

The Mech 5181

Chapter 5181 Companion Spirits Possibilities

Ves had the illusion that he was lecturing another class of university students.

The few times he taught at the Eden Institute of Business & Technology turned out to be extremely helpful.

He gained a valuable amount of experience on how to speak to a crowd of really smart first-raters.

Compared to holding a lecture in front of a crowd of attentive mechers, Ves found it a little more challenging to capture the attention of all of these distinguished people.

His current audience represented a small portion of the very best Survivalists. Their visions were much broader and higher. Their comprehension was greater and they demanded more proof to back up all of his assertions.

Ves was able to oblige them a bit better based on the fact that everyone in this hall had a red or purple dot on their badges.

It actually felt liberating for him to talk about spirituality and cultivation on a more open basis. They were all a part of the 'in group' so to speak.

The listeners did not even mind if he employed his own terminology and theoretical frameworks to describe his perspective on companion spirits.

In any case, he managed to produce results that were valuable enough to be invited to hold a closed session, so Ves was definitely doing something right!

Ves spent a considerable amount of speaking time on explaining the basic properties of companion spirits. He wanted to get all of the truly necessary explanations out of the way before he could get to all of the fun stuff.

"...Now that you have received a basic idea of what companion spirits are, let me show you what they can do to make your lives better."

"Mrow."

Blinky dove down and passed through the deck without incident. He then emerged again and passed through numerous other obstacles in the hall to show that he was not hindered in the slightest!

"As you can see, companion spirits can be useful for spying purposes as they can be used to peek at what is happening in another room or whatever. Everything they see, you can see as well, as they are essentially another part of yourself. There are range limitations to most spirits, but there are cases when they can be overcome. You can make them invisible to most forms of detection as well."

Blinky turned invisible, though not perfectly. The cat could not be detected with visual sensors, heat sensors, gravitic sensors and the like, but that did not mean his spiritual presence had disappeared.

Although Blinky tried his best to dampen his own presence, he did not excel in stealth, so those with unusual means of detection were able to sense his location easily enough.

Even so, the potential applications of a companion spirit in the intelligence community were still great!

Ves could already see the attendees with pink dots looking a lot more attentive than before. So long as companion spirits could solve the flaw of getting easily detected through metaphysical means, they could be utilized to strengthen their spying efforts even further!

"This is only the most basic usage of companion spirits." Ves spoke as Blinky's manifestation became visible again. "A more profound usage is to treat them as incarnations that can engage in separate forms of cultivation. For example, I am a mech designer, so it stands to reason that I cannot engage in other forms of cultivation, correct?"

The people who only possessed red dots on their badges might not be experts in cultivation, but they at least received a crash course on it, so they could still follow the explanation more or less.

"Well, that rule no longer applies anymore from the moment you have a companion spirit. I don't profess to understand everything that is going on, but I can show you real examples of cases where engaging in multiple forms of cultivation at the same time can individually strengthen our own capabilities."

A small number of people looked as if they already understood what Ves was about to present, but much of this was completely new to the rest of the crowd.

"Mroooooow..."

Blinky cautiously began to cultivate the Imaginary Universe Method. Even though this act interrupted the cat's ongoing recovery, he only had to maintain this state long enough to make a statement to the audience!

"I am a mech designer, but I have also become a qi cultivator." Ves boldly stated. "My companion spirit is not bound to my limitations as a mech designer. By engaging in a cultivation method that is suited to a pure energy-based life form like himself, Blinky is able to absorb a lot of E energy radiation and use that to fuel all kinds of applications."

The Star Cat demonstrated one such application by converting a moderate amount of his enormous reserves to life-attributed spiritual energy.

The newly produced energies began to spread across the entire compartment and even spilled into the surrounding spaces as well!

The audience showed a much greater reaction at this time. What was happening was supposed to be impossible for ordinary mech designers. Even if they somehow gained control over their own internal energy, they couldn't afford to spill it out so unscrupulously!

The fact that Ves or rather Blinky was able to do so without suffering any serious consequences made this session a lot more important than before!

More than a few experts among the attendees were hidden cultivators or possessed an extensive understanding of cultivation. They fully understood the advantage of having a companion spirit that can supply a specific variation of E energy in larger quantities!

Ves actually held back the fact that Blinky was actually able to disgorge large amounts of unconverted energies of different attributes as well.

While he was not sure whether it was possible to keep the Red Association in the dark about Blinky's internal universe, there was no need to volunteer sensitive information for free.

"Would you like to demonstrate your own companion spirit, Jovy?"

"Sure."

The other Senior Mech Designer stepped forward and showed off his Eye of Providence.

"Zsssss."

Many of the attendees were already familiar with it, but now that they received more context, they understood how valuable it was to a mech designer.

"Professor Larkinson here has customized a companion spirit for me based on my individual traits and requests." Jovy said as his Eye of Providence stared at all of the attendees with an unnerving gaze. "My Eye cannot absorb and release E energy as unscrupulous as Blinky, but as its shape suggests, it is good at detection. It can not only help me observe E energy radiation and various related phenomena directly, but it also has special abilities related to probability manipulation."

Ves had already explained before that the traits of a companion spirit was largely based on the strengths and inclinations of their principals.

It did not take much for a lot of smart mechers to make a reasonably accurate guess of what the Eye of Providence could actually do! The very name of the companion spirit made a lot more sense to them all of a sudden!

These were brand-new metaphysical capabilities that were either impossible or incredibly difficult to obtain through traditional cultivation!

It was also unheard of for mech designers to gain access to all of these extra abilities without giving up their ability to work with mechs!

Ves grinned. "There is more. I can only show you Blinky and the Eye of Providence to you in person because that is all I have on hand. I am more than happy to give you a closer look at the companion spirits that I have created for other people, but this conference of yours is strict about the people who can come along. I can only show you clips of archival footage. Everything you see is real. You can ask my friend here if you want confirmation."

A projection came to life that began to show different companion spirits as well as their abilities in action.

A lot of mech pilots suddenly grew a lot more interested and excited as they witnessed numerous expert mechs in action.

Even though they were just second-class mechs, that could not take the shine away from them! When they saw that the Promethea single-handedly burned down entire alien starships by using Kiroshi, it became clear that companion spirits were useful in combat as well!

"Mech pilots are not supposed to wield this form of power... but if they are somehow able to do so, then this should be the expected result."

"I have heard that double cultivation is too impractical to make any serious attainments, but these companion spirits make it easy!"

"This is the perfect solution to my dilemma. I can keep piloting mechs while simultaneously abiding by my family's ancient traditions."

"This is like having a cake and eating it too! I cannot say anything about how this will affect mech designers, but these companion spirits can increase the combat effectiveness of expert pilots by at least 30 percent!"

"That burning cat Kiroshi looks rather familiar, don't you think? Isn't there another powerful pilot that has taken to using a cat to shape her own resonance-empowered attacks? I wonder if Professor Larkinson has based his work on the power of a god pilot."

Ves smiled as he saw and heard the reactions from his audience.

Of course, it was only the younger and less important figures that exhibited their reactions in the open. The more important and powerful figures at the rear kept their cools and held their cards close to their chests.

There was no way they remained impassive, though!

Ves had saved the best for last.

"Up until this point, I have shown you two different examples of how companion spirits can complement a mech pilot or a mech designer in his existing work. Their existence can strengthen existing abilities or enable new possibilities. However, what if I tell you that they can also be used to make another impossibility happen? While I cannot give you a direct example of one, I can show you a related case of what I am suggesting."

A new projection came to life that showed Ketis in various capacities.

Some of the clips showed her designing her mechs in the design lab or the workshop. Though she looked unusually fit and muscular for a mech designer, she showed all of the competences of a Journeyman Mech Designer.

In the other clips, she had donned her combat armor and began to chop at various alien enemies as she and her fellow Swordmaidens boarded crippled alien warships!

Enemy shots bounced off her sharp domain as Ketis charged forth!

She did not even wait to get in range before she swung her sword and unleashed a resonance-empowered energy wave that cut through solid metal cover and bisected the yurzen marines that tried to defend their doomed ship!

A lot of mech pilots as well as a fair amount of mech designers shot up straighter in their seats!

As the clips showed Sharpie exerting strong willpower and diving into Ketis' greatsword, much of the crowd became fascinated by the fact that this amazing woman was both a warrior and a mech designer!

Even if not everyone in the crowd was aware of the existence of traditional swordsmanship, the whispers soon made it clear that this was an ancient discipline that also relied on willpower to overcome all odds!

The mechers did not miss the implication that if a mech designer could become a swordmaster, he or she could theoretically become a mech pilot as well!

A true mech pilot was one that could attain godhood by constantly strengthening their willpower.

The most essential requirement was to have the possibility to undergo apotheosis!

It was not a secret to this gathering that apotheosis only graced mech pilots who did not engage in any other form of cultivation.

Even though this demonstration did not prove that high-ranking mech designers could simultaneously become high-ranking mech pilots as well, the promise of this dream alone was enough to make people excited!

Ves felt it was a good decision to showcase these examples. It might not be as good as presenting them in person, but there was enough credibility in the footage to convince these gathered mechers and associates that companion spirits had the potential to transform their lives as well as the rest of red humanity!

Although he was uncomfortable with acting so high profile this time, he knew it was necessary for him to move up in society.

The Age of Dawn imperiled all of red humanity. Ves did not want to remain stuck at the cannon fodder level when the war progressed to a more serious stage!

Chapter 5182 Limitations of Fruit

The possibilities presented by Ves gradually mesmerized the mechers and associates.

Those whose understanding of cultivation science was still shallow had already become eager to try out a complementary new form of cultivation.

Those who possessed a more comprehensive grasp of cultivation science were absolutely floored by what Ves had managed to accomplish!

What Ves presented to them all should have been almost impossible. Even if Ves was able to get it done in one way or another, they expected companion spirits to emerge only after expending extremely rare resources or undergoing an incredibly dangerous life-threatening procedure.

Yet as Ves was done with hyping up all of the real and potential benefits that companion spirits brought to their principals, he began to shock his listeners once again by explaining the logistics of providing them to people.

"I have worked on companion spirits for numerous years." Ves confidently spoke to an audience that looked a lot more attentive and engaged in this closed session than before. "I have come up with two different ways to impart them to people. The original method is when I operate on an individual in person. This has several advantages and disadvantages. It is easier to add extra strengths and attributes that the recipient does not have before. It also allows me to design and program the appearance, the potential abilities and the growth trajectory of the spirit in advance. Many of my closest subordinates and allies have received this personal service from me and gained considerable boosts that slowly grow over time."

That caused a lot of people to look at Ves with a hungry expression. They probably wanted to contract him to impart him with a custom companion spirit as soon as this session was over!

To be honest, Ves did not want to remain stuck here and create companion spirits one after another for the rest of the duration of this conference.

Exchanging benefits was important, but attending other informative sessions was also important!

This was why he needed to reduce the heat and lower the demand for his personal services. It would be very hard for him to reject so many powerful and influential mechers otherwise.

He raised his palm. "My method has limitations. First off, I cannot impart them on anyone who is too strong for me to operate on their most important inner selves. I am completely unable to do anything to ace pilots because their strong instinctual defenses are too sensitive. I imagine that I am unable to do anything to Master Mech Designers either for comparable reasons. I can only employ this method on a moderately powerful individual. As for children and adults who have yet to display any cultivation talent, I cannot give them a mature companion spirit immediately, but I can plant a seed that they can slowly grow and mature over years. This is what I have done for my children."

There were many implications in his words. Ves wondered how many people in the audience understood the hidden meaning of what he had just conveyed.

"This method is also fairly risky and dangerous. It is just as important and critical as installing a cranial implant in your head. I am sure you are familiar with the risks of augmenting your brain. You need to be able to trust that the implant has not been tampered with. You also need to trust the implant surgeons to perform the procedure correctly and without damaging the parts of the brain that you rely upon to excel in your work. The same considerations apply with companion spirits. I do not believe that I have botched this process when I have serviced my previous clients, but I am not a qualified medical professional who possesses any relevant certification and degrees."

That caused a lot of people to look a little less eager now that Ves deliberately portrayed himself as a back-alley doctor!

Ves smiled again. "My original method is incredibly useful to people, but the aforementioned limitations have led me to conclude that it is not suitable for mass adoption. I am the only person who can perform this procedure. It is locked to my design philosophy and unique circumstances. My companion spirit also provides a lot of assistance in operating on people's souls. Since it is difficult to replicate my circumstances, I have worked to develop an alternate means of imparting companion spirits that is much more reliable, consistent and replicable."

He gestured towards the surrounding trees. "One of my research institutions has dedicated years of development into this research project. My researchers and specialists have made relatively little progress after a point because we were lacking a critical source that could activate our desired solution. It is only after the Age of Dawn has started that our trees have gained the final factor they needed to make them work. If any of you are perceptive enough, then you should have picked up on the fact that they are constantly absorbing E energy radiation."

The trees might look a little creepy due to their fleshy construction, but Ves found it to be quite good at absorbing E energy radiation. He attributed this to using Titania's former flesh as the main ingredient.

"The companion spirit fruit trees that we have developed and nurtured over the years require ordinary nutrients such as water, compost and gasses, just like any other normal standard tree."

However, in order to impart these fruits with the energies needed to create companion spirits, the trees must be subjected to background radiation. The stronger the radiation, the faster these fruits can grow."

One of the Masters in the back couldn't help but ask a question at this time.

"What is the average yield of these trees, Professor Larkinson?"

"I was just getting to that." Ves responded. "None of our trees are very old at the moment. Typical young trees like this can grow a companion spirit fruit to maturity in around 3 months at the current level of background radiation. You can easily shorten this if you find a way to increase the concentration of E energy radiation, although there will likely be diminishing returns. The trees will grow 9 to 21 fruits per cycle. You can either leave the fruits in place to enrich their energy content and produce stronger companion spirits as a result, or you can pluck them right away and use them to augment anyone who meets the requirements."

"What are the requirements of these fruits?"

Ves smirked as he turned and carefully pluck a pear-shaped fruit with a refreshing green coloring.

The companion spirit fruits tended to be shaped like pears, but they came in all sorts of colors, from wheat gold to eggplant purple.

It didn't really matter how they looked. One shape or color was not better than any of the alternatives. Ves just wanted to add a little more variety to the fruits in order to make them more exciting.

"Each mature fruit can impart a companion spirit fruit merely by ingesting them." Ves stated. "Don't worry too much about the dietary impact of these fruits. It is like eating any other standard fruit. As long as your physique is able to digest an apple or a pear, you can eat this fruit. At worst, you can just vomit it out. It should not impact the process. What truly matters is that the act of biting, chewing and swallowing the fruit activates a trigger that causes the special E energy construct locked within the fruit to enter your body and move up to your soul. This process is completely safe. By leaving out an actor such as myself, it stands a much better chance of going through your inner defenses without triggering a rejection reaction."

The ingenuity behind this process was rather clever. There was a good reason why Ves stuck to the concept of fruit even though he could have resorted to different alternatives.

From a spiritual perspective, fruits were harmless and benign foods that people always associated with positive benefits. Many trees evolved in a way that encouraged other organisms to eat their fruits, so there was no malice or danger involved in any part of this chain.

By borrowing from this old interaction and making sure that his new products did not deviate too much from the conceptual meaning of fruit, Ves managed to turn these succulent and delectable snacks into viable augmentations that could induce major changes to a person's spirit!

"Any companion spirit fruit that does not trigger a rejection reaction is legitimate." Ves emphasized to his audience. "The ones that do produce complications are either botched, immature or somehow programmed to take advantage of you. Everyone's soul is sensitive towards any influences that can

cause potential harm or malice. You can rely on this capability to prevent widespread abuse of these new kinds of fruits."

Not everyone found these claims to be credible. It was in the nature of the Association to verify every invention and claim to make absolutely certain that there weren't any hidden dangers.

Part of the reason why the mechers took so long in observing and monitoring Jovy's companion spirit was because of their incessant need to verify that everything was in order.

Their prudence was justified. The mechers possessed a strong engineering tradition, which meant that they went through a lot of effort to prevent any possible mistakes from occurring.

A single misstep could easily kill millions of people!

Right now, the mechers still knew too little about the safety of his companion spirit fruit trees. If not for the fact that red humanity was moving closer to extinction with each passing day, they probably would have preferred that Ves spend a few more decades on refining this powerful application.

Since that was not a realistic option anymore, Ves had to make sure to spell out any possible dangers and other limitations.

"All companion spirit fruits can be ingested by any human or red human." He stated. "Now, I understand that the definition of human can be a little fuzzy these days. Aside from the biological compatibility that I have mentioned before, I have programmed the E energy construct so that it conducts a test that verifies that the recipient is human or considers himself a human. Anyone who is obviously alien will not be able to activate the core part of the fruit. It will just float away and dissipate into nothing."

His original companion spirit fruits did not possess this racial lock. The T Institute had to feed a lot of them to alien captives in order to gather enough test and observation data.

Ves just added this restriction to the first production version of the companion spirit tree as this pattern was meant to be utilized for use outside of lab conditions.

"Aside from this restriction, a companion spirit fruit can only work on individuals who already possess the talent or potential for cultivation. Not all of you may know what that means, but there is no need to worry too much about it. In the Age of Mechs, few people possessed this particular quality. Now that we have entered the Age of Dawn, gradual exposure to background radiation is causing every human to develop this quality. It is just a matter of time."

These words reassured the people who already knew that they lacked this essential property. Exotic radiation was truly a boon to all of them as this new variable granted these people a new chance to attain extraordinary strength and longevity!

Ves casually tossed and caught the green companion spirit fruit in his hand.

"I think you will be able to understand these fruits a lot better if you can witness their effect in person. Who among you wishes to be the first volunteer to partake in this fruit? As long as you are not strong enough to resist the process, it should grant you a brand-new companion spirit within a couple of minutes. Who wants to try?"

Over a hundred hands immediately shot up in the air!

Chapter 5183 A New Bank Slate

Many people in the audience had become attracted to the idea of obtaining a companion spirit.

Blinky and the Eye of Providence had attracted a lot of mech designers. The ones portrayed in the archival footage had a lot of appeal for mech pilots.

The mechers and associates who attended this conference were highly successful because they constantly worked to bolster their advantages. They were highly competitive in nature and did not want to miss out on a potential benefit that could put them leagues ahead of their immediate rivals!

Everyone understood that red humanity was about to undergo drastic changes. A lot of the old rules would soon be thrown out of the window. Those that did not move quickly enough might get left behind forever!

Many of the attendees understood that cultivation was about to make a comeback due to the ubiquitous availability of E energy radiation. This made companion spirits especially relevant to their lives and careers. The benefits to their own cultivation were too obvious for them to miss this opportunity!

After all, who knew how long it would take for the Red Association to accumulate enough trees and grow enough fruits. There were many members who could make good use of these fruits. If the supply was too low, then it could take years and a lot of MTA merits before they could have their turn.

Both Ves and Jovy scanned the individuals who raised their arms.

Just as expected, many of the volunteers sat towards the front. They were the ones who were most hungry and eager to augment themselves.

The older people sitting in the rear were much more prudent about this kind of stuff. They already possessed a full suite of high-quality augmentations that already produced a lot of satisfying results. Adding a completely new and unanticipated improvement to the mix might disrupt their equilibrium and cause them to become unbalanced.

There was a remarkably high proportion of people who possessed spiritual potential in the audience. This made sense as the weakest mech designers who attended this conference were Journeymen.

However, that still left a lot of mech pilots, mech officers along with regular scientists and engineers who did not possess any advantages in this area.

Ves automatically left them out of consideration. He focused his sights on a younger candidate who would likely exhibit a strong reaction and express a lot of appreciation for gaining a new companion spirit.

He quietly communicated with Jovy over a wireless connection to refine his selection.

"I think it is best to go for a mech pilot as opposed to a mech designer." Jovy advised. "I am already an example of a mech designer who has benefited from a companion spirit. The real decision makers want to take a closer look at how a mech pilot handles this new addition."

"Good idea. It's a shame that neither of the two expert pilots in the crowd have raised their arms. The companion spirit that emerges from one is always a lot stronger from the start."

"Does your fruit even work for them, Ves?"

"I have never tested it, but it should work in theory."

After a quick discussion, they chose to select a 35-year old expert candidate who was in his prime.

According to the record that Jovy was able to access, the powerful pilot not only made excellent attainments in virtual competitions and practice battles, but also spent a lot of time on fighting against alien warfleets in the frontlines.

Although the man had yet to undergo apotheosis, his willpower was strong and vigorous enough to stand out from the audience!

He was the best choice aside from the two expert pilots who adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Once the expert candidate got called over, he rose from his seat and navigated his way forward.

The man exuded an air of confidence that became more obvious as he got closer.

Ves actually did not know how obtaining a companion spirit would affect his chances of breaking through.

There was a very real possibility that all of the changes to his mind and spirit would cause him to get pushed away from apotheosis.

However, as long as the delay was not too great, it was always worthwhile to get a new companion spirit!

"Here you go." Ves said in a friendly tone as he passed the green companion spirit fruit. "Just bite into it and eat it whole. The process will already begin from the moment you swallow your first piece of fruit, but it is best to go through with it in order to minimize any possible complications."

"Understood, professor." The expert candidate responded as he regarded the fruit in his hand with a careful glance. "Any other instructions?"

"You should relax and allow the fruit to do its work. It might feel unnerving once it goes into effect, but do your best to remain calm and trust that the process will do its work without complications. I think it is best if you sit down."

The expert candidate immediately lowered himself until his uniformed body knelt onto the floor. He then proceeded to lift the fruit to his mouth and bit into it like he would an apple.

The fruit was actually a lot softer than a standard apple or pear. The flavor and density of the fruit was light. This made it easier for the man to swallow it down to his stomach.

The transformation had already begun at this time. A projection came to life that displayed the detailed physiological state of the expert candidate.

While the sensor readings showed clear signs that the expert candidate was growing more active and excited, they did not show any further abnormalities. The changes to his body were entirely caused by emotional fluctuations.

The real magic took place in a different layer of existence!

Many of the individuals with stronger perception leaned forward in order to try their best to track what was happening to the expert candidate. Not all of them possessed the ability to observe the transformation process as clearly as Ves, but even they could feel the progressively stronger ripples emanating from the man!

"It's happening!"

While the expert candidate exhibited intermittent signs that he wanted to resist the changes induced by whatever the fruit slid inside of him, he took all of the advice in mind and forcibly maintained a state of calm.

The spiritual construct imparted by the fruit actually worked a little slower than usual, but everything fell within expectation. Ves did not show any concern that the process would fail as he saw that the expert candidate remained under control.

Slowly but surely, the spiritual construct attached itself to the pilot's spirituality and began to spawn a new semi-independent growth.

The process looked parasitic, but Ves had designed it to be as painless and gentle as possible.

Several minutes passed by as the expert candidate occasionally frowned in discomfort. He could feel himself expanding in a manner that he could never describe. It was like birthing a new child, but his offspring happened to be himself!

Slowly but surely, the spiritual add-on imparted by the fruit took root, borrowed the strength of the recipient and began to activate the small amount of life energy that was vital to the entire transformation process.

A blank new companion spirit steadily came to life.

As the expert candidate finally opened his eyes, he took a moment to take a few breaths and explore his strange new condition.

The audience remained completely silent as they waited to see and hear what was coming next. Did the process succeed? Had this expert candidate obtained a powerful augmentation that set him up to do greater deeds on the battlefield?

"I feel as if... I am in control of my own body, but also another one that is new and unusual in so many ways." The man described.

"You should be able to control your new companion spirit right away." Ves gently said. "To be more precise, it is an inherent ability of any companion spirit. You are him, and he is you. Both of you are the same individual, just split up into two personalities. Your companion spirit can think for itself, but you can always exert more direct control over it at any point. Try out. Command your new spirit to emerge from your head and show it off to everyone."

What emerged was a spirit shaped like a human.

In fact, the small and translucent form of the new companion spirit was a precise match for the expert candidate!

The only major deviation was that the spirit lacked color. The pale new addition looked like a tiny ghost or fairy.

"Why does he come in the form of a human?" The expert candidate asked in puzzlement. "Why is it not a cat or a lizard?"

"The shape is unconsciously determined by the thoughts and desires of the recipients." Ves answered. "If I am in control of the process, then I can manually create any animal or object that you desire. The companion spirit fruit is not able to respond so well to any demands. It will select the shape that reflects you the best or that you truly desire. The form of a companion spirit is not too important. It is more for image's sake. Their real strengths and abilities are determined by other factors. If you are dissatisfied, then your companion spirit will steadily outgrow his old form and morph into a cat or a dragon over time. It all depends on what you truly want."

The starting form of a companion spirit should already reflect their principals rather well.

The issue was that people could change a lot over time. This was especially in the case of major events and traumas. Companion spirits were designed to partially mirror this growth and change themselves so that they could remain relevant and useful.

"Does your spirit possess any special strengths and abilities?"

The expert candidate frowned before shaking his head. "I... do not feel he has any. He is still too... young. I think I can replicate one of my favorite attacks whenever I pilot my mech. Let me try."

The companion spirit began to look more and more active until he finally let loose a bunch of intangible plasma bolts.

The harmless attacks weren't even threatening enough to trip any security alarms.

"Is that supposed to do anything?" The man and his companion spirit both looked confused.

"He is still young." Ves patiently explained to the man. "You should try to embed your companion spirit into your machine or a specific component of it." Ves advised with a grin. "You might be able to resonate with your mech to a degree. Even if that does not happen, it is still helpful for you to impart a part of yourself into your mech. You will be able to get more in tune with the machine. At the same time, your spirit will shape himself to his environment and start to develop abilities related to mechs. This will take time as your spirit is not only young, but also close to a blank slate."

As more and more people became enthralled by the new companion spirit, Ves wanted to close his presentation with an important message.

"Every companion spirit fruit grants a new beginning to its eater. Each of you has a responsibility to nurture your new addition. If you neglect your new gift, then it will not grow as fast as one that is actively used and taken care of. No matter whether you obtain a companion spirit from a fruit or from a customized service, each of them has the potential to become as powerful if not more powerful than any would-be god. The journey will be long, but it will also be easier because it is technically a natural energy-based life form. That completes my presentation. Do any of you have any questions?"

Ves immediately became engulfed by over fifty questions!

Chapter 5184 Tree Security Management

Ves tried his best to impart as much essential information in his presentation. He felt he did a good job at conveying the essentials so that everyone could make a judgment on how much his companion spirits and the trees that enabled their proliferation could contribute to humanity.

Over the course of his presentation, Ves constantly paid attention to his audience. He gauged their receptiveness towards his proposal and tried to figure out if any of them showed any opposition towards companion spirits.

While Ves saw a handful of concerned individuals who justifiably thought that this invention had not undergone enough rigorous testing to be utilized on actual humans, they were just the minority.

There were still plenty of other people who were so greedy for power that they fell in love with both the short term and long term benefits of obtaining a companion spirit!

No one cared whether Ves was a young second-class associate anymore. Almost everyone recognized and acknowledged the value of his companion spirits. They could easily change red humanity forever as long as the supply of companion spirit fruit trees were abundant enough!

It made sense that the first question related to mass production.

"How easy is it to scale up production and produce millions of fruits a day? Are these fruits only available from these specific trees of yours, or can they also be produced through other means, such as materialization?"

"It is not easy to scale up production." Ves admitted. "These trees are made out of repurposed astral beast flesh. They possess certain properties that cannot be obtained from cloned organic tissue or other easily accessible alternatives. Materialization is not an option because the resulting tree will miss an essential life factor that can only be gained through organic growth. The good news is that there is a good chance that you can probably use any ancient ancient beast flesh as long as it belongs to a centuries if not millennia-old life form. No matter how different the properties may be, the resulting trees will conform to a standard template to prevent any incompatibility with humans."

He had partially incorporated aspects of the Blood Cult Scarlet Oak Tree Growth Manual that he had obtained in the past.

"My research capabilities are limited. I am good in a number of specific fields, but my expertise is nowhere near as comprehensive as that of your Association. I am sure that there are many experts among you who can address many of the problems and limitations of my work."

Ves already encountered enough bona-fide cultivators within the halls of the Khamatar Reign to know that the Survivalist Faction had a good pulse on cultivation!

The Survivalists did not reject this hidden heritage. They chose to embrace it so that they could use the wisdom of the ancients to quickly get up to speed on how to take advantage of exotic radiation.

Since the Red Association was so tolerant, it should have no problem bringing together the right experts to increase the practicality of companion spirit trees.

Perhaps they might even be able to improve the efficacy of its fruits!

Ves essentially handed over the responsibility of mass production to the Association. If the mechers wanted to make companion spirits available to the masses so badly, then they were free to allocate as much manpower and resources into this project as they wished.

One of the Masters sitting in the rear asked another important question.

"How well are your companion spirit fruit trees protected against theft and unauthorized use? If our alien adversaries have managed to obtain samples of your trees and fruits, what is your estimate on whether they can reverse engineer them and develop their own variants that work for their species?"

This was a real risk, but Ves had already thought about this problem in advance.

"I have implemented numerous safeguards to prevent that from happening," Ves responded. "You might not be able to see it, but the most critical factor that allows the fruits to create companion spirits is a rare variation of E energy. It is not present in background radiation and can only be produced through extremely limited means that are under my control."

Ves did not feel comfortable with explaining the real mechanism that ensured that others were unlikely to succeed in their effort to create unsanctioned imitations of his work.

He had made a deal with Gaia to manage and oversee every single companion spirit fruit tree.

Ves was not able to make this happen by himself, but the aloof True God was able to lend a hand to make it happen after implementing a few adaptations.

Just as Ves supported all of his products from afar, Gaia had become akin to a 'tree spirit' to every companion spirit fruit tree.

It was subtle, but Gaia's faint influence played an essential role in creating the right life energy that could make the companion spirit come to life!

If her contribution was absent, then the companion spirits would possess no real life. They would end up as flawed and malformed extensions of an individual's spirituality. Ves could not foresee the consequences of stopping the transformation process before the most critical step occurred, but he did not think it would end up well for the subject in question!

The more senior attendees found the answer to be overly vague, but they understood that it was not quite convenient to ask for further clarification.

Security was a sensitive matter. It was best for Ves to limit any further explanations in front of a more limited panel of mechers.

For now, they just had to take his word that the aliens would not be able to replicate the effect of his companion spirit fruits so easily.

Ves did not believe that his companion spirit fruit trees would remain limited to humans forever.

He already possessed a few ideas on how to circumvent his own security precautions. If he could do it, then there had to be other powerful beings out there that could produce a similar result.

Aside from that, as exotic radiation continued to transform the Red Ocean, more and more humans and aliens would gain spiritual capabilities. Who knew if one of them happened to circumvent the security measures of his trees with ease?

From the moment Ves or the Red Association chose to introduce companion spirit fruits to red humanity, Pandora's box had truly opened. It was no longer possible to contain what was unleashed.

Ves calmly answered a few more tricky questions. While he did not divulge too much information, his words increased people's trust in his companion spirit fruits.

"Professor Larkinson, is it possible for us to acquire and make use of the remaining fruits?"

It did not miss everyone's notice that there were a lot more fruits that were just begging to get eaten.

Ves had thought about multiple ways he could sell these precious goods. He ultimately thought that companion spirit fruits might not be so rare once the Red Association successfully started mass production.

If that happened relatively soon, then anyone who paid a fortune to obtain these relatively weak fruits would probably get pissed because they felt they had been scammed!

It was best for Ves to rein in his greed and offer a more reasonable price for his goods. It was fine to charge a premium based on how the people could gain a head-start, but it was not wise to treat them as fools.

Besides, the real gain was to create more companion spirit holders. They would inevitably show off their new additions and perform a lot better with their help.

Once word of mouth about companion spirits began to spread within the Association, the demand for them would definitely skyrocket!

"I plan to offer two kinds of opportunities for you to obtain a companion spirit." Ves addressed the crowd. "I will sell each fruit for 100,000 MTA credits each. Make sure you read the accompanying instruction manual to avoid wasting them. After that, I will hold an auction for five possible opportunities to receive a customized companion spirit from me that is much more powerful than what you can get from a fruit."

Jovy had actually been the one to suggest an auction. It was an excellent way to maximize his profits out of a limited number of clients.

By preying on their wealth and desperation, Ves would be able to limit the amount of time he wasted on this chore but still make it worthwhile enough!

This immediately made a lot more people excited. A lot of mechers and associates would probably converge towards this hall if not for the fact that this closed session did not permit any further entry.

"I do not intend to buy these fruit for myself, but I wish to reserve them for my disciplines." An older gentleman spoke from the rear. "How long will they remain effective after they are plucked?"

"I am not entirely certain about that." Ves honestly admitted. "I have not tested this. I predict that they will remain active for several months. They are designed to last at least that long. I am not sure whether they will deteriorate after that. Their efficacy may gradually weaken over time, which is not good as that increases the chance of complications. It is safest to take them within a week. Don't try to freeze them as that will not really preserve the most important components of these fruits."

He needed to remind himself to task the T Institute with testing the longevity of the companion spirit fruits. The best way to do so was to pluck a lot of fruits, keep them in storage under different

conditions and gradually feed them to the alien captives and test subjects imprisoned within the Dragon's Den.

All of those aliens were troublesome to manage and support. It was always better if he and his clan could exploit their value by subjecting them to different experiments.

Ves soon began to sell the fruits. He had brought a total of 15 companion spirit fruit trees to the conference. Each of them possessed an average of 18 fruits, which meant he had 270 fruits in total.

He had already held back 200 companion spirit fruits so that the mechers could subject them to an extensive battery of tests.

This meant that he could readily put up 70 fruits for sale, which should be enough to meet the immediate demand from his audience.

Just as expected, the fruits sold out quickly. 100,000 MTA credits was a significant sum to the average mecher, but it was not that excessive to some of the elites and high-ranked mechers who were qualified to attend this conference.

7 million MTA credits was not a small sum for an average second-class organization.

As it was, the Larkinson Clan would be able to modernize a lot of old and outdated products and systems with this tidy windfall!

Just as Ves expected, a lot of the people who ended up buying the fruits were older researchers and Master Mech Designers. They either wanted to conduct their own research on these unusual products or reserved them for their own descendants and apprentices.

Of course, that still left a lot of people who cherished the fruits in their hands as if it was the greatest treasure in the Red Ocean.

They refrained from ingesting them right away. They intended to wait until the session was over so that they could head over to one of the Khamatar Reign's medical bays so that they could eat the fruits under supervision.

Once the 70 fruits passed on to their new owners, Ves finally commenced his auction.

"Do not miss this opportunity to gain a stronger and more customized companion spirit. By allowing me to impart them in person, I can create strong helpers that are comparable to the likes of Blinky, the Eye of Providence and Kiroshi that can enrich your life or the life of a candidate of your choosing. My capacity is limited, so I will only do this 5 times during this conference. Commence the bidding!"

Chapter 5185 Messy Auction

Ves rubbed his hands in clear anticipation of what was about to proceed.

He had already spent a lot of time on hyping up the value and utility of companion spirits. Through the use of words, archival footage and a bit of promotional artwork, many of the mechers and associates who had attended this closed session developed a strong appreciation of his work!

It was a rather odd sight. It was usually the mechers that looked down on second-raters. Now the situation had reversed because Ves introduced a product and a service that they could not provide themselves.

He had become one of the many associates that the Survivalists found worthwhile enough to befriend. Now, their efforts literally bore fruit as Ves answered their call in a time of need and offered a solution that could potentially strengthen all of red humanity in a way that no one could imagine!

This was all a part of a grand plan.

The conference organized by the Survivalist Faction served as a quick introduction to the possibilities of cultivation and E energy radiation. Ves was not the only person who attempted to do business by selling one of his staple inventions within the halls of the Khamatar Reign.

As soon as the conference had come to an end, tens of thousands of talents and high-ranking leaders would return to their respective places in red humanity's space and begin to proliferate much of the powerful new boons introduced in the conference!

The auction was about to commence. Ves did not feel the need to make it too formal or adopt a more formal process. Everyone here already received enough information on companion spirits to understand the value of customized products.

Ves had also been honest enough to state that a blank companion spirit from a fruit had the potential to surpass a customized companion spirit based on growth, experiences and other factors.

That depressed the value of a custom product, but not too much. There ought to be enough wealthy and resourceful guests among the 700 who attended this closed session who did not mind paying a small fortune in order to gain a head-start for themselves or their hand-picked dependents.

Ves had to strike a balancing act. He wanted his service to have value, but not so much that the mechers forced him to slave away all of the time. By hinting that his capacity to operate on people's spirits was limited, he should hopefully be left alone after he had completed his orders.

Ves stood on a slightly elevated step and gazed at the people seated in front of him. Jovy meanwhile stood at the side as he got ready to track and value the upcoming bids.

A new projection came to life that displayed five empty slots.

"We do not have much time left, so let us do it like this. Each of you can voice your bids. As long as my friend and I place a high enough valuation on your offer, it will show up in the top 5. Each of you will be able to place a bid if you have not done so yet or revise your existing one if you are willing to make a greater concession. This bidding process will end when no more offers arrive that affect the top ranking bids."

It might be better for Ves to string out the five possible opportunities one after another, but that would turn this session into an unseemly mercantile occasion. This would not leave the best impression behind.

He had to remind himself that the central theme of the conference centered around contributing to the survival of red humanity.

It was not supposed to be a celebration where people selfishly tried to profiteer from this extinction-level threat!

That said, no one worked for free. Many of the mechers and all of the associates wanted to make sure their own interests were being met. They would never endeavor to work so hard to save red humanity if their remuneration was insufficient.

"Before we begin, I think I should clarify my demands." Ves spoke in a more personal tone. "I am not in an acute need of MTA credits. It is all numbers to me. I am more interested in benefits that can help me transition my clan from a second-class pioneering organization to a first-class one. Starships, advanced technologies, exclusive knowledge, long-term business contracts and anything else that can speed up the uplift process is helpful. I am particularly interested in any solutions that can speed up the learning process so that second-raters are able to learn all of the skills needed to qualify as first-raters."

That last demand was a particularly important demand for Ves. As he worked to enable his clan to play in the big leagues, he already knew that the majority of his clansmen would ultimately have to be left behind at the second-class stage.

The gap was just too great. Only the smartest, most talented and most-hardworking of second-raters would be able to follow Ves to this greater stage. The others would probably have little choice but to join one of the current or future branches of the Larkinson Clan that continued to operate in the middle zones.

Ves still wanted to give the slowpokes a chance to gradually move their way up. As long as they performed well enough and made enough contributions, the clan should be able to provide them with high-quality augmentations and other forms of assistance that would hopefully speed up their own efforts.

Who knew if a new invention might emerge that would magically insert a lot of knowledge and proficiency in people's heads. If the System was able to create enlightenment fruits, then others might be able to create similar products.

It was not necessary for the substitutes to be as good. Ves only cared about whether it was safe and whether it was available in larger quantities.

The expressions of certain mechers frowned when they heard his last demand.

The truth was that the Mech Trade Association and by extension the Red Association did have methods to quickly accelerate the learning process. It was one of the ways in which the mechers were able to get a lot of its recruited members up to speed.

It was actually the same kind of tech that the Polymath proposed to transform huge batches of hastily grown batch humans into ready-made soldiers and other service personnel!

No matter what flaws or sequela was associated with this high-tech solution, Ves wanted to try and see if he could secure access for his clansmen!

Ves spent another minute on explaining his expectations for this auction before he opened the bidding process.

"You may begin to place your bid. You can do so by voicing it in the open. If you wish to be more discreet for whatever reason, you can transmit an encrypted message to Jovy Armalon, who will place it on the list but keep the details hidden to the public if necessary."

A lot of people voiced or transmitted their bids right away. Both Ves and Jovy had to maximize their mental capacity in order to quickly value and rank the opening bids.

Of course, more than a few of the attendees just threw out low bids for fun or in the hopes that no one was willing to offer more. Ves and Jovy outright ignored them and focused on the more lucrative ones.

It was hard to quantify the exact value of non-monetary offers. Ves did not even try to do so. He settled for deciding upon their ranking instead, which was much less demanding.

"7 million MTA credits."

"15 million MTA credits."

"130 million MTA credits!"

"One first-class superdrives fitted for sub-capital ships."

"Just one? That is too modest. I will offer two first-class superdrives!"

"150 kilograms of phasewater."

"I will agree to collaborate with you on designing a commercial first-class multipurpose mech."

"I will introduce you to the Harma Vess Family that has settled in the Zelmar Upper Zone. The family can help you source materials and open up new business channels when you are ready to market your products to first-raters."

Ves tried to suppress his grin as more and more attractive bids continued to arrive. The projected list constantly changed as people tried to upstage the current top 5 offers.

He found it challenging to determine whether a certain good or service deserved to be ranked on top of another attractive bid. There were many times where he and Jovy had to make quick and sloppy judgment calls because it would take too much time and effort to evaluate them properly.

In any case, Ves went by his gut and relied on his feelings and intuition to navigate this exciting process.

"I am the majority shareholder of a top implant development company." One of the Master Mech Designers spoke up. "Most of the company remains stuck in the old galaxy, but our local subsidiary in the Red Ocean has enough researchers and data to continue their development in this new age. I can offer you or your chosen candidate a chance to replace an outdated cranial implant with a customized premium first-class model that is adapted to the new variables."

Ves' eyes lit up. While he did not feel the need to replace his transformed and mutated bioimplant, his wife urgently needed this improvement.

He could save a lot of MTA merits and give Gloriana a fantastic anniversary gift if he could secure this valuable boon!

"My spouse and my children could make use of high-performing first-class cranial implants." Ves spoke as he set the Master Mech Designer's attractive offer at the top of the current ranking. "If any of you are able to equip them with high-quality implants, that would be great."

High-performing cranial implants were expensive and difficult to procure. They not only demanded the best first-class exotics in order to produce the high-quality miniaturized components that made them work so well, but they also had to be designed, configured and installed by the top implant experts in their respective fields.

Only the most renowned and established implant development companies could service this exclusive market.

While it was not that difficult for RA Masters to purchase this product for themselves, they were not able to buy it for others at an affordable price.

These people had to come up with other ways to win an opportunity to obtain a custom companion spirit.

"We have constructed a small but fully-equipped first-class outpost on a planet in the Caesarion Upper Zone." An associate spoke. "We initially planned to use it as the base of our operations to support our expansion into the interior of the Red Ocean, but recent events have caused us to shift our strategy. We originally intended to disassemble the outpost and ship back the modules to the Agamemnon Upper Zone, but I will transfer ownership to you as long as you agree to exchange two companion spirit quotas."

Ves shook his head. "Two is too much. The Caesarion Upper Zone will soon be engulfed in the flames of war as it is too close to the current frontlines. By the way, please take into account that I will only provide one quota per individual or group."

This was still an incredibly attractive offer despite all of the pitfalls. Ves was not sure whether he would want to keep the outpost in its current location. If not, he could always arrange for it to be moved to the rear, though the location probably wouldn't be as desirable due to excessive crowding.

At this point, the bids started to slow down as the top ones were already pretty expensive.

"Is there anyone among you who is willing to offer a first-class starship?"

Nobody obliged, much to Ves' disappointment. The value of starships had skyrocketed even further after the greater beyond gate got cut off. Even first-raters struggled to accumulate them given that they demanded a lot of expensive resources to build.

No one was crazy enough to trade a starship for a custom companion spirit!

Chapter 5186 EdNet

Now that the auction had reached this stage, few people continued to make their bids.

They carefully weighed their options and tried to tailor a bid that would successfully allow them to squeeze into fifth place.

While many of these people possessed a lot more assets than that, they needed to be careful about giving away their core assets for a rather abstract return.

No one was able to quantify the value of a companion spirit. While it promised to grant immediate short-term benefits, it took years of continuous growth in order for them to truly come into power.

This waiting period was a bit too long for many people. The coming difficulties meant that they needed to ensure they possessed sufficient capital to tide over the next few years.

This was why nobody gave up their own starships even if they had plenty in their possession.

"I wish to bid with five copies of my Kemon Divar C-Variant mech model." Another Master Mech Designer spoke. "My Kemon Divar is a line of first-class multipurpose mechs targeted towards security companies and other mid-range consumers. The C-Variant is adapted for spaceborn use and can help with defending fleets against threats at multiple ranges. If you agree to provide the phasewater, I can change the model to the more powerful and luxurious F-Variant, which is several times more effective in combat."

Ves looked tempted. Five serious commercial first-class multipurpose mechs could massively increase the combat power of his fleet.

He quickly shook his head. First-class multipurpose mechs sounded nice, but his clan lacked the pilots who could make full use of their advanced capabilities. It took a lot more training and learning to be able to operate these machines in a way that justified their inclusion.

Besides, the moment his clan started fielding first-class mechs was the moment where he and his clan would have to abide by an entirely different set of rules and obligations.

It was not wise to trigger this transition too early. Nobody in his clan was ready as of yet. Not even Ves thought he was qualified to design first-class multipurpose mechs that were up to the standard of a first-class Senior Mech Designer.

As long as these conditions weren't met, Ves was not inclined to accept this bid.

Besides, he wanted to design first-class mechs himself when the time was right. His clan depended on mechs designed in-house for over a decade and for good reasons. Every machine was alive, and many of them had grown considerably stronger after years of active service.

The ideal way to handle this situation was to gradually upgrade his existing stock of mechs to quasi-first-class versions.

Once his mech pilots all got used to fighting at a higher intensity, Ves wanted to upgrade those machines to proper first-class mechs.

The 'multipurpose' part was not entirely necessary as far as Ves was concerned. The Ouroboros already proved in part that simpler mechs that fit more restricted archetypes still had value at the first-class level.

So long as Ves kept his first-class mech designs as simple and familiar as possible, he hoped that all of his existing veteran mech pilots would be able to accompany him in his journey.

In any case, Ves automatically assigned a low value to any offer that included first-class mechs. The attendees soon got the message and stopped offering their own work.

Jovy suddenly received a transmission that contained a discreet offer. He frowned as he struggled to judge how much value he should ascribe to this vague description.

He silently passed it over to Ves.

"Look at this. It is related to cultivation."

When Ves inwardly read through the bid, he immediately became excited!

He tried his best to suppress any outward reactions, but it was hard to contain his glee.

The reason why he became so enthused about this offer was because it not only had to do with cultivation science, but also happened to be highly relevant to his professional interests!

He read the message once again in order to make sure he did not misjudge the value of the bid.

(I am the patriarch of the Becker-Anson Family. My relatives and I are descendants from an ancient lineage that is purported to be led by a legendary figure that claims to be a Divine Blacksmith. Our records of these ancient times are spotty and incomplete, so I cannot verify whether they are accurate. The reason why we are confident that we are indeed related to this ancient figure is because we are in possession of remnant notes and scriptures that the blacksmith has left behind. We have brought them here in order to enlist the Red Association's aid in translating and interpreting the ancient letters. I am offering to give you access to the translated texts once they are available. If you prefer to study the ancient scriptures directly in their original form, I am open to granting you the right to peruse them in person for the duration of this conference.)

Ves was not surprised that Jovy punted this ball to him. It sounded a bit sketchy. Few people alive today knew what a Divine Blacksmith was supposed to be. It could just be a particularly talented but relatively mundane craftsman who just happened to have an overinflated reputation during his lifetime.

The truth was much different, however. Ves couldn't help but recall the description of the Divine Blacksmith Records enlightenment fruit that he caught sight of not too long ago. The high price tag deterred him from purchasing it, but it also highlighted the value of this ancient heritage!

There was a chance that the two might be related. The probability was low, but not zero.

It could also be that whatever tattered records the Becker-Anson Family managed to preserve over the course of hundreds of thousands of years might not be complete enough anymore to provide much value.

Ves did not want to miss this opportunity, though. He speculated that a Divine Blacksmith might be one of the most representative types of creation cultivator during ancient times.

The much more modern tradition of mech design might have been based on some of the working principles of this older profession.

If this was the case, then Ves would be able to learn secrets that allowed him to understand the foundation of mech design.

Aside from that, the scriptures might also provide more guidance to Vulcan, allowing him to advance his understanding of traditional craftsmanship by leaps and bounds!

The list of top 5 offers changed. The anonymized bid took fourth place for the time being.

Ves would have valued it higher if not for the vagueness and uncertainty surrounding these ancient scriptures.

"Anyone further bids?"

A few more trickled in, but none of them were valuable enough to shake the top 5. These people were just giving it a try to see if they could get a deal out of this auction.

It was at this point that one of the three bigshots made a bid for the first time.

Both Ves and Jovy had been monitoring the actions of the representatives of the three dominant cliques of the Survivalist Faction.

Compared to individual mechers and associates, the three envoys had access to a much greater quantity and variety of bargaining chips.

Master Xena Wintress of the Xenotechnician sub-faction instantly silenced the hall when she spoke.

"I am willing to bid 10 permanent quotas to our Association's EdNet. Professor Armalon may have already informed you what that means. If he hasn't, then you only need to understand that the EdNet is a deep virtual reality training and education solution that immerses a human into a long-duration interfacing pod. The reason for doing so is that the pod can accelerate the neural transmissions and thinking speeds of the trainees so that they can effectively perceive time at a faster rate. Time inside the EdNet's enclosed virtual environment can pass up to five times greater than normal."

This was an incredibly valuable offer and exactly what Ves wanted to obtain during this auction!

The EdNet was the Mech Trade Association's traditional method of quickly bringing people up to standard.

What Master Wintress said was correct. Through a mixture of different treatments, it was possible to accelerate the subjective experience of time of an individual by 5 times.

This meant that people could spend 5 times learning essential skills inside the EdNet while only a single year passed in the material realm!

Not even the MSTS could replicate this amazing benefit!

As Ves grew more and more excited about this amazing bid, Jovy transmitted a few caveats over their private communication channel.

"The EdNet is generally good, but it is not perfect. The infrastructure required to operate it is... immense. The only way for people to connect to it is to send them to the Vulit Central Star Node or another core star system under the control of the Red Association. Anyone you send cannot be pulled out in advance as this will inflict great damage to their health. They will have to remain connected for a full term, which is 2 years at minimum and 4 years at maximum. Once completed, it is not possible for the same individual to enter the EdNet within 20 standard years."

Ves did not hear about this before. The EdNet was not harmless. It induced great stress onto the central nervous systems of its users, so much so that their brains incurred actual damage!

This was why a recovery period of 2 decades was mandatory. The mechers did not recommend that anyone connect to the EdNet after this time had passed because it was just too damaging.

Nonetheless, Ves strongly believed that many of his clansmen needed this powerful learning tool!

Ves was not sure how much a single quota was worth. 10 quotas was not enough to uplift the entire clan into a first-class organization, but it at least allowed him to uplift a small group of hand-picked confidantes ahead of time!

"Is the EdNet accessible to both potentates and non-potentates?"

"Both mech pilots and non-mech pilots can make use of it. It works better for potentates. The higher their genetic aptitude, the lighter the strain. Potentates with A or B-grade genetic aptitudes can comfortably make use of the EdNet while suffering minimal damage to their brains, especially when they have the appropriate augmentations. Pilots with lower genetic aptitudes can still make use of the EdNet, but their effective combat performance will degrade at a faster rate. The problem is compounded when piloting highly complex first-class multipurpose mechs. If these mech pilots cannot make enough progress, they will be forced to retire a few decades earlier than normal."

All of this information was new to Ves. He never knew that genetic aptitude made such an enormous difference to the EdNet.

"Does that mean that non-potentates effectively incur the most brain damage from using the EdNet?" Ves asked.

"That is correct. The danger sounds serious, but the actual neurological damage is not noticeable for most professionals. The human brain can tolerate a surprising amount of defects. The right gene treatments and cranial implants can protect the nerves from degrading too quickly, and extensive medical treatments during and after the lengthy session can lower the damage even more. This is the reason why many mechers have not devolved into drooling idiots after they emerged from the EdNet."

It was much better to learn stuff the old-fashioned way rather than rely on the EdNet.

However, if there were no alternatives, then the EdNet was an effective way to quickly overcome the skill and knowledge gap!

Ves no longer held any doubts towards this bid and put on second place, elevating it above the first-class outpost bid.

The main reason why he did not rank it at the top was because Master Wintress only included 10 quotas in her bid.

At least the quotas were permanent. Ves could continue to rotate his men for as long as the Red Association maintained the EdNet.

Chapter 5187 Lucky Captain

As the auction neared its end, Ves already felt more than satisfied with the top 5 bids!

They encompassed a variety of boons that enriched his clan as well as his personal interests. The mechers normally never offered these bids to associates under normal circumstances.

Once the bid of Master Xena Wintress showed up on the list, many people continued to observe the other two envoys.

In the end, Master Tolarian Cerny declined to make a bid.

Master Henry Urbeck who represented the interests of the Fist of Defiance made the final major bid in this auction.

"We have... connections with the Red Fleet. Given your prior history with fighting against numerous different alien fleets, we can arrange an RF Frigate Warship Token for you. This token will be bound to your name. Take note that the fleeters have the right to deprive it from you as long as you abuse your privileges."

"What?!"

The audience showed a much greater reaction this time!

No one could have imagined that the Fist of Defiance could actually help Ves obtain an actual token!

Very few of them had been issued since the Red Fleet announced its controversial Warship Quota Program.

It would be an amazing benefit if the Larkinson Clan was one of the few who managed to win a token, even if it was the least valuable among the ones included in the program.

A frigate was larger than a mech, but not large enough to pose a great threat towards a decently-sized mech force.

However, a small warship was better than no warship as far as Ves was concerned!

The Larkinson Clan did not even have to wait for the Diligent Ovenbird or an external shipyard to construct an armed frigate. It could quickly put its token to good use by repairing and refurbishing one of the many captured alien vessels that fell within the specifications of the token!

The Larkinsons could even field the archship captured by Lucky as long as they managed to repair her systems and learned how to operate her properly!

The requirements were a bit high, though. The archship had incurred a fair amount of internal damage, so no one had a good idea how reliable she was in her current state.

Repairing the archship required special knowledge on archetech that the Larkinson Clan did not possess at this time.

Even if Larkinsons were able to repair the archship, she was nothing more than a gigantic alien monument so long as no one was able to control all of her systems!

While the relatively small alien stealth vessel included a number of backup controls that enabled humans to turn off the lighting, open certain hatches and so on, this was far from enough to put this incredibly valuable warship in the field!

The clan needed to gain full control over her systems. In order to make that happen, the Larkinsons needed to interface with her archetech systems somehow.

This was easier said than done. Humans did not possess the archshells required to directly interface with the archship. Perhaps the Xenotechnician and his researchers may have figured out a way to circumvent this requirement, but Ves did not get his hopes up that he and his clan could obtain their solution.

The only member of the Larkinson Clan that had demonstrated slightly greater control over the archship than others was... Lucky.

For a brief moment of time, Ves visualized a highly unusual scenario.

An archship roamed across the stars in total stealth. The repaired and modified alien vessel slipped behind enemy lines with confidence and quietly approached isolated enemy ships and ambushed them without mercy!

Once the battle had ended before it properly started, the handful of surviving aliens who were taken prisoner attempted to look their captors in the face in order to voice their defiance.

Yet when these alien captives were finally brought inside the archeship, it turned out the ship was crewed by a colony of intelligent cats!

Each cat wore the red uniforms and protective suits of the Larkinson Clan.

The most important feline of all was Lucky, whose recently transformed archemetal body enabled him to control the archeship as if he was an actual member of the arche race!

"Meow!"

Ves shook his head to get rid of this silly notion.

There was no way he would invest Lucky as the captain of the archeship and allow him to roam the new frontier like a feline freebooter!

The entire notion sounded absurd, even though there was an actual chance to make this happen!

If Ves was able to make the archeship usable, then he preferred to keep her under human control.

Who knew what kind of mischief Lucky would get up to if he gained sole control over this small but incredibly slippery vessel!

Ves would never allow Captain Lucky to roam the stars by himself!

It was much better if the Larkinson Clan could design and construct an armed frigate from scratch.

The Naval Design Department could finally tackle an exciting new project. Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai and her staff might not have any experience with designing warships, but they were quick learners who already learned a lot of lessons from examining captured alien vessels!

A warship of the frigate classification was also small enough to limit the technological complexity of the hull. There was simply not enough capacity to fit a lot of advanced and powerful ship systems.

Even the gun batteries had to be fairly tame and limited in size in order to fit the hull.

In fact, there were many possible ways to design and configure a frigate. Ves personally did not see much of a point in mounting a large quantity of moderately sized gun batteries onto her hull.

This was the most traditional way to outfit a frigate. They excelled at point defense and shredding small craft, but were awful at damaging larger vessels.

A warship token did not restrict the caliber of gun batteries of a vessel as far as Ves knew, so it was completely possible to adopt the opposite configuration!

Instead of equipping a ship with guns, the Larkinsons could equip an enormous cannon with ship modules!

In other words, Naval Design Department could essentially design a dedicated ship killer frigate.

In this case, the entire length of the frigate's hull wrapped around an oversized naval cannon.

This disproportionately powerful gun imposed such a heavy load on the frigate that the ship had no capacity left to accommodate any other weapon systems or useful auxiliary functions!

In order to maximize her firepower to the best possible extent, the ship designers would also have to make compromises in many other areas. The frigate would move as slow as a capital ship and become awfully vulnerable to attacks.

Was it really worth it to sacrifice so much just to field an unbalanced ship killer frigate?

Hell yes! Ves couldn't count the number of times where he wanted to gain a lot of hard firepower to overcome the absurdly strong transphasic energy shields of alien warships.

It took a lot of mechs or expensive transphasic weapons to chew through those defenses. The time and effort expended on this chore resulted in significant delays and led to the deaths of a considerable number of mech pilots in every battle.

A ship killer frigate might not be able to fight an alien warship by herself, but she was an excellent complement to a mech army that did not have access to any other large caliber weapon systems!

As long as Ves was able to apply some of his unique solutions to the warship, her effective firepower may exceed every other comparable frigate!

This was a much more palatable alternative to putting the token to use by putting Lucky in charge of the archship.

Ves no longer held any doubts and ranked Master Urbeck's bid at the very top.

An RA Frigate Warship Token was just that valuable!

Though the changes triggered a small discussion among the attendees, nobody expressed any serious objections towards the ranking.

It was largely based on Ves' subjective needs. The mechers might not have a high opinion of the Red Fleet, but that was because they already fielded their own warships!

The Larkinson Clan did not enjoy this privilege, so a warship token sounded particularly attractive to Ves. There was no way that he wanted to let this permit slip from his grasp, so he put it right at the top!

A few more minutes passed by as a handful of individuals issued cautious bids. None of them managed to get in the top 5, so Ves was ready to conclude this event.

He found it a bit odd that Master Tolarian Cerny did not make a bid on behalf of the Polymath's clique.

"Don't bother waiting." Jovy communicated to Ves. "I already have a companion spirit. The Polymath and her followers have already examined my Eye of Providence in great detail. Companion spirits are not as mysterious to them anymore."

That made sense, sort of. Ves clapped his hands in order to signal the end of the auction.

"The bidding window has closed! Thank you for participating in this auction. I am sincerely grateful to all of you for showing so much willingness to exchange your benefits with mine. The time allotted to this closed session has run out. This ends my presentation on companion spirits. I hope that each of you as well as the red humanity can gain strength from them. If you can, please convince your colleagues and superiors to support the initiative to grow companion spirit fruit trees

en masse and make their fruits available to the wider public. The more humans become empowered by companion spirits, the faster our race can assimilate in our new cosmic neighborhood."

Much of the 700 attendees chose to clap their hands and applaud Ves for taking the initiative to share this potentially life-changing invention.

All of them recognized the magnitude of his contribution even though nothing had happened as of yet. As long as companion spirits were truly as safe and useful as Ves claimed, there was no way the Red Association could stop their adoption!

The only questionable part was mass production. The Red Association's research groups still had to solve a lot of problems before these vital trees could be multiplied to a point where their fruits could readily meet all of the demand.

As Ves and Jovy surrendered the hall to the next assigned speaker, the three envoys called the two over so that they could hold a discussion in a more private setting.

"Come. There is a secure meeting room on the next deck where we can discuss our initial decisions towards your proposal."

It did not take long for them to enter a secure meeting compartment that was already configured for sensitive talks.

The two groups sat on the opposite end of a square metal table.

Ves understood that the most important moment had come. The only Survivalists who had the right to decide upon this enormous matter were the three faction leaders.

It was not necessary for two Star Designers and a god pilot to pass judgment on this matter in person, so the envoys effectively possessed the power to make the initial decision on what to do with companion spirits.

"Professor Ves Larkinson." Master Xena Wintress broke the silence. "First of all, congratulations for holding your first presentation in our conference. Your reputation and word of your innovation will have undoubtedly spread among our members and associates. We are not satisfied with the lack of extensive testing data, but we judge your work to be practical and useful enough to permit an initial rollout among a select group of humans. Once we have solved the mass production issue, we will decide on how extensively red humanity can gain access to companion spirit fruits."

Master Tolarian Cerny spoke next. "There are arguments in favor of universal adoption. There are also arguments in opposition to this stance. As the inventor of companion spirits, we would like you to provide your input on how companion spirits should be utilized by our race. We will take your opinions into account when we draft our follow-up policies."

"Regardless of our decisions, we will credit your work to your name." Master Henry Urbeck said with an approving smile. "We have not overlooked your selfless dedication to the cause of our collective survival. Depending on how extensively we make use of your invention, you are entitled to receive much greater rewards than a RA warship token."

The mention of greater rewards immediately caused Ves to grow more excited. The following discussion was critical to his ambitions!

Chapter 5188 Mobilize The Population

The closed sessions on companion spirits was already a fantastic success as far as Ves knew.

He constantly gauged the mood and receptiveness of his audience during his presentation. While the attendees did not form a representative sample of the larger population of mechers and red humans, not many of them exhibited any serious signs of rejection or concern.

There were always small groups of people who valued the sanctity of their mind and souls. The very notion of eating a strange fruit that caused them to spawn an entirely new personality in their own bodies sounded like the beginning of a horror drama to their ears.

Ves did not expect to win over everybody. He just wanted to obtain sufficient support from both the grassroots and the upper echelon to attain widespread adoption if not acceptance across society.

From what it looked like, he sold the benefits of companion spirits well enough to build up a huge amount of demand to anyone who became aware of their existence!

He could already imagine the conversations spreading across the halls and corridors outside of this secure chamber.

Much of the details surrounding companion spirits had to remain confidential in order to prevent anyone with red or purple dots on their badges from getting the wrong idea.

However, the existence of companion spirits by themselves was not prohibited. As such, many of the 700 mechers and associates eagerly spread the word and shared the potentially explosive benefits of having them to any of their friends and acquaintances aboard the Khamatar Reign!

Once the conference came to an end, thousands if not tens of thousands of people would soon go back to their old haunts and tip off a lot more people of this amazing new 'augmentation1'!

As the inventor of companion spirits, Ves was entitled to earn a lot of credit and recognition. If everything proceeded as he hoped, he would definitely be celebrated as one of the major contributors of red humanity!

From the moment he concluded his presentation, his identity had already changed. Ves knew it was impossible for him to cling onto the identity of an 'ordinary' associate or an 'ordinary' second-class Senior Mech Designer.

When the benefits of companion spirits to humanity were so great that they had reached the standard where they could be featured in the announcement of the next mech generation, Ves knew that he had formally entered the big leagues of his civilization!

This brought amazing benefits as well as a lot of new dangers to him. There was no way he could roam the new frontier as casually as before.

Ves was afraid of what might come, but he knew he didn't really have another choice. All of the other alternatives were worse.

In order to avoid the fate of cannon fodder, he needed to speed up his rise to power, and the only way he could do so with his current means was to follow Calabast's advice and pursue a high-profile strategy!

As Ves sat in front of the three hand-picked representatives of a handful of the most powerful human leaders in the Red Ocean, he realized he had reached a critical junction where he could shape his own future.

The three Master Mech Designers did not have to listen to the input of a mere associate. They could make decisions entirely on their own based on the information that Ves had provided during the presentation. Each of them were incredibly intelligent and possessed far greater awareness of the needs and the circumstances of red human civilization.

However, that did not happen. Each of them reserved precious time from their busy schedules in order to accommodate and indulge Ves in person. This was a very clear message and indication that his soft power and influence among the Survivalists and beyond had broken through a new threshold!

He knew what he had to do during this time. He had to demonstrate that he possessed the maturity, judgment and wisdom to play the game at an exceedingly high level.

There was no need for him to be as brilliant as a first-class politician raised from birth. His value rested in his ability to innovate fantastic new solutions that could help red humanity tide over the current crisis. He just had to avoid sounding like a fool. He also had to avoid any irresponsible remarks.

As Ves mulled over the question that he was supposed to answer, he decided to voice his true opinion.

"When I initially came up with companion spirits, I did not expect this to be more than a privilege that is reserved for my closest friends and family." He said. "It was only recently that breakthroughs in the relevant research project opened up a lot more options for everyone. Given how cultivation is on the rise and how companion spirits can amplify the extraordinary growth efforts of any red human, my invention can easily raise the comprehensive strength of our people and civilization to a whole new level. If everyone has become as strong as a dragon with the aid of their own companion spirits, is there any reason for us to fear the native aliens of the Red Ocean?"

This was the dream that many people had in mind when they learned about companion spirits.

Whether it could come true was not entirely certain. The Red Association still needed to find a way to mass produce companion spirit fruit trees, but this should not be too difficult given how much research ability it commanded.

Master Tolarian Cerny appeared particularly receptive towards this vision. "The Polymath is in favor of any initiative that can enhance the potential of our entire race. It does not appear that the cost of production is a major burden. The most important input is E energy radiation, and the trees can absorb that for free in any location. If that is the case, then we can turn companion spirit fruits into a universal benefit. This should have massive implications for our entire society. An uncountable amount of lives will transform forever. What we find particularly encouraging about your companion spirits is that they offer hope to the weakest and least capable of our population."

That was right! Ves understood what Master Cerny was talking about.

To the individuals who already had easy access to augmentations and superior education, companion spirits were like icing on the cake. They most definitely brought a lot of benefits to the

lives of individual Terrans and Rubarthans, but it was not as if this addition completely changed their lives.

At most, companion spirits functioned like another augment in their large collection of other enhancements. The marginal improvements to their lives were rather modest in the greater scheme of things.

The situation was completely different for third-raters. The citizens of the lower zones that Ves had almost entirely ignored ever since he entered the Red Ocean did not have access to so many fancy gene treatments and implants.

They lived in the most resource-poor regions and had to work with inferior means. This caused them to remain incredibly weak and incapable of playing a more significant role in defending red humanity against the onslaught of aliens.

While their third-class mechs and fleets were able to put up at least some fight against the rabble of the native alien races, their fragile tin-can assets easily fell apart as soon as they got ambushed by a ship or a fleet of a much more powerful race!

Against the might of potent transphasic gun batteries, transphasic energy shields and dazzlingly fast warp drives, no third-class fleet could ever hope to form a proper resistance against the more serious native fighting forces!

Quantity did not help as the tech and performance disparities were so great that a single superior ship could wipe out thousands of inferior vessels in a prolonged battle!

In this circumstance, companion spirits introduced an alternate means of empowerment that was a lot more affordable than the more traditional technological solutions.

If third-raters couldn't become strong enough to defend their homes against the aliens because they couldn't obtain stronger machines, then they could partially compensate for this shortcoming by strengthening their human resources instead!

Ves did not have a clear idea on how exactly this was supposed to happen. Companion spirits gave people a much easier path towards cultivation, but the choice of cultivation methods played a crucial role on how they developed in the future.

This was not his problem. He was sure that the Survivalists and the Red Association would prepare tailor-made cultivation methods for the masses that enabled a large proportion of them to become a lot more useful in the escalating conflict.

Ves constantly had to remind himself that not every problem was his problem. He was part of an enormous community. There were plenty of clever people around who could handle these affairs a lot better than a simple mech designer.

However, not everyone was in agreement with this universal approach.

"We cannot afford to pamper the weak." Master Henry Urbeck espoused the view of the Fist of Defiance. "Propping up the third-raters just so they can play a minor role in the war is not worthwhile. By giving out these fruits for free, we devalue them. People will begin to take their companion spirits for granted since everyone else already has them. No matter how cheap it is to

mass produce these fruits, we need to restrict their spread by raising the threshold of earning them. Only by making them earn their companion spirits through hard work will they continue to invest significant effort into growing them. This way, we can ensure that the limited resources at our disposal will mainly be used to benefit the strongest and most hard-working human heroes."

This opinion did not sit well with Master Cerny. The other man felt it was a waste to heavily restrict the spread of companion spirit fruits and completely disregard the possible contributions that third-raters could make.

"Our population is too small as it is now that we are cut off from the Milky Way." The Polymath's envoy critiqued. "Do not exacerbate the problem by limiting this new augmentation to a select few elites."

Master Urbeck crossed his arms. "A companion spirit must become the mark of heroes. The way I see it, we should reserve the fruits that grant them to those who seriously contribute to the survival of our race. If our faction has chosen to settle for our Deep Strike Plan, we can issue these fruits as a reward for every human who participates in a deep strike operation. Each and every soldier who risks his life by going deep behind enemy lines deserves to earn this life-changing reward! Others who do not bear the same risks but contribute in a different form may also earn companion spirit fruits without necessarily risking their lives. Think of financing the operation, providing the essential starships or designing many of the mechs chosen by the raiding units. Whatever the case, people who sit back and do little to increase our chances of winning the war are not deserving of this reward."

"That will split our society in half! Inequality will increase to a level unseen since ancient times!" Master Cerny protested! "Previous generations of humans have worked hard to build a modern and mutually supportive society where every person can attain the opportunities they need to climb the social ladder and better themselves. Professor Larkinson here is one of the best success stories of that. Many more hidden talents may be buried among the third-class colonists that occupy the lower zones. They only need a single opportunity to reveal their impressive talents. Companion spirits have the potential to lift them out of their mudballs. Universal proliferation is the right course of action if we want to uplift red humanity as a whole."

"Not everyone deserves to be uplifted! We have entered a time of unprecedented danger and turmoil! We must abide by the survival of the fittest, not the survival of the deadbeats and wastrels. A modern society cannot properly cope in a situation where it is beset by an overwhelming amount of hostile civilizations. We must recognize our new reality and accept that we have entered a new phase where only the best can lead us to victory."

It became increasingly more clear that the Fist of Defiance and the Polymath held opposing attitudes in how to mobilize the population. They did not appear to be able to find a compromise on this contentious issue!

Chapter 5189 Unique Trade Good

Ves had unintentionally triggered a highly contentious and acrimonious debate on the utilization of companion spirits.

Inventing it was one thing. Deciding on how to make use of it was another thing!

Although Ves did not mind it if he had to wade into this discussion under normal circumstances, what complicated it was that it also came with enormous political implications.

The Fist of Defiance and the Polymath were completely different people, but they were also powerful visionaries who possessed extremely strong opinions on how to lead red humanity in the new age.

To be fair, Ves thought that both of their arguments made a lot of sense.

On the one hand, much of red humanity actually consisted of third-raters who were largely useless in the current conflict.

From a strategic perspective, their main purpose was to provide a lot of low-level labor and resources. They could occasionally spawn superior talents for second-rate powers, but the vast majority of them remained almost entirely irrelevant in relation to the war that had engulfed the entire Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy.

Turning each of them into cultivators could completely transform their usefulness to society!

In a time where red humanity did not have the luxury to wait for better solutions, this might be the best way to slow down the increasingly more serious alien onslaught.

On the other hand, Ves found himself resonating with the vision espoused by the Fist of Defiance.

Ves had always taken a lot of risks and ventured into the less explored regions of space for riches and rewards. He made a lot of gains in his expeditions, but there were many times where he felt that those who did not take the same risks were somehow inferior to him and his clan.

The differences between his people and the general public became more and more obvious over time.

The civilians who lived in an ordinary settlement did not have the slightest clue about what true hardship looked like. Their lives were placid as they behaved like drones that never thought about moving outside of their highly structured places in society.

It was easy for the Larklnsons to look at these ordinary people with contempt. The Red Ocean offered so much wealth and opportunities, but all these colonists had done since they came here was to repeat the old routines of their original lives in a different environment!

Ves inwardly shook his head whenever his thoughts strayed in this dark direction. This was not a healthy or proper mindset. Not everyone was cut out to be a soldier or a risk taker. Even ordinary civilians had a place in society as they worked on new scientific developments and kept the factories running.

He spent so much effort climbing up the ladder that he was starting to forget his humble roots. This was a natural development brought about by a widening perspective and increasingly greater isolation from the grassroots, but it was a depressing change nonetheless.

Ves glanced at Master Henry Urbeck and Master Tolarian Cerny. Their opinions were not their own. They put voice to the thoughts and the ideals of their powerful leaders and their large base of followers.

Neither of them were entirely right or wrong. They just preferred to solve a problem in different ways.

When Ves was asked for his personal input on this issue, he found it difficult to pick a side.

He could choose not to voice an opinion, but that was a cowardly decision. Ves could not avoid politics now that he had climbed up to this height.

He took a deep breath before he issued his response.

"Exotic radiation is changing all life in the Red Ocean no matter what we decide. Our race is transforming into something completely different over time. Decades from now, red humanity may have diverged so much from original humanity that we can hardly recognize each other anymore."

"What are you trying to convey, Professor Larkinson?"

"Power will come to people for as long as Messier 87 floods the surrounding space with exotic radiation. A lot of third-raters will experience certain degrees of mutations and additional powers. Their ability to cope with them is not good. They can easily harm themselves and the people around them if they do not know what to do. Companion spirits can provide a lot of help with learning how to handle E energy radiation in a safer and more effective manner. As energy-based life forms, they are much better suited to operate in an environment with greater energy density than before."

Master Henry Urbeck frowned at those words. "So you are of the opinion that companion spirits must be given to the masses regardless of whether they are deserving of them or not. I can understand the noble sentiment behind this approach. You care about their health and wellbeing. However, your compassion will not avail us anything if our soft and benevolent policies ultimately fail to stave off total defeat."

Though the powerful Master exerted a considerable amount of pressure, Ves maintained a straight posture as he continued to voice his own opinions.

"I do not accept the premise that a single invention, no matter how life-changing it may be, can decide the life and death of red humanity. There are so many brilliant and amazing innovators among us that it is our collective efforts that will help us turn the war around. Don't get me wrong, Master Urbeck. I do not oppose the strategy that you have espoused. I do not mind cooperating with it if the Survivalists end up voting for it. I just think that with all of the changes happening around us, we should endeavor to cling to the remaining pieces of our humanity."

Those words caused the three Masters to fall silent for a number of seconds. Ves had offered a gracious response. He stuck to his own stances without fear and without nakedly sucking up to anyone.

The sincerity struck a tone in the hearts of the older mech designers.

The only female Master in the chamber broke the silence.

She had remained silent for a long time as she allowed her other two peers to collide their ideas against each other.

The Xenotechnician had a very different use in mind for companion spirits.

"I would like to ask a question, Professor Larkinson. You have already told us that you have made precautions that can prevent your fruits from being used to empower our adversaries. Are you certain that your security measures will hold? I do not think I need to explain how much of a

calamity it will be when the phase whales and our other more intractable alien opponents gain the power to properly harness E energy radiation."

"It won't happen." Ves stated with confidence. "There is a... strong entity that regulates every companion spirit tree. Since she is the sole supplier of the sole type of E energy needed to make the fruits work, she can easily deny any unauthorized applications of my work."

The mention of the word 'entity' caused Xena Wintress to grow more suspicious.

"Would you like to elaborate on this key factor? Is she a human, alien, or one of your 'design spirits' that are prominently associated with your iconic products?"

"The last one." Ves honestly answered. "She may not be human, but she is fully aligned with our race. I am aware that it is not entirely ideal for us to rely on this factor to maintain the efficacy of our companion spirit fruits, but any solution is better than no solution."

That caused Master Wintress to offer a slight grin. "So if we make use of your companion spirit fruit trees in any capacity, our race has already begun to cooperate with an alien. You may very well be the first red human in our society to embark on cross-species collaboration that is highly beneficial to our species!"

That assertion caused everyone else to be taken aback!

Ves never regarded this work in this light! No matter whether it was his mech designs or his companion spirit fruits, he mainly considered them to be the results of his efforts alone.

After all, his design spirits weren't really external factors given that he had created most of them by his own hand!

However, Master Wintress was not wrong to characterize his work in this manner.

She continued to press Ves by asking another question.

"We are aware that you have spent years on testing your fruits onto an extensive number of alien test subjects. This means that it is possible for you to develop fruits and trees that are specifically locked to races of your choosing, is that correct?"

Ves nodded a lot more reluctantly this time. "That is the case..."

Master Wintress grinned at this point. "That is an excellent response! We can make use of companion spirit fruits as an exclusive trade good. This can become a powerful point of leverage that can help us convert one of the hostile alien races into allies of convenience. So long as we limit and control the supply of companion spirit fruits that are attuned to our new friends, we can incentivize them to keep cooperating."

That sounded crazy!

However, it might actually work!

The allure of companion spirits was undeniable. Both humans and aliens had the potential to benefit enormously from them. This presented additional support for the Diplomacy Plan.

There weren't a lot of means for the relatively weak and outnumbered red humans to maintain the allegiance of foreign allies.

Without sufficient leverage, those seemingly friendly aliens could turn their faces at any time and stab red humanity in the back during a critical time!

This was where companion spirit fruits could make a crucial difference. If the leaders of the alien civilizations had grown dependent on this unique human trade good, they stood to gain a lot more benefits by maintaining the current relationship rather than ruin any further chances to give themselves and their offspring a new way to gain power.

All of this sounded great if not for the fact that this entire plan might become the prelude of an even greater future disaster!

What if all of those 'friendly' aliens who gained companion spirits became a lot more powerful than before?

What if those friends grew so fast because of this that the disparity in power had become a lot more severe?

There was a good possibility that those aliens would choose to crush their former pals in an attempt to rob humanity's heritage by force!

No alliance could survive in the long run when the parties diverged so much. Handing over companion spirit fruits to friendly aliens was a short term solution that could buy more time for red humanity.

Everyone still needed to rely on other measures to truly prevent red humanity from going extinct.

"We cannot proceed with sharing one of our new and most significant advances with our alien rivals." Master Henry Urbeck declared. "We shall only tempt fate if we do so. Companion spirit fruits should be known to the wider public as an exclusively human benefit. Don't you agree, Professor Larkinson?"

Ugh. This was another highly contentious political debate. Ves was not in the mood to wade into this particular affair, but he couldn't get away by saying nothing at this junction.

"I am of the opinion that red humanity needs to gain a racial advantage over all of the other aliens that occupy the Red Ocean. It is a crude but effective means of making our adversaries take us more seriously. The phase whales are respected because of their high intelligence and amazing phasewater integration. The nunsers are both numerous and combative. The puelmers are excellent at assimilating and adapting advanced technologies. As for us... we possess many advantages as a whole, but a lot of individual humans are rather weak and unimpressive. We can turn that around by using companion spirits as a common trait of our race. If we begin to share our fruits to the aliens, then red humanity will lose this distinction. I think that is a shame."

Chapter 5190 Ves The Bigshot

Ves did not exactly know what he got pulled into. He initially thought that this would be a simple discussion on his possible rewards for making an amazing contribution and handing it over to the Survivalist Faction.

Instead, he got dragged into a political debate where the ideologies of the three leaders of the faction collided against each other.

Ves not only gained a greater understanding of what each faction leader stood for, but also managed to make a strong impression in front of the three Master Mech Designers.

It was incredibly fascinating to hear how the top leaders dealt with these kinds of affairs. Ves had never come closer to decision-making on a level that could not only affect red humanity as a whole, but also the lives of every other alien in the same dwarf galaxy!

A huge amount of responsibility rested on the shoulders of these decision makers. They were all tasked with defining a strategy that could help red humanity survive the adverse circumstances it was facing at this time.

Ves did not think he was close to ready to wield this kind of responsibility.

A single mistake no longer risked the lives of himself, his family and his clan around him. A misstep might instead doom the lives of trillions of red humans that sought salvation from the wrong messiah.

As the interesting and unusual debate slowly came to a close, the three Masters finally chose to move on to more immediately relevant business.

"We have not decided as of yet how we wish to roll out your companion spirit fruits." Master Tolarian Cerny informed Ves. "Our policy concerning this particular contribution will be decided after the vote is held. I can already tell you that we will endeavor to use it on a larger scale in at least some capacity. This means that we already recognize and accept your major contribution to the common good of our race and civilization. Unless a later discovery has been made that puts the safety of your work into question, we will make extensive use of it to strengthen ourselves one way or another."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That is why I have taken the initiative to present it to you all. It would be a tragedy if my hard work and effort remains unused."

"Your contribution, as impressive as it may be, also puts us in a quandary." Master Henry Urbeck mentioned.

"How so, Master?"

"We are not accustomed to situations where we are confronted by an invention that affects our society to such a drastic degree that originates from... a young independent mech designer."

That was probably the most gracious way to describe Ves' inferior identity and status.

Master Xena Wintress concurred. "It is much more usual to receive contributions of this level from fellow Master Mech Designers, renowned and established research institutions and top developers. They are predominately first-raters who already have lengthy track records of progressively greater contributions. There is not much harm for them to earn slightly greater recognition than they have already attained. You... are in a different position from them. Your success is too abrupt."

"Let us be blunt with you." Master Henry Urbeck spoke. "Our study and analysis of all of your work up to this date suggests that you are being wasted in your current position as a second-class pioneer. You can make significantly greater contributions and help us defend our limited territories much more effectively if you have become a proper first-class mech designer with a strong organization and an extensive network of contacts."

Master Tolarian Cerny folded his hands on the table. "The issue is that this description does not match your current conditions. It is in our best interests to pull you into this higher orbit, but doing so has often proven to produce mixed results. The gap is too wide to make the transition instant. You must undergo a gradual but still relatively brisk transition period where you can become an actual first-class mech designer that is ready to assist our entire race against the predations of native alien races."

Ves figured most of this out himself. To hear that even the Survivalists struggled to do something about it said a lot about how difficult it was for them to come up with an adequate resolution.

"So what happens now?" He asked in a more casual tone than he should.

He was growing a little impatient with all of the dancing around. He wanted to hear a verdict right away so that he could move on to fulfilling his orders and attend other interesting sessions.

"You are scheduled to preside over other sessions in the following days. In anticipation of subsequent contributions, we think it is best that we defer our announcement of your combined rewards until the end of this conference."

"We can already give you a preview of what to expect." Master Xena Wintress spoke with a generous smile. "Your galactic citizenship will rise from tier 6 to tier 4. This is what you are entitled to after you have presented your companion spirits to us for the good of this branch of humanity."

"Galactic citizenship is not necessarily earned. It is a formal recognition of a fact that has already been established. It mostly serves to signal to the wider public that you are a valued human contributor that has become a living treasure to our entire race."

"Higher tiers of galactic citizenship are associated with progressively greater benefits, privileges and most importantly protection. A tier 4 galactic citizen is much more prominent than a tier 6 galactic citizen. This is a stage where hundreds of powerful first-class organizations will begin to scrutinize you in an attempt to exploit you to their own advantage. Even if they show considerable restraint, they may not necessarily have your best interests at heart."

"As such, one of the permanent benefits of tier 4 galactic citizenship is that you have the right to be accompanied by a small escort from the Red Association or the Red Fleet. The combat strength of this escort may not necessarily be high, but their presence serves as an open reminder and deterrent to other parties that your continued survival and wellbeing is of material importance to our entire civilization."

"Not every tier 4 galactic citizen makes use of this privilege. Terran and Rubarthan Master Mech Designers can already count on formidable protection from their respective states or organizations. This benefit primarily exists to serve as essential protection for more vulnerable contributors such as yourself. You may choose to reject it for whatever reason, but we can guarantee you that you will fall into entrapment within the year if you do not reconsider during this period of time."

The three Masters exerted a lot of pressure to Ves all of a sudden. They constantly emphasized how his high-profile development strategy had been a little too successful to the point where he had turned himself into a target for all kinds of powerful opportunists!

As much as Ves disliked this turn in conversation, he could not deny the reality of his new situation.

From the moment he completed his first closed session, he had already painted a large target on his back!

Fortunately, the mechers weren't entirely clueless and impersonal. Master Tolarian Cerny gestured to Jovy, who had remained silent like a rock all of this time.

"Our records indicate that you value your autonomy. In no way do we wish to impose upon your space. We can assign Professor Jovy Armalon here to be the head of your security escort. He will have the authority to choose the composition of the escort fleet as well as its personnel. Do you agree with this arrangement?"

As much as Ves wanted to keep his distance from the mechers, it was unrealistic to push him away now that he had made so many eye-catching contributions.

This wasn't even the end of his contributions! He still had to speak in several more sessions before he was done!

All of this gave the Survivalist Faction even greater reasons to accompany him and ensure his safety.

If this was the case, Ves might as well accept this new reality rather than object it out of irrational feelings.

"I like to travel to many different places." Ves spoke. "If my fleet ever ends up in a confrontation against a human or alien fleet, will the escort ships and mechs from your Association stand by or actively participate in battle?"

"The rules are slightly different this time." Master Henry Urbeck replied. "All acts of aggression towards you and your immediate group will not be tolerated. It goes without saying that our fleet will endeavor to defeat any alien opposition without hesitation. We will not show mercy to your human adversaries either as they are not supposed to resort to aggression to you, whether openly or covertly."

Master Tolarian Cerny issued a word of caution. "This is not an excuse for you to wield our power like your own personal club. We will permit you to use our assets to assist you in any battles against alien forces. It is in everyone's best interest if we fight and defeat as many aliens as possible. That does not apply to scenarios where you take the initiative to attack another human group. If this conflict is entirely avoidable or unnecessary, then we do not condone this behavior and will not lift a finger to help your selfish cause."

"That... is understandable. I am satisfied with these conditions." Ves steadily replied after a while.

It was unreasonable to expect anything more from the Red Association.

Ves did not want to entrust his safety in the hands of the mechers on a permanent basis. He considered this offer for protection to be a stopgap solution that would tide him over for the next decade.

Once he had successfully uplifted himself and a select group of clansmen to the first-class level, then that would be the moment where he surrounded himself with strong protection that was under his complete control.

By the time he had amassed a sizable first-class force, it was not entirely necessary anymore to have the mechers hovering so closely to him all of the time.

Of course, their presence could still be useful in numerous ways. They could continue to pose as a form of deterrence towards miscellaneous troublemakers.

"Do you have any other questions with regards to your presumably galactic citizenship tier promotion?"

"I do. If there are any situations where my forces as well as your escort fleet defeats a sizable alien fleet, will I have to give up a portion of the bounties?"

All three Masters nodded.

"Our escort fleet is primarily tasked with ensuring your survival and wellbeing. It is not a convenience that is meant to encourage you to attack stronger and deadlier alien forces than what you can safely confront. Every participating group is entitled to the shares that they deserve. If our escort mechs and warships have produced the greatest results in a battle, then our Association will withhold a proportionate share of the rewards. You can choose not to deploy our forces in a fight. You can earn the full reward in this scenario."

That reassured Ves a lot. The escort fleet therefore functioned as a safety blanket of sorts. He could always put it aside in situations where he did not need to rely on the potent firepower and varied solutions of the Association's potent warships and sophisticated first-class multipurpose mechs.

"I have another question. What is the difference between a tier 4 and a tier 3 galactic citizen?"

"The difference... is much greater than the previous transitions." Master Xena Wintress slowly replied. "There is no guarantee that your total contributions will merit this promotion, but if there comes a time where you are qualified to become a tier 3 galactic citizen, then you have become our peer in this aspect. Your protection detail will not be confined to a small escort fleet. You will have the ear of every Star Designer and god pilot. You may be invited into high-level councils where you may be able to vote on policy proposals that directly change our society as a whole."

In other words, a tier 3 galactic citizen had already entered the ranks of the true ruling class of human civilization!

"I see... wait a minute." Ves suddenly looked startled as he made a drastic realization. "When exactly will you upgrade my galactic citizenship tier? Will it happen during the end of the 6th day or the end of the 7th day when the conference has come to an end?"

"There is no need to impose any artificial delays on your case." Master Tolarian Cerny said. "We can process your application within hours. Our administration is highly efficient in this regard. It will happen at the end of your secret session that is scheduled on the 6th day of this conference."

"Oh... does this mean that I get to have a vote on the big decision on the final day?" Ves hesitantly asked.

Master Cerny looked amused. "Do not be silly, Professor Larkinson. You are an associate, not a formal member of the Red Association. However..."

"If you ever happen to become a tier 3 galactic citizen, you can technically become an honorary member of either the Red Association or the Red Fleet. If you accept this privilege, then... you have earned the qualification to participate in the vote."

"...I see." Ves flatly replied.