of textbooks, some of which have been written so long ago that we don't know the exact dates. Their contents had never been taken seriously by the Heavensworders because it was all nonsense, but now that E energy radiation has become available, that is no longer the case."

She elaborated a bit on what the Heavensworders had discovered. Their sword styles and traditional methods had become a lot more effective now that their conditions have changed.

"Now that traditional swordsmanship has reconnected to exotic radiation, many ancient and traditional training methods and sword styles have gone through a revival. Our swordsmen and swordwomen are progressing faster than before, and it has also become a lot easier for them to execute extraordinary sword techniques."

"Have their chances of breaking through increased as well, Ketis?"

"I think so. I expect more swordmasters to arise from our ranks fairly soon." Ketis said with a touch of satisfaction. "They won't be able to make much of a difference in the battles that we are typically engaged in, but you never know. If any of them have the opportunity to become sword saints in the future, then their ability to fight against larger opponents will not be small."

There was no way that sword saints could defeat an ace mech.

Ves wasn't sure about other types of opponents.

"Can a sword saint defeat an expert mech?" He curiously asked.

"That is difficult to say." Ketis said in a more cautious tone. "It depends on a lot of different factors. They need a really good sword and possibly a suit of combat armor. I can take care of that, but even then I imagine it will be difficult for sword saints to defeat an expert mech, let alone catch up with one. The difference in scale and equipment means that sword saints can't possibly move as fast as a mech equipped with a transphasic flight system."

That was understandable. Even if a sword saint possessed the same quality of extraordinary willpower as an ace pilot, the difference in equipment made a huge difference!

If having a good sword and suit of combat armor produced an amplification factor of 10, then a good mech like the Mars produced an amplification factor of too or even 1000!

Perhaps there might be ways to enrich the loadout of a swordmaster and a sword saint to the point where they could put up a decent fight against mechs or warships, but what was the point?

A powerful enough mech could do the same job a lot more effectively!

Even Ketis, who had assumed the role of the patron of traditional swordsmanship in the Red Ocean, could not deny the relative weaknesses of her own warrior profession.

"I think it is still worthwhile for our clan to support and encourage the swordmasters that will emerge in the future." Ketis told him. "They only require a fraction of the resources and attention that we spend on our expert pilots. They can keep themselves busy and make themselves useful by themselves. The battles against alien fleets are giving them plenty of opportunities to test their mettle in real combat."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I don't mind that. I don't think that swordmasters are useless. They can serve as excellent bodyguards, especially in cases where it is not possible to bring any escort mechs along. If any of them are open to serving as honor guards for myself or other important clan figures, then they are free to apply."

"I will pass that on." Ketis smiled.

She supported any initiative that made swordmasters more useful and relevant to the clan. Despite all of the new dangers that Messier 87 introduced, she felt grateful for being able to experience this promising new age.

Their discussion soon turned back to the original topic.

Ketis had strong ideas about what Ves was trying to accomplish.

"I do not think that your premise has any chance of working." The swordmaster stated and jerked her head at Sharpie. "Look at her. Do you think she is human like myself or something else like a mech?"

"Heaven! Heaven?"

Ves peered closely at Sharpie. She used to look like a spiritual sword, but now turned into a miniature version of Ketis.

She exuded a strong force of will that possessed an unquestionably human flavor.

According to his own theories, companion spirits weren't necessarily separate life forms from their human principles. They were more akin to split personalities that received a major autonomy upgrade.

"I think... Sharpie is you." Ves told Ketis. "I don't think your companion spirit is complete if she doesn't have access to your memories, your knowledge and so on. She may be able to form her own thoughts and emotions, but that does not separate her completely from you. Her willpower is your

willpower. That is why you are seamlessly able to harness it and leverage it despite already becoming a Journeyman Mech Designer."

"That's right. This is why I think your idea is unlikely to work. Look, I don't deny that your living mechs can become extremely clever and strong-willed. What I am saying is that they are not in a good position to push their willpower beyond the limit. Situations like that only arise when people who care a lot about stuff and have developed strong opinions are put under enormous pressure."

He started to understand where Ketis was going with this argument. "Are you saying that life quality is an important variable?"

She nodded. "It makes a lot of sense for humans who have lived for at least two or three decades to have plenty of reasons to yearn for greater strength and break through as a consequence. How old are our mechs? Most of them are only seven years or younger! They are like children compared to us! Even if they grow older, will they truly be able to develop the depth of life and the complexity of relationships to have something to fight for on their own? I'm not too sure about that. They just aren't as complete as humans in these areas."

"What if they borrow the help from their mech pilots?" Ves suggested. "What if they can leverage the extraordinary willpower of their pilots to facilitate their own breakthroughs?"

Ketis firmly shook her head. "That will never work. The strength of someone's willpower is a reflection of that person's desire to obtain the power to change his or her destiny. Putting too much stock in a partner is a sign of weakness. It is counterproductive to expect a living mech to produce strong willpower when it is depending so much on the pilot."

"Sharp! Sharp!" Her companion spirit echoed.

"I see. I think you are right. It is highly unlikely for living mechs to become willpower cultivators themselves." Ves regretfully concluded. "They are similar to clones in that sense. They can pass off as humans on the surface, but they possess severe deficiencies that make them inferior."

Ves had no choice but to drop this radical idea. It was too impractical to work under the present circumstances. He might have reason to revisit it if he had access to better resources and more extensive knowledge, but that sounded unlikely.

Just as he was about to say goodbye and leave, Ketis made one more suggestion.

"Wait, Ves." She called. "Have you ever thought about finding ways to leverage the companion spirits of our expert pilots?" "Hmm?"

She gripped the Bloodsinger again and sent Sharpie back inside.

The sword exuded a lot more power and sharpness now that it was reinforced by a companion spirit!

"Now that Venerable Dise and all of our other expert pilots have their own companion spirits, they have been looking into ways to make them useful in combat. The pilots have produced limited results, but I think they can do a lot better if they have a little more help from someone who knows what he is doing. Why don't you try and expand upon that instead?"

His eyes suddenly lit up. "You're right! Why didn't I think of that sooner?!"



He immediately thought of an iconic example of how a companion spirit could massively amplify the combat effectiveness of a mech.

The Destroyer of Worlds could not have become the most destructive god pilot without the help of Emma!

Chapter 5080 Redlance

"Hihihi!"

Marvaine swam in a colorful tropical-themed swimming pool. A few brightly colored yellow toy ducks surrounded him from multiple directions and teasingly led him along the shallowest portion of the pool.

"Quack quack quack."

"Quack quack!"

"I got you!" Marvaine said as he made a small leap and managed to catch the smallest and cutest little duck!

Further away, Aurelia who wore a frilly pink bathing suit swam forward while being followed by an army of wet but enthusiastic cats.

Her companion spirit Mana floated just in front of the soaking felines and continually encouraged them to persist!

"Mew mew mew!"

"Muaaa. Muaaa."

"Yiaowyiaow."

Meanwhile, Andraste who wore a plainer black bathing suit was climbing the stairway that led to the highest diving board.

Yet before she could go any further, a certain Rubarthan Sentinel Cat jumped in front of her and made warning noises.

"Miaow! Miaow!"

"Awww, come on, Clixie. I'm a tough girl! I can handle this height!"

"Miaow!" Clixie swiped the air with her claws in an intimidating fashion.

The red-headed girl's face drooped. "Alright. I won't go further. Sheesh!"

Andraste soon walked along the second-highest diving board before proceeding to jump and performing a clumsy spinning dive!

"Wheeeee!"

Clixie tumbled into the air right after the little girl!

"Miaaaaaaaaow!"

As the children laughed and the cats meowed like cats, Ves and Gloriana laid on the benches positioned a short distance away from the pool.

Although another battle was on the horizon, Ves and Gloriana wanted to relax and take their children on a small excursion.

This was why they decided to pay another visit to the Vivacious Wai and visit one of the recently built swimming pools in Dawn City.

Of course, even if they had taken their children out to enjoy a day of fun, the two mech designers couldn't get rid of their workaholic tendencies.

Each of them sat in front of projected design suites and calmly tinkered with their own mech designs.

Ves was in the process of finalizing the Eye Project. It should have been completed weeks or months ago, but all of the recent changes in circumstances compelled him to rethink his work a bit and incorporate a few new additions.

The commercial marksman mech still retained its basic premise. Its connection to Vulcan granted the mech pilot a better understanding of the target's weak points, key components and other useful technical information.

What changed was how extensively the Eye Project provided detailed information.

It no longer gave its mech pilots a few obvious nudges. Instead, it was capable of supplying rich information, as much as the mech pilots were willing and able to absorb!

The more Vulcan familiarized himself with a particular mech model, starship class or alien tech base, the greater the details that he was able to provide!

The delivery mechanisms were also important. Previously, the Eye Project was only able to impart information directly into the mech pilot's mind through the man-machine connection.

While Ves still retained this delivery method as it was fast and efficient, he also added an option to enable the Eye Project to translate its own findings into a digital format.

This was a considerable expansion in functionality!

This effectively meant that the Eye Project could serve as an observer or a scout for a larger mech unit.

Even adding a single copy of this rifleman mech was enough to grant an entire mech force fairly detailed information about the technical strengths and weaknesses of their opponents!

If that was not enough, Ves also imparted the Eye Project with its own cultivation method!

Given the worsening prospects of red humanity, Ves chose to stop holding back a bit and expanded the functionality of the Eye Project.

He developed a simplified edition of the Lesser Larkinson Guardian Mantra with the intention of pairing it with a commercial mech that he expected to sell quite well in the following years.

The Minor Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra was not as fast and efficient as the Lesser edition. Its lower intensity meant that it was stabler and easier, making it a lot less strenuous for design spirits to manage the cultivation of so many living mechs.

Ves also tweaked the deity cultivation component of this simplified mantra to favor his design spirits a little more.

Every living mech that cultivated the Minor Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra supplied up to 50 percent more spiritual feedback to any connected design spirits than the other editions!

This would definitely slow down the cultivation progress of the Eye Project and his future commercial mech models even further, but Ves knew the importance of differentiation.

Only when there was room for more premium offerings would Ves be able to profit from designing more high-end mechs that offered better cultivation performance for vastly inflated prices!

Aside from that, Ves did not want his Larkinson Army to get upstaged by rival mech forces. The Larkinson Clan earned much of its fame and prestige due to the demonstrated strength of its exclusive mechs.

If hundreds of other mech forces were able to smash alien fleets with just as much ease as the Larkinson Army, then the latter would no longer be able to earn as much renown anymore!

As Ves put the finishing touches on his cultivation-enhanced Eye Project, Gloriana briefly uttered a small sound of surprise.

"What is it, honey?"

"Dulo Voiken and Juliet Stameross have just completed their first live testing sessions of their recently completed Woodpecker Project. The performance of their work has slightly exceeded their expectations! Let me pass on the footage they just uploaded to our internal database."

A new projection appeared that showed several gunmetal gray lancer mechs charging towards a thick and suspended plate of salvaged transphasic hull plating.

The mechs shared a decent resemblance to the Transcendent Chargers, but featured a more modern and slightly flexible construction.

Their acceleration was respectable but not too noteworthy among their mech archetype. This was because Dulo and Juliet solely treated the Woodpecker Project as a second-class mech.

The only aspect that did not fit the pattern was its weapon!

Each lancer mech held exceptionally long blast lances that were tipped with red. The bulbous appearance of these lance tips made it clear that they were anything but typical!

As the lancer mechs accelerated closer, they eventually thrust their lances against the thick metal plate with great force!

Normally, the suspended hull plating should be too thick for the lancer mechs to do anything more than drill a small hole on the surface, but the actual outcome was much different this time!

The lance not only pierced deeper into the salvaged starship plating, but its red tip also exploded almost instantly afterwards, causing it to generate an internal rupture that left behind a decently sized crater!

The other mechs that arrived in sequence repeated this action and drove their red-tipped lances into the same point, causing this section to become increasingly thinner and more fragile!

By the time the last lancer mech drove its weapon into the expanded weak point, the metal plating had been completely breached!

"That isn't all, Ves." Gloriana said.

Once the new lancer mechs completed their initial charges, they pulled out a second red-tipped lance from their backs and extended it to their full lengths.

The mechs then proceeded to test their capabilities against a transphasic energy shield.

When they drove their lances against the shield, they inflicted a combination of kinetic and explosive damage.

Each time the lancer mech struck, they inflicted damage far surpassing the normal attacks of any standard mech!

Although the new lancer mechs ultimately failed to take down the transphasic energy shield, Ves did not look down on them because of that. The results attained by such a small quantity of mechs was impressive.

If more lancer mechs had joined the attack, the transphasic energy shield would have easily collapsed!

"These are good results." Ves remarked. "The Transcendent Chargers are more effective against mechs and unshielded targets, but the Woodpecker Project is much more optimized to quickly break open a hole in the transphasic energy shield coverage of an enemy starship."

He recognized the advantages of Dulo and Juliet's new mech, considering that he had occasionally contributed to it by making it alive and connecting it to the Phase King for enhanced transphasic penetration.

He hadn't been involved in much of the detailed technical development of the lancer mech design project, so he hadn't been certain whether the Woodpecker Project would be able to live up to its promises.

From the results of this testing session, Ves could already conclude that it was bound to become a staple mech for at least a handful of mech legions!

"The new Redlance as Dulo and Juliet have decided to call their newly completed model should be ready for mass production, just in time for the upcoming battle." Gloriana spoke. "Our mech forces probably won't be able to field more than a company of them, and their assigned mech pilots won't have enough time to master them thoroughly. The good news is that Dulo has also developed another blast lance model that is optimized for our Transcendent Charger model. They can be fabricated en masse with much greater ease, so the Eye of Ylvaine will be able to launch hundreds of explosive charge attacks in the next battle."

All of that was good news. Both the Redlance and the Transcendent Chargers with updated weapon loadouts should play a considerably more effective role against alien warships!

So long as they were able to concentrate their damage onto a single segmented transphasic energy shield, it was possible to blow upon a hole in an alien warship's energy shield coverage with considerably greater speed and effectiveness!

However, Ves understood quite well that everything had a price. The Redlance's mech frame itself was not too exceptional in terms of cost and performance. It was quite a fast and efficient machine, proving that Juliet and Dulo had spent a lot of effort into reducing waste.

That did not change the fact that its disposable blast lances added a considerable cost and resource burden to the Larkinson Clan!

"How much phasewater is needed to make these blast lances?" Ves asked.

"The final amount that Dulo has settled upon is 5 grams." Gloriana responded. "His explanation is that anything less will decrease the penetration and destabilization strength of the blast lance too much. It will take a considerably greater quantity to breach the transphasic defenses of a starship, which is not desirable. More phasewater is always better, but the diminishing returns from this point onwards make it increasingly less economical. The current quantity happens to be a decent compromise between penetration power and cost effectiveness."

Ves couldn't help but wince when he heard that each blast lance required 5 grams of phasewater in order to produce.

A few grams did not sound like much, but when Ves thought about how a squad of Redlances or Transcendent Chargers could typically carry four of these weapons each, the total expenditure could easily exceed several kilograms of phasewater!

What was worse was that these transphasic weapons were not enduring weapons such as energy rifles or swords.

They were more akin to transphasic grenades that had been attached to the end of long poles!

Each time a mech used up a blast lance, that was 5 grams of phasewater down the drain!

A single relatively short engagement could easily cause the Larkinson Army to lose 5 kilograms of phasewater!

If the Larkinsons were unable to claim at least that much phasewater from the spoils, then that meant that they had suffered a considerable loss!

"We shouldn't use these extravagant transphasic blast lances on every occasion." Ves said with a frown. "Has Dulo Voiken designed a non-transphasic version of his blast lance?"

"He did." Gloriana answered. "Their performance is considerably worse, but should still be powerful enough to down most mechs and alien starfighters with a single direct hit."

That mollified Ves a bit. "That is good. I need to make another pass on their design before it enters into mass production. I can't allow the new living mechs to enter into service without a cultivation mantra!"