

Mech 4481

Chapter 4481 Sourcing Materials

A cyborg cat checked many of the boxes.

An organic internal architecture allowed the cat to retain most of the advantages of living organisms.

A metallic exterior made it easy for Ves or anyone else to repair, replace or upgrade the feline's outer body parts.

It became increasingly more common for Ves to gain access to high-grade materials, some of which were good enough to be used in first-class products.

The problem was that the quantity was always insufficient. Obtaining ten or so kilograms worth of alloys was often completely inadequate.

Even the lightest mechs weighed at least several metric tons, so it was completely pointless for Ves to design a machine based on a rare material that was only as big as a human head.

However, a few kilograms of rare and precious alloys was more than adequate for a cyborg cat!

"A smaller divine artifact is much less resource intensive." Ves smiled.

It was relatively easy for him to gain access to the materials needed to produce the mechanical half of the cyborg cat.

The Infinite Bazaar offered many different alloys at varying prices. If Ves was willing to take a few risks, he could also try his luck by drawing a couple of golden lottery tickets.

"If that isn't enough, I can always fall back to what I am carrying at the moment."

Ves banged his armored fist against his chest plate.

His personal suit of combat armor was made out of a combination of several precious alloys. The predominant metal was Unending alloy.

If Ves was willing to temporarily sacrifice the integrity of his Unending Regalia, he could disassemble a few exterior parts and reshape them into cat components.

"It would certainly be an excellent way to enhance the connection between myself and my divine artifact."

Every part about the Unending Regalia bore his imprint, and that wouldn't go away if he broke it apart.

"Is this a good idea?"

Ves always intended to upgrade his Unending Regalia sooner or later. Unending alloy was good, but he could gain harder and tougher metals if he really wanted to. The replacement materials might not be spiritually reactive, but who cared when Ves just wanted to obtain protection against lethal blows?

"It's not a good idea to disassemble my armor given the situation that I will be returning to after I am done."

Ves would be returning to the battlefield after exiting the System Space. He needed all of the protection he could get in case he failed to stop the unclean whale from affecting everyone.

Aside from that, he wouldn't be able to explain why his Unending Regalia looked completely whole in one moment, but was missing a couple of chunks the next moment!

"I'll leave this for later."

The material composition of the exterior wasn't important considering that Ves intended to upgrade it on a regular basis.

He felt it was better to buy a batch of materials or even a complete product from the Infinite Bazaar once he had a better idea of what he wanted to make.

"The organic half of the cyborg cat is much more important."

It was much harder to obtain organic materials in the System Space. He did not have access to the treasures of the Larkinson Biotech Institute, so he couldn't whip out a chunk of flesh harvested from a powerful astral beast like Titania or a fish-whale sovereign like the Phase King.

"Still, even if I am able to access those materials, I don't know how to work with them. They're too advanced for my own good."

Ves was most familiar with human biology and flesh, so he was more inclined to use human biomatter as a base material.

The question was where he should obtain the resources to make the organic half of his cyborg cat.

He looked down at his arms.

"The orvens have a habit of chopping up a part of their bodies to make their ritual sacrifice altars."

The aliens had their own reasons for doing so, but that didn't mean that it was a bad idea for Ves to copy this custom.

If Ves chopped off one of his limbs, he would obtain high-quality biomatter that was not only stronger and more sophisticated than baseline human flesh, but was also highly attuned to his own spiritual energy and power!

Ves couldn't think of a better way to reinforce the connection between his divine artifact and himself than integrating the former with biocomponents that were reconstituted from his own body!

"It's a brilliant solution! It makes complete sense for me to sacrifice a part of my own body!"

He was willing to go quite far now that he had become invested in this design project. Perhaps he would have never thought about doing this before, but now that he became enlightened by the Blood Cult, he could no longer ignore the value of his own corporeal shell!

His blood was rich with spiritual power. His flesh had also gained a decent amount of power after his blood had circulated through his body many times. These processes gradually turned his body into an increasingly more valuable resource!

"It would be a waste to rule out this option!"

Using his own biomatter as the principal raw ingredient for his cyborg cat came with multiple advantages. He was not only spared from spending Ascension Points to obtain another source of biomatter, but he also gained the opportunity to work with a familiar material.

He stored a lot of files related to his unique biology. He wasn't able to interpret any of the science in the past, but not that he had become versed in biotechnology, he was sure he could understand most of the reports!

While it would probably take a bit of time for him to get a grip on the more abnormal traits of his flesh, much of it should still be human in essence.

"This is especially the case for my extremities. As long as I leave out the Jutland organ, the rest of my body should still be manageable."

He contemplated which limb he should chop off in order to gain his batch of raw materials. He initially thought about chopping off his hand along with a part of his forearm before he decided against this decision.

"I work with my hands a lot, so they have special meaning to me. However, I still need my hands to complete this project and complete other Missions if I accept any after this. Losing a limb will severely affect my productivity."

While it was possible for him to get by with one arm, the loss of a limb would slow him down and make a lot of manual precision work impractical.

As a mech designer who regularly liked to tinker in his workshop and engage in practical work, trying to perform the same processes with just a single arm sounded like a nightmare!

"I should cut off one of my legs instead!"

That was a much better idea! A mech designer had no use of a functional leg. Ves could still move around for the most part as he had already accounted for this unlikely possibility when he designed his Unending Regalia.

If one of his legs ever broke or went missing, the hollow leg section would simply lock up and make other adjustments so that it could continue to support his weight.

Ves could even make other targeted modifications before he went through with the operation in order to improve this feature further.

This way, Ves could still move around and work on his subsequent designs in the System Space without impacting his productivity to a significant degree!

"I can even chop up my other leg if I need extra biomass for another project!"

Ves had no qualms about cutting off parts of his body because he knew he could grow them back when he returned to reality and dealt with the unclean whale.

The biggest problem was that it would take a bit of time for the biotech experts over at the Larkinson Biotech Institute to regrow a new pair of legs.

It might take weeks or months in order to do the job properly. In the meantime, Ves would have to waste a lot of time on physical therapy and other tedious treatment sessions.

He did not look forward to losing so much time!

"It's a necessary evil." He sighed. "It's better to spend more time at a medical facility than to miss out on the opportunity to build a good divine artifact. Who knows, my new cyborg cat might even be able to play a crucial role in foiling the unclean whale's plot!"

The clues he gathered about divine artifacts painted them as extraordinary objects that were much more powerful than an ordinary totem.

Ves didn't know exactly what made them different, but he had a few ideas.

"Maybe... divine artifacts aren't as foreign to me as I think they are. It... would certainly explain a lot if Lucky is a living divine artifact. The Sacred Scrolls may also turn out to be high-end divine artifacts."

If this was the case, then that would give Ves a lot of food for thought!

The strength of a divine artifact reflected their source or principal. Lucky wasn't all that impressive, but his ability to grow and evolve by assimilating his food was impressive.

Perhaps the developer of Lucky had a similar concept to his cyborg cat in mind!

As for the Sacred Scrolls, whoever made the Metal Scroll must be having an awful time since the beginning of the Age of Mechs.

Several sources stated that damaging a divine artifact would have major consequences to the entity it was tied to, though Ves wasn't clear of the details.

It made sense to assume that the apparent fragmentation of the Metal Scroll affected the strength and condition of its principal.

Ves was also impressed that the Metal Scroll hadn't disintegrated entirely. For its fragments to be able to prevent themselves from crumbling and regaining

at least a bit of functionality was a testament to the exceptional qualities of a powerful divine artifact!

"I'm not certain whether Lucky and the Metal Scroll are truly related to divine artifacts, but if this is the case... I want in. There is no way I want to be left out of this party!"

His expectations for his cyborg cat became greater. Let alone sacrificing a leg, he was willing to give up more parts of his body if he could ensure that he could still preserve what was left of himself!

The Spirit Space was not supposed to function as a hospital. While Ves could use the biotech-related lab and workshop equipment to tend to his injuries and even grow a basic cloned limb for himself, they weren't capable of keeping his head alive if he decided to chop it off his neck so that he could use the rest of his physical body as a raw ingredient for his organic design projects!

Ves shook his head. "I shouldn't get too caught up by all of this business. Let's stick to chopping off a leg and go from there. A cat can only contain so much biomatter."

He supposed he could design a chonky fellow if he really wanted to make a bigger cyborg cat, but it wasn't worth it in his eyes.

A fat cat not only attracted a lot more attention, but also lost a lot of mobility.

These consequences were antithetical to his original purpose of designing a living divine artifact that was good at camouflage and escape.

"I'll go for a slender cat then." Ves decided. "I should visit the Infinite Bazaar to see what kind of materials I can use to shape the exterior of my new pet."

He went down to the Infinite Bazaar and browsed the available items. The System offered plenty of excellent materials, though he wasn't familiar with

many of them. The prices also tended to vary a lot. He had to give up on many desirable products because they fell outside his budget.

"This is going to take a while." He frowned.

Chapter 4482 Cat Purposes

After browsing all of the offerings of the Divine Bazaar, he failed to find a material that suited all of his needs.

"I knew it wouldn't be easy." Ves sighed.

The Divine Bazaar offered a random selection of high-end goods at various prices. Roughly half of the available products were tied to the mech industry, but the other half was obviously related to the Five Scrolls Compact.

This presented Ves with a dichotomy of options that were incredibly useful when used for specific purposes, but wasteful in many other circumstances.

As a mech designer, Ves found it easy to judge the materials that could be used to make a mech. He never heard of most of them, but that did not stop him from reading the descriptions and gaining an intuitive sense of what he could do with a particular resource.

"Just because they're useful for mechs doesn't mean they are useful for my current project."

He faced a different problem when it came to materials related to spiritual engineering.

The Five Scrolls Compact and its many off-shoots not only made use of a lot of very weird materials, but also labeled them with strange and superstitious names.

"What can I expect from a bunch of crazy cultists?"

Ves shouldn't judge the exotic materials utilized by the cultists too much, though. No matter what, their abilities and powers were real, so they definitely

knew what they were doing when they made use of all of these strange materials.

As Ves compared the materials used by mech designers with the materials used by spiritual sorcerers, he found that the latter possessed an undeniable advantage.

"The Compact not only has access to spiritually reactive materials, but possesses the method to produce more of them. What is their secret?!"

Ves had spent a lot of time and effort to find more materials like P-stones, B-stones and Unending alloy without much luck.

There had to be some places in the Milky Way or the Red Ocean where he could find deposits of spiritually reactive materials, but he hadn't found any up to this point.

He suspected that it was pointless for him to search in ordinary places.

The two most likely locations where he could find what he needed was inside an anomalous region like the Nyxian Gap or an exceptionally energy-dense region.

Ves found it far too dangerous to stray in another hazardous region of space like the Nyxian Gap.

As for energy-dense regions, these were places like the galactic center in the old galaxy and the upper zones in the new frontier where the richest resources could be found.

Ves and his clan didn't have the qualifications to wander around an upper zone at will. Not yet at least.

"I guess the Divine Bazaar is my only available channel for spiritually reactive materials for the time being." He sighed.

He did have an idea on how he might be able to make a substitute for a P-stone. He just needed to conduct a lot of research and experimentation before he could be certain about his new theory.

Ves didn't have time for that, and any substitute material he could make wouldn't be strong enough for his needs.

His cyborg cat needed to be able to take a hit in order for Ves to feel assured about the safety of his divine artifact.

Fortunately, the Divine Bazaar offered several materials that seemed up to standard. Most of them were over his budget, but there were also cheaper materials that were just as strong but weren't valued as much.

"It mostly has to do with how useful they are and how widely they can be applied."

[Infected Lead from the Sixteenth Heaven]

Price: 109 Ascension Points

This metal bar bears the properties of lead originating from the Sixteenth Heaven. It is infected by an unknown influence that has corrupted and distorted its properties. The infected lead has gained new traits at the cost of weakening other traits. The infected lead can become an excellent carrier of one element after undergoing specific treatment, but will block and reject other elements.

This material sounded like a combination between Unending alloy and B-stone. It could probably absorb a lot of spiritual energy but only of a single attribute while rejecting the rest.

This was a useful property that Ves could use to make a lot of helpful products, particularly ones oriented towards defense!

"It would make for a perfect helmet material for my Unending Regalia! I can defend myself against spiritual attacks while also channeling my spiritual abilities without too many restrictions!"

If not for the fact that Ves didn't want to squander 109 Ascension Points, he would have bought this infected lead without question!

Sadly, he had to give up on this promising idea as well as many other ones in order to focus on what was important.

"I can't go for anything that is too extravagant. I need to settle for a more modest material that can still offer a specific benefit."

While he eventually planned to upgrade the exterior parts of his cyborg cat with superior versions made out of better materials, it might take years for that to happen.

In the meantime, his divine artifact was bound to develop and mature in a direction set by its initial form and functionality.

If he made a cyborg cat that was good at generating energy shields, then it would likely develop more abilities and become a lot better at this job over time.

If he made a cyborg cat that possessed an active stealth system and could hide its presence, then it would only become a lot more difficult to detect when it grew older.

This was why Ves did not necessarily pay attention to the strength of the materials. It was much more relevant for him to study and understand their unique properties.

"Maybe it is better for me to define what I want from my divine artifact. What do I need? What should it do that my other cats cannot do? My cyborg cat has to have a unique purpose in order to make it worthwhile for me to bring to life."

It was redundant for him to create a copy of one of his existing cats, no matter whether they were physical or spiritual.

Ves briefly went over his cats and what they excelled at the most.

"Lucky can produce gems and he's an excellent infantry-level combatant. Clixie is a great caretaker for my family and can also put up a fight. Goldie is the guardian and the watcher of the Larkinson Clan. Blinky already provides me with a lot of help in any work related to spiritual engineering. Alexandria is great at forming a design network that can tie the minds of many people together."

Ves inadvertently amassed a notable collection of cats. Each of them possessed a powerful function that already provided him with the assistance that he needed the most, whether it was on the battlefield or in the workshop.

"There isn't much that I need." He muttered.

After a lot of thought, he could think of only two possible areas where he could use another cat.

The first option was defense. Keeping himself alive was a great priority. Though Lucky and Clixie were able to defeat smaller physical threats while Blinky was quite good at fighting spiritual threats, he did not possess a way to shield himself from damage.

"My Unending Regalia and my shield generators can block a lot of damage, but I doubt I will be able to remain in one piece after getting bombarded by a squad of mechs!"

The two possible ways he could defend against overwhelming attacks was defense or evasion.

Ves recently obtained a one-use personal teleporter, so he already had the evasion part covered for the time being.

He worried a lot more about defending his family. Neither his wife nor his children possessed defensive gear as good as his Unending Regalia.

He planned to remedy this shortcoming soon enough, but even then they might need additional help if they ever came under threat.

Making a cat that could save their lives at critical moments sounded more than worthwhile in his opinion!

"It's just that putting up a big shield is not that useful on its own." Ves sighed. "I can still equip my kids with all of the shield generators that I can afford. It is much harder to help them run to safety, especially if teleportation is blocked."

The best defense was a good offense in this case. This might not always be the best solution, but it could at least buy his children a lot of time.

Lucky, Clixie, Blinky and his honor guard were already capable of defeating enemies at the same level, but they were helpless in the face of mechs and warships.

Ves had always desired to gain the ability to defeat a larger threat on his own. Perhaps a divine artifact might be able to satisfy his need due to its special properties.

"What kind of cyborg cat will I make, then? One that can transform into a sophisticated firearm that can spit out hot beams of death?"

For a moment, Ves visualized the scene.

Perhaps he visited a planet one day and a group of hostile mechs managed to sneak close enough to launch an assassination strike.

While his bodyguard mechs kept most of the enemy mechs busy, one of the threats might be able to get through the blockade!

Yet before this enemy mech could complete its mission, a cat would jump into Ves' arm and assume a posture that was similar to a gun.

Ves subsequently aimed the head of his cat at the mech before 'pulling the trigger', causing his pet to disgorge a disproportionately powerful energy beam that instantly burned a hole through the chest of the enemy mech!

"Ridiculous!"

This was an absurd and impractical divine artifact for many reasons!

Although Ves definitely wanted to add an attack ability to his divine artifact if possible, it wasn't a close reflection of his power and rules.

If he wanted to make a divine artifact that could serve its primary purpose well, then he needed to pay close attention to its functions and how well they matched his inclinations.

"I'm a mech designer, not a warrior. Direct combat shouldn't be the focus. I need to pick a function that matches who I am and what I stand for. The most fitting product should be tied to life, mechs, mutual growth and synergy. What kind of cat can I make that encompasses all of these concepts?"

Ves mulled over those words. His eyes slowly grew brighter as he generated an idea that captivated his imagination.

"What if I design a cyborg cat... that can supercharge the performance of a mech?"

He envisioned a cat that could attach itself to the frame of a mech or enter its cockpit and settle on the lap of the pilot.

Once his divine artifact settled into place, it could use its abilities that were inherent to Ves to form a spiritual connection to the mech, mech pilot and possibly the design spirit.

Once the cyborg cat established the connections, it could boost the performance of the mechs in various ways, from empowering the spiritual capabilities of the mech or speeding up the growth of a mech pilot!

In some cases, the cyborg cat might also function as an additional source of power that could enhance the power of the next attack from attack!

This way, Ves had more ways to intervene directly in an ongoing mech battle!

The only way he could intervene in a battle at this time was by channeling his Worclaw energy through a masterwork mech or weapon.

He could only employ this trump card once in a battle, and there were only a handful of mechs that he could channel this power.

"If I can make a cyborg cat that can interface with any mech, then I don't have to worry about these limitations anymore!"

Chapter 4483 Divine Guidance

Ves looked at the lab equipment with considerable dread and hesitation.

"I can do this. It will be quick and easy. I'll just have to stick my body inside the machine and wait until I can go out again, just with a couple of parts missing. It is just like cannibalizing a portion of a mech in order to build a better machine."

It all made sense in his mind and thoughts. In order to build the cyborg cat that could potentially grant him power beyond anything else he had ever wielded, he had to work with the materials he had available.

After selecting an appropriate alloy for the mechanical side of his upcoming divine artifact, he proceeded to spend 10 days on designing his cyborg cat.

Ves wished he could have spent more time on refining his design, but he had to make do with a relatively small but intricate design.

Surprisingly enough, designing the organic half of his cyborg cat wasn't as challenging as he thought.

Sure, he initially felt clueless about how to design a cat made out of his own reconstituted flesh.

Despite taking the form factor of a cat, Ves wanted the organic bits of his divine artifact to maintain as much of the properties of his half-alien, half-human flesh as possible.

It was quite hard for him to reconcile his conflicting demands with his limited understanding of Biotechnology until he found the right approach.

"Rather than treating it as a designer beast project, I should treat it as a downscaled mech design project!"

It was like making one of the mech figurines that he did for fun or because he wanted to surprise one of his children with a new toy.

He just needed to be a lot more serious and thorough about it. Ves took mech design projects a lot more seriously, so he immediately underwent a mentality shift when he resumed his work.

No matter whether it was a mech or a biomech, all pilotable machines followed a common set of rules and conventions.

Ves had designed so many mechs that those rules and conventions were literally engraved in his Spirituality.

This was why he experienced much less difficulties when he designed his first biomech. As long as the product was related to a mech, Ves would always find a way to leverage his abilities to complete his work.

"I'm a mech designer. Designing mechs is what I do. If I can't design a mech, it's not because I am unable to, but because I'm not pushing my capabilities hard enough."

Although Ves might not be capable of distorting reality and producing all kinds of amazing phenomena like swordmasters and high-ranking mech designers, he was still a Journeyman Mech Designer!

Designing mechs was more than just a job to him. It was his conviction and his purpose. So long as he set his sights on designing any mech, he would always work at least twice as hard and maybe even more if an exciting idea stoked his passion!

Ves certainly had plenty of that in spades once he designed his cyborg cat as if it was a mech.

Of course, the much smaller form factor and radically different demands forced Ves to make a lot of changes.

Much of it was for the better. A miniature 'tiger mech' did not require as many advanced systems or high-performance parts. The cyborg cat did not need to bear so much weight or control tens of millions of individual components.

Since Ves already had experience with designing fairly accurate and representative mech figurines, he already knew most of the steps necessary to simplify his miniature mech design.

While he was largely able to rely on old and proven methods to design the mechanical exterior of his cyborg cat, he had to become a lot more creative to tackle the organic internal architecture.

There were many times when he felt tempted to give up and design a completely mechanical cat, but when he thought about all of the amazing possibilities he could bring to life with blood and flesh, he committed to his chosen direction.

"Designing the internals of a cat is just like designing an organic tiger mech. It doesn't really matter where the biomatter comes from as long as it bends to my will."

Ves was designing a miniature tiger mech using his own flesh as the main ingredient. As long as he framed his project in this way, he stopped feeling lost and always knew what he had to do in order to progress his work.

Sure, he had to take out a virtual textbook and quickly get up to speed in order to solve many new problems that he had never encountered before, but the amount of times he needed to reference another source was much more limited due to the tiny scale of his miniature mech design project.

The only parts he stumbled with were the more unusual aspects of his cyborg cat. He already figured out that merging his work with a fragment of his Divine Core would transform and elevate it into a completely transcendent work, but that did not mean he wanted the base form to be too plain and simple.

"The properties of the base form will determine the direction of its evolution."

Ves depended heavily on the more esoteric knowledge granted by both the Blood Cult Scarlet Oak Tree Design enlightenment fruit as well as the Orven Ritual Sacrifice Altar enlightenment fruit for this phase in the design project.

He wanted his cyborg cat to gain similar properties as his Blood Knight, but also gain the capability to do more.

"My cyborg cat should not only be an accurate reflection of my domain, but also a vessel which can propagate my vision."

As Ves increasingly immersed himself in the more unorthodox and mystical theories of the Blood Cult and the higher caste members of the orven race, he began to mix up his thoughts and form strange and unusual conclusions.

Under normal circumstances, he would have questioned or rejected all of these odd ideas, but now that he had entered the mental state of a mech designer, he picked a few proposals that appealed to him the most and found a way to stuff them inside his tiny cyborg cat design!

Ves didn't really understand what he had done or why he made all of those design choices by the time he woke up from his intensive state.

Some of the functions he tried to add to his cyborg cat design sounded way too ambitious to him. How could he possibly implement such advanced features into his divine artifact when he had no idea whether they even worked?!

"Well, this isn't the first time that I've tried out an experimental new design application in a final product." He shrugged.

His rational side told him that it was exceedingly reckless to implement new and untested technology into a critical work that would have great implications for his future.

His passionate side told him to trust in his gut and his instincts and believe in his own design solutions, even the ones that looked a little dubious.

Being a mech designer wasn't always about cold, hard numbers and boring rules. There was an art to designing mechs that could reach beyond the limits that confined the possibilities of ordinary products.

"Besides, once my cyborg cat becomes a divine artifact, everything will be smoothed over somehow."

Ves had learned from his latest enlightenment fruit that the ancient orvens initially made sloppy and frankly shabby altars.

Somehow, most of them worked out and performed their functions without too many problems. The orvens discovered that intent was more important than getting everything right.

Of course, if the altar was good to begin with, it took a lot less sacrifices for it to assume a proper form.

"I don't want my divine artifact to feed on sacrifices, though." Ves furrowed his brows.

This was a major sticking point to him. As a mech designer, he liked to think he engaged in a productive profession. He was a creator, not a destroyer.

Sure, his works could be used to spread untold amounts of destruction, but that was the prerogative of his customers. Ves had nothing to do with that unless he commanded the mechs himself.

In any case, Ves did not want his cyborg cat to follow the depraved footsteps of the orvens.

"I kind of understand why the orven civilization is so degenerate. Their leaders delude themselves into thinking that they can become gods as long as they feed from the lives of their fellow orven brothers. They are cannibals in all but name. In order for them to gain strength, they need to take it away from others."

That was a road that he would never want to take. Ves wanted to achieve the opposite with his cyborg cat. He wanted it to become a more benign existence that could grant power to others. He wanted his cyborg cat to be defined by its ability to facilitate the growth of both mechs and mech pilots.

These were the actions that best aligned with his design philosophy and his principles and he was determined not to stray from them in the pursuit of greater power!

"It's fine if my cyborg cat isn't powerful on its own. It can do so much more if it can function as a universal amplifier or force multiplier."

Trying to implement this aspiration on a cyborg cat that incorporated two different tech bases was anything but simple, but somehow he managed to complete his design with few obvious inadequacies!

After checking the design multiple times, Ves became confident that it was viable and able to do what he needed it to do, all without subjecting his design to any simulation testing or prototype testing.

He just knew that the design was sound.

"It's kind of weird that I feel so confident about my work. Is this what designing a divine artifact for myself is like? I feel as if I am being guided by an unknown influence."

Ves doubted himself for a moment. He carefully inspected his mental, spiritual and physical state and did not find any worrying indications that he was being mind controlled.

"Weird."

He set this suspicious matter aside since he couldn't do anything about it. Rather than obsess over the variables that he couldn't control, he would rather work with the ones that he could affect through his own actions.

At this point, that meant going through with the fabrication of his divine artifact.

An invisible cloud seemed to press on him as he came closer to this crucial step.

"Divine artifacts are important. Super important. I have a strong feeling that my life will change forever once I go through with this. Once I am done, I can no longer go back. My course will be set."

Ves did not waste much time on second-guessing the decisions he had made for his divine artifact. He was already completely onboard with the design concept. The doubts he had over the less transparent aspects of his cyborg cat were not enough to pull him back to the drawing board.

This was why he had pulled his body out of his Unending Regalia and brought himself before one of the lab machines.

He had already programmed the biomedical device to perform a series of actions that would allow him to obtain the organic raw materials he needed to proceed with the fabrication run.

"I just need to go in and out. Nothing more."

Thinking about everything that he could gain from his current project finally broke his hesitation.

He took a deep breath before he put his body inside the tomb-like biomedical chamber.

"Proceed." He issued a verbal command.

He could feel the biomedical device go to work. It injected him with a cocktail of chemicals meant to sedate him and limit any unfortunate side effects for the operation that was about to take place.

Just as his thoughts became a little woozy, he felt a sharp and powerful blade slice right through his leg below the knee!

"AAAAAH!" He roared as the pain overwhelmed his sedation. "THAT HURTS, GODDAMMIT!"

He forgot about accounting for his abnormal physique's increased resistance against sedatives!

Chapter 4484 Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum

Ves was no stranger to pain, and the biomedical chamber did its best to respond to the mistakes he made when he programmed its initial instructions.

While he had been cognizant enough to account for his body's reduced sensitivity towards sedatives, he did not properly compensate for the fact that his half-alien body also broke down the dose at an abnormal rate!

The speed in which the sedatives wore off was so quick that by the time the device had cut off his leg, he had already regained much of his original pain sensation!

After the medical chamber practically doused his injured body with sedatives, it at least managed to complete the rest of its job with no further issues.

By the time Ves finally woke up, he awkwardly lifted his body from the chamber and hovered above the growth with the help of his antigrav uniform.

The lingering drugs and chemicals did a good job of suppressing the lingering pains and helping the rest of his body adjust to its diminished state, but Ves wanted to purge them out of his system as soon as possible.

"I can't proceed with the fabrication run if my mind is still impaired." He frowned.

As a somewhat qualified biotech researcher, he understood much better how his abnormal mental and physical state would negatively affect his work.

He couldn't do much about his missing leg, but he could still come up with a way to cleanse his body of most of the chemicals.

Could he handle it, though?

"I have to." He gritted his teeth. "I've worked under difficult circumstances before. A bit of pain is nothing compared to what I can get at the end."

Creating a divine artifact was about making sacrifices. Though Ves did not ascribe to the philosophies of the orven race, he acknowledged at least this much.

The pain he would experience throughout the fabrication process was nothing but another price he would have to pay in order to make the cyborg cat of his dreams.

The possible features and future potential of his upcoming living divine artifact more than compensated for all of his sacrifices!

"Besides, compared to the ancient orvens who initially discovered this method, I am much better off." Ves recognized. "My clan can easily regrow and reattach a new leg for me once everything is over. It will just take a few

months before my body is almost exactly the way it was before. Technology is truly great."

It took a bit more time for Ves to recover from his operation and handle the remaining preparation for his crucial fabrication run.

One of the essential requirements to designing a proper cyborg cat was to install the right electrical components and circuitry to control its mechanical functions.

Although Ves tried to substitute that with organic substitutes as much as possible, there were still limits.

"It's best if I maintain a balance. The mechanical side of my divine artifact isn't meant to be an empty shell. It has to be equal to its organic side."

Both sides came with their own pros and cons. Ves aimed to combine as much of their advantages as possible so he could have it both ways.

He wasn't entirely sure whether he succeeded in striking the right balance, but he had a good feeling about this. The cyborg cat design was sound as far as he could tell and every ingredient was alright as far as he could tell.

As he donned his Unending Regalia once again, he noticed plenty of changes compared to before.

His personal suit of combat armor already made adjustments to account for the missing parts of his left leg.

Not only that, it felt a bit more hollow than before.

This was because he partially disassembled it so that he could pull out a number of redundant and less critical components from his advanced armor.

He couldn't help it. His cyborg cat needed circuitry and other advanced components. He couldn't make these essential parts out of a single exotic alloy, so he had to look elsewhere to obtain what he needed.

He built and maintained his Unending Regalia himself so he knew exactly what it could offer to him. The high-quality parts could easily be repurposed, reshaped or reprogrammed to help the cyborg cat control its non-organic systems.

Ves just had to accept that his Unending Regalia lost a bit of functionality as a result, though he tried to minimize the impact as much as possible.

"I originally didn't want to do this, but the only other way I can obtain a bunch of circuits is to buy a device from the Divine Bazaar and break it apart."

That was an unattractive option for several reasons.

First, the devices were all highly advanced, which meant that Ves would never fully grasp its components.

Second, Ves would have to spend even more Ascension Points than he already had at this time.

He already exceeded his original budget. He spent 25 AP on an enlightenment fruit, 35 AP on buying the exotic alloy to form most of the exterior of his cyborg cat and 10 AP to design his divine artifact.

"That's 70 AP in total." Ves grimaced. "Since I probably need to spend a day to make my cyborg cat, I will need to spend at least 1 additional Ascension Point."

This meant that he could only expect a measly profit of 29 Ascension Points at the end.

Was it worth it? Definitely! At this stage, he was even willing to suffer a minor loss if that was what it took to build a more promising divine artifact for himself.

The possibility that the cyborg cat could also play a role in disrupting the unclean whale's actions and save his entire clan from getting teleported deep into alien territory was another major benefit!

"It's better if I can earn a profit, though. I can't obsess too much over the long-term benefits of a powerful divine artifact when that damned prisoner from the Palace of Shame is threatening to cut my life short!"

Earning 29 Ascension Points was not as much as he originally hoped, but it was better than nothing.

After inspecting his ingredients one last time, he centered his mind and thought about his design.

"The design should work. Everything is where it is supposed to be. All of the parts and materials that I have prepared are up to standard. I only have to focus on making the end product."

When Ves next opened his eyes, he entered a state of total concentration.

Even the dull pain that emanated from his missing leg and the rest of his body no longer bothered him that much.

He first activated the machines responsible for altering, shaping and nurturing biomatter.

It felt a bit macabre for him to see his severed leg and carefully preserved legs with his own eyes. He did not even dare to hold it with his own hands.

He merely used a bot to transfer the container that held the limb to the right machine.

Once the limb was in place, he instructed the biotech device to follow an extensive plan to break down and reshape the flesh.

The limited size of the biomatter made it easy for Ves to confine the processes to a single advanced machine. The Workshop of Creation truly

offered the best production facilities. Not only were their functions incredibly good, but they were also easy to work with. They were just so fast, precise and reliable that they could prevent many errors that would occur when working with lesser devices.

Ves still took the time to supervise the initial and most important processes. He wanted to make absolutely sure that the biotech machine did not glitch out and waste the raw ingredients!

"I can only do this three more times before I run out of legs."

He could only spare his upper left leg, his lower right leg and his upper right leg in total.

After that, he would have to start with chopping off his arms, which he absolutely did not want to do because he loved working with his hands too much.

"Speaking of handwork, I should proceed with fabricating the mechanical parts for my cyborg mech."

He always felt a bit awkward when working with biotechnology because it didn't involve enough tactile processes.

Ves essentially had to instruct a machine to process raw biomatter into a biological seed and wait for it to grow and mature by absorbing the nutrients in a mineral-rich pool.

He felt frustrated by his lack of direct control over the growth process, but he had to admit that it was rather convenient that he could work on other tasks while the organic side of the cyborg cat gradually took shape.

Ves felt much more at home once he began to work on the mechanical side of his divine artifact. He quickly returned to familiar territory as he processed the diverse collection of parts taken from the Unending Regalia.

The material composition of these parts were diverse. Much of it was made out of a combination of Unending alloy as well as more specialized materials that offered superior electrical conductivity and so on. There were so many different materials that all had their own uses that Ves had to be careful about wasting the limited quantities he had available.

"If I botch these steps, I will have to pull out even more components from my Unending Regelia to replace what I have lost."

His determination to not let that happen added a lot of pressure on his shoulders. He deliberately reduced his pace and spent extra time to make sure he was doing everything right.

"I feel as if I've turned into Gloriana."

No matter what he thought about his wife, he had to admit that she produced much less waste than any other mech designer under normal circumstances.

Eventually, he came to the point where he had to fabricate the structure and the exterior plating of his cyborg cat.

This was the simplest task but also a fairly tricky one considering that he was working with a material that he had never handled before.

[Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum]

Price: 35 Ascension Points

This metal bar consists of Arcutuleum Platinum, an exotic variant of platinum that is many times harder but is only slightly denser. This metal has undergone special treatment that has lasted for 57 years that has imbued it with an affinity for extraordinary power as well as additional properties. The treatment has made the Arcutuleum Platinum into a permanent mimic substance, which means that it will partially imitate the properties of another material upon contact.

As far as exotic materials went, this one was not as weird as many others. The reason why he settled for this material as opposed to others was because it was spiritually reactive and because of its mimic properties.

Ves didn't really value the ability to mimic other materials. What he was after was a material that conformed to his divine artifact's themes and overall design direction.

He chose Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum because he suspected that it would promote the fusion and synergy-related functions of his cyborg cat.

"Now that I think about it, this exotic material reminds me of Lucky."

There had to be a connection. Lucky's metallic body was able to absorb or assimilate the strengths of other powerful materials on a permanent basis.

This gave Ves the suspicion that Lucky might be made out of a higher-end version of Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum.

"Perhaps I am slowly drawing closer to the crowd that originally made Lucky."

Ves was not in a hurry to discover Lucky's origins. He wouldn't be able to do anything if he learned the truth.

In any case, working with Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum turned out to be a lot more troublesome than he thought.

Its properties were already active in its current form, which meant that every time Ves attempted to manipulate the metal, portions of it would keep mimicking the material properties of his workshop devices and tools!

"Is there a way to stop this madness?!"

Chapter 4485 Final Spark

Ves had to interrupt his schedule in order to figure out how to manipulate Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum without causing the material to grow softer, harder, heavier or lighter during the process!

Since the System hadn't been kind enough to provide him with a complete report on all of its properties, Ves had to figure out how to inhibit the mimicking behavior by himself.

He conducted many experiments on the spot.

He found out that the mimicking ability of Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum only worked on solid materials. Gasses and liquids didn't produce any reactions as far as he could tell.

One of his most important discoveries was that his sample had more trouble with mimicking the properties of more powerful materials and exotics.

"The more work it has to do, the less it is able to transform itself."

It was as if Arcutuleum Platinum only had a fixed pool of energy to fuel its mimicking process.

He found out that it could completely mimic the properties of ordinary bronze and steel due to their simplicity, but only transformed to a moderate degree when it came into contact with Unending alloy.

"I see. The best way to work with this material is to use a tool made out of material that is too powerful for it to mimic."

The Workshop of Creation might be great, but it didn't offer any tools of that level.

Ves experimented with other materials to see whether the mimicking ability was as universal as it suggested.

He found out to his amazement that it was able to mimic non-metallic materials such as paper or plastic. This almost caused his sample to crumble because it had become a lot more fragile all of a sudden!

What was even more surprising to Ves was that it could even mimic organic materials to a degree!

When Ves pressed his naked finger against the sample, he immediately felt as if he was touching another part of his body that just happened to be cold!

"Damn, this is creepy!"

It didn't make sense. He could see why the incredibly versatile mimicking ability made Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum so useful, but how could anyone exert control over its functions?

It would have been great if it was mimicking a powerful or useful material, but anyone who wanted to ruin it simply had to push an ordinary rock or tree leaf against its surface to make it fragile!

"I don't believe that the developers of this material are able to tolerate such an obvious weakness!"

He tried various means to limit the activity of the material. He failed to produce the desired results after subjecting his sample to heat, pressure, light, electrical current and magnetic fields.

Even though he could employ more unusual methods to get a reaction out of the exotic material, he didn't feel he was on the right track.

"I'm looking at this the wrong way. Since I suspect that Arcutuleum Platinum is related to the Five Scrolls Compact, maybe I need to use their methods instead of the methods of an engineer."

Ves concentrated his mind and tried to make contact with it with the help of a spiritual projection.

"What?"

It felt as if he was touching a puppy. The metal wasn't alive per se, but it possessed a low form of reactivity that suggested that it could respond to certain commands.

"Stop." He instructed the sample while he poked it with a finger.

The Arcutuleum Platinum transformed to match his skin and flesh.

"Halt."

"Freeze."

"Reverse."

"Zero."

"Reset."

Ves tried out many different commands while he poked the sample to see whether it would stop transforming.

Most of the commands ended up doing nothing, but he finally managed to produce a meaningful change when he uttered a specific word.

"Inherit."

That caused the Arcutuleum Platinum to freeze in its current state.

When Ves carefully drew his finger back, it continued to mimic his skin and flesh as if nothing had changed.

"Err, go back?"

Ves encountered a new problem as he had to find a completely different command to turn it back to normal.

"Default."

"Initial state."

"Original."

"Copy."

"Mimic."

"Embrace."

The sample turned back to normal again after Ves uttered the word embrace! When he put the sample into contact with different materials, it mimicked their properties as usual.

"What if I want to switch this ability off entirely so that I can work on it as if it is a normal material?"

He tried the inherit command again but found out that it did not freeze the material in its current state.

Ves had to try out a lot of other keywords until he finally stumbled upon the right command.

"Isolate."

This did the trick. The Arcutuleum Platinum no longer produced any special interactions when coming into contact with different materials.

Ves wanted to scratch his head. "This is going to be a little more complicated. My cyborg cat will need to exert a lot of control over his body in order to avoid mimicking the wrong materials at the wrong time."

He did not worry too much about it, though. One of the special traits about living products was that it was much easier for them to master their inherent quirks.

He believed that a living divine artifact would be able to control its own body to an even greater degree, especially after it experienced a powerful baptism!

"It will be fine... I think. I can always fix my divine artifact if there is a glitch."

Ves shrugged and resumed his work. He had already fallen behind schedule due to this unexpected problem and he was eager to get back on track.

He worked a little faster in order to catch up to his original schedule. The impact to his work was minimal as he grew fully confident in his ability to work

and shape Arcutuleum Platinum after he had frozen their mimicking behavior with the isolate command.

Hours passed by as Ves completed more parts for his cyborg cat.

In the meantime, the biotech machine had just completed the organic internal design for his divine artifact.

It did not look pretty. It was as if someone wanted to cook a cat by skinning the creature and trimming down the flesh for a bit.

The fact that the 'skinned cat' was made out of flesh that used to comprise his lower left leg did nothing to make it more appetizing!

Still, Ves perceived a certain sense of dormant power, beauty and grace from the small bioproduct.

He had put a lot of thought and effort into its design. He made sure that the integration of his flesh, bones and blood did not go to waste by designing a spiritual foundation that could anchor and repurpose their extraordinary energies.

"It won't take much longer." He whispered.

The time to assemble his divine artifact had come. The biological inner structure had grown to its full form at a fast pace due to its limited mass and volume as well as the excellent facilities of the Workshop of Creation.

After he carefully scanned and inspected the biological core, he confirmed that it had not mutated or deviated from his original design to a significant degree.

Small changes and inconsistencies were inevitable when it came to grown bioproducts, but Ves had already accounted for these unpredictable deviations.

This was why Ves completely assembled the mechanical parts around the biological base by hand.

He could make small adjustments to the original plan and design on the spot. He didn't even have to stop to make calculations as he just knew how he could shift the parts to make them all fit together.

"It also helps that I've designed my cyborg cat with changes in mind."

Compared to the frustrations of trying to figure out how to control the mimicking ability of Arcutuleum Platinum, assembling the mechanical side of his new cat was much more relaxing.

Ves felt increasingly more expectant of the end product as he slowly put his latest work together. He had to work slow at times because there were a number of delicate parts that needed a gentler touch, but it didn't take long before the cat became more complete.

Soon enough, his cyborg cat had taken shape.

Technically, it was not yet complete. He needed to integrate it with a shard of his Divine Core to make his latest pet come to life.

That did not stop Ves from appreciating his work at its current state. It largely matched his design and the cat that he envisioned.

The organic properties of the cyborg cat were not quite evident on the surface.

At first glance, it looked like a silvery mechanical cat that could pass off as Lucky's cousin. Many of the parts resembled that of his first cat, but there were a number of differences that made the cyborg cat more aligned with himself.

Its expressive purple electronic eyes looked dull at the moment, but Ves was certain that they would shine once his divine artifact came to life.

His new pet would look much cuter and more adorable by that time!

The exterior of the cyborg cat consisted entirely of plating made out of uncoated Permanent Mimic Arcutuleum Platinum. Any light shining on the material produced faint green highlights that made it seem as if the metal was coming to life.

When Ves carefully squeezed his work from different angles, he could feel the interlocking plates flex wherever they were supposed to bend.

If he pressed hard enough, he could even feel the spongy feedback of the flesh underneath.

Ves received even greater feedback when he examined his work with his spiritual senses.

"This is a little freaky."

The cyborg cat was undeniably an extension of himself. Ves could still feel the strong imprint of his former leg inside his incomplete divine artifact.

For a moment, Ves felt tempted to mount his cyborg cat below the stump of his amputated leg and try to walk as if he was wearing a fancy robotic limb!

Ves shook his head. "I need to stop thinking about nonsense and complete this job."

The sense of weight and history had grown stronger without his notice. He was still at a point where he could change his mind and reject his current work, but the window was closing as he made his way to the mountaintop.

The atmosphere of the Sacred Temple was significantly different from that of the Workshop of Creation.

The Workshop of Creation was a perfect place for a mech designer as it offered almost all of the tools and facilities he needed to make a mech and many other products for that matter.

The Sacred Temple seemingly had nothing to do with mech design. It was a sacred location that was fully dedicated to helping Ves attain spiritual ascension.

It seemed fitting that he was bringing his cyborg cat to the temple. What he had completed just before was mostly technical work.

Now that he wanted to complete the final and most crucial step, he could no longer rely on the power of conventional technology.

He needed to draw on the power of mysticism in order to infuse his cyborg cat with life and a touch of divinity.

When Ves reached the Sacred Hearth and stopped before the flame that represented his weak and underdeveloped Divine Core, he paused for a moment.

"This is it. Should I go through with this or should I reconsider?"

He slowly looked down at the inert cyborg cat in his arms.

Ves saw no reason to turn back at this point.

"It just needs the final spark."

When he turned his gaze back to his exposed Divine Core, he instinctively knew what to do. He carefully raised his armored arm and grasped a small section of the flickering flame.

It felt as if he was touching solid matter.

He believed that there was no gentle way to do this, so after taking another deep breath, he wrenched the portion of the Divine Core in his grip and quickly stuffed it inside the body of his cyborg cat before he became overtaken by the soul-wrenching pain!

"AHHH! MY HEAD!"

His very Spirituality shook and cracked because of his reckless action!

Although Ves was no stranger to pain, he never felt as if he had picked up an axe and proceeded to chop it on the side of his head with as much force as possible!

At the same time, his latest product began to glow and thrum with power that echoed with the damaged Divine Core that was exposed by the Sacred Hearth.

The birth of a divine artifact set a remarkable process into motion that was just beginning to transform the cyborg cat!

Chapter 4486 VIP Treatment

Ves stared at his old home with a mix of nostalgia and confusion.

When he used the phrase 'old home', he did not refer to his grand stateroom aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

He did not refer to the so-called Royal Mansion back at the Cat Nest in Davute either.

Instead, the only homestead that deserved to be called his old home was his father's house that was located all the way back in Cloudy Curtain.

It was obviously extremely illogical for Ves to be transported hundreds of thousands of light-years away from his current position in reality.

There was no way he could have been brought all the way from the Red Ocean to the Milky Way and back to the Komodo Star Sector without his notice!

Besides, there was no way his old home remained intact!

It took a while for him to recall the time period where his home looked this way. He glanced at the adjacent mech workshop and slowly recalled that it

lacked the details that it had accrued over time as Ves made more use of its humble production capacity.

"It's as if I have returned all the way to the beginning of my journey."

He looked down on his own body. He did not look like a fresh university graduate at this time. This was his current body, complete with a missing chunk of his leg.

Fortunately, his Unending Regalia did its job and provided enough support for Ves to lean his weight on his left.

Although something freaky was clearly taking place, Ves did not feel very spooked by the situation.

His intuition did not warn him of an imminent threat and there weren't any obvious enemies in the vicinity.

Seeing that he was not about to get swarmed by a bunch of Fridayman mechs or an angry phase whale, Ves decided that he might as well roll with the situation and follow his impulses.

He managed to jog more information out of his dusty memories. He recalled that his old home was in a state where his father had recently gone missing, but not before going 330 million bright credits into debt in order to acquire a second-hand 3D printer.

Now that Ves had become a parent himself, he understood his father's actions and intentions a lot more than before.

"It takes a lot of love to abandon a comfortable and stable life in the Bright Republic and flee all the way to the Nyxian Gap. It must have pained my dad to permanently separate himself from his own child and the rest of the Larkinson Family."

His father definitely knew what he was doing. He went through the risk of going deep into debt and handed over this enormous burden to his son with the confidence that it would all work out in the end.

The reason why his father was so confident was because he was the one to give his son the Mech Designer System.

Ves felt incredibly mixed about his father's scheme. "He is the one who pulled me out of an ordinary life and put me on a trajectory where I eventually became exposed to a lot of danger."

The System had given Ves a lot of benefits, but it had also put an enormous target on my back.

"Wait." He suddenly frowned. "That's not entirely right. I would have been subjected to a lot of danger regardless if I obtained the System. The next Bright-Vesia War was already looming on the horizon. As soon as those Vesians invaded the Bright Republic once again, every mech designer would be called into service. Those that don't have the right connections would be thrown to the wolves."

Ryncol had fought in the last Bright-Vesia War and knew exactly how brutal it was and how many low-ranking mech designers needlessly perished at the front.

Perhaps passing on the System was his father's way of giving his son a chance to get out, either by becoming valued by the state or receiving an opportunity to emigrate to the Friday Coalition.

It was too bad that Ves didn't exactly do what his father intended.

"Sorry, dad."

Ves did not linger too much on what he could have done to avoid getting embroiled in the Bright-Vesia War. He had already processed his feelings on this matter and accepted this formative period as an essential part of his life.

He was much more interested in exploring the current situation at the moment.

"Let's see if the workshop is just as I remembered."

He entered the shabby workshop and beheld the 3D printer that started his career as an independent mech designer.

"What an awful machine."

Ves worked with first-class superfabs these days. Although they weren't the best that humanity could use to fabricate high-quality goods, few people had the opportunity to work with such excellent machines.

Now that he came face to face with the third-class 3D printer that was barely adequate even by the standards of the Bright Republic, Ves felt as if he was looking at a toy.

"I've come so far since the start that I can't even bring myself to use such an awful machine anymore."

Ves felt ambivalent about that. He once vowed that he would never allow himself to forget his humble roots.

Nowadays, he became so pampered by second-class mechs that he pretty much off-loaded all of the responsibility of designing third-class mechs to his subordinate design teams.

"Since when have I become so snobby?"

"You're only human, Ves. You are flawed, just like me." Another voice replied.

"Who?!"

Ves quickly turned around and realized that a stranger had entered his old workshop without his notice!

He didn't recognize the newcomer. The mature and clean-shaven man possessed a tall, athletic build but was clearly more at home in an office as he wore a well-cut, modern suit.

What was interesting about the man's outfit was that it was clearly a set of second-class anti-grav clothing.

An individual like that did not belong in a place like Cloudy Curtain, especially in this time period!

"Who are you!?"

The other man grinned in a disturbingly familiar fashion. "Don't you recognize me, old friend? We used to be buddies, you know. I even worked for you for a time. If you can't figure out who I am after telling you all of this, then I seriously doubt whether you are as brilliant of a mech designer as you appear on the news."

Ves looked closely at the man's face and slowly found a match from a person who he had buried deep into his mind.

"Carlos...? Are you Carlos Shaw?"

"In the flesh." The suited man grinned. "Well, in a manner of speaking at least."

"...You don't look like the Carlos that I knew." Ves said. "You look... older. You've gained muscle. You carry yourself with an air of confidence that you did not have before. Is this... who you currently are, Carlos?"

"Yup."

Ves pointedly looked around the workshop and confirmed it was in the exact state as it had been when he started his mech designer career on his own. The Living Mech Corporation didn't even exist at this time!

"Shouldn't you... I don't know, look younger or anything? How can you even appear as your current self when I have no idea how you look? Are you a figment of my imagination or have we literally reunited with each other across hundreds of thousands of light-years?"

Carlos raised his palm in a vaguely familiar manner. "Whoa there, Ves. I know you're curious and all, but I don't have all of the answers. It's not my job to explain what is happening."

"Then what can you tell me, 'old friend'?"

"I'm here but not here. I am the Carlos you know, but I'm not entirely the Carlos who is currently living his own life back in the Komodo Star Sector. I am not an illusion but I am not entirely the person who you consider to be your old friend. It's complicated."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "If I tell you something here, will the real Carlos become aware of our conversation?"

"No."

"How can I believe you? What proof can you give me that will convince me that talking to you won't have any repercussions?"

"Oh, come on, Ves! Don't you understand what is going on?! You've been pulled into a dream sequence that is centered around you, not me! This is your chance to have an earnest talk with me so that you can obtain closure and complete the first step of your divine transformation without too many regrets holding you back! It would be really bad if that happens, do you know that?"

Ves grew even more suspicious about this abnormal situation. "You are being awfully forthcoming, Carlos."

"In fact, I shouldn't even tell you all of this, but there is an external factor—cough "SYSTEM" cough"—that has interfered with this dream sequence. Congratulations, Ves. You have a VIP pass. You have received extra privileges for that reason."

"I see. I kind of believe you now. The real Carlos would never speak like this. I distinctly remember that I never told you anything about the System."

"You didn't." Carlos said with a dour expression. "I don't blame you, Ves."

"Really?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "If I recall, you left my side because you were too jealous of my success. I would have found a way to help you, man. I admit that I care most about my own gains, but that doesn't mean I never learned to share. If you just stuck out with me, I would have taken care of you. Just look at the clan I founded and grew through my own efforts. Everyone who had stood by my side from the beginning has become much better off than before. You could have been one of them, Carlos."

The man that Ves had once considered his friend let out a sigh. "You're right. I could have. There is not a day that goes by when I think back on that fateful day where we had that spat. If I wasn't as stupid and if I wasn't so consumed by my envy towards you, I might have ended up a lot differently. It's too late for that now. What is done is done. You have your life and I have my life. We've gone our separate ways."

Ves scanned Carlos' appearance once again. "It looks like you've shaped up. What happened to you after you left my side?"

"Oh, nothing much." Carlos nonchalantly answered. "I tried to muddle through on my own. The Sand War and the Komodo War changed all of that. Before I knew it, the Coalition Reserve Corps picked me up and put me in a holding

facility where they interrogated me for months. They squeezed everything I knew about you. Not that it helped that much."

"How so?"

"I knew you best during the times we attended the Rittersberg University of Technology and when we worked during the early days of your mech business. The Ves back then is unrecognizable from the Ves that returned from his mandatory service in the Mech Corps. That is also the reason why I didn't hesitate to reveal everything I knew. I don't think my information helped the Fridaymen in any way or shape."

"Thanks. I think."

"You're welcome, old friend."

"So what did you do after that? I take it that the Fridaymen did not treat you too poorly."

"They were quite nice to me when they realized that I was being fully cooperative." Carlos smirked. "Just like you, I got the VIP treatment. While my information didn't turn out to be that helpful, the Fridaymen were still decent enough to give a big bag of money as well as citizenship to their fine state."

"So you decided to start a new life in the Friday Coalition?"

"I did." Carlos nodded. "I had nothing left in the Bright Republic. The state was in a bad shape after the sandmen wiped out the surface of Bentheim, so the Friday Coalition was a much better stage for me to restart my mech design career."

It sounded like Carlos was genuinely doing well nowadays. Ves felt a little guilty for never taking the trouble to check up on his former bosom buddy, so he actually felt quite relieved that Carlos hadn't fallen victim to all of the major events that took place in the Komodo Star Sector.

Of course, Ves could only base this conclusion on the premise that this dream sequence was as this version of Carlos had described.

Once all of this was over, Ves would definitely look Carlos up on the galactic net and confirm that his former friend had truly emigrated to the Friday Coalition like he claimed!

Chapter 4487 Lessons Learned

"Did you make it in the Friday Coalition? No offense, Carlos, but you don't look like a Journeyman."

"None taken, old friend. It's not that bad. I didn't make much progress at first, but I had a plan. I used the rewards I've earned from the CRC to take additional courses that would help me become a second-class mech designer. Remember those candies you've fed me? That has helped me a lot with passing all of those difficult courses. Anyway, when the Komodo War grew hot, a lot of lucrative jobs became available that helped me integrate into the local scene."

"I'm happy that you managed to pick up your life after you have left." Ves said with genuine sincerity in his tone. "I don't even mind that you completely betrayed my trust and stabbed me in the back by telling everything you knew about me. I would have done the same if I was in your place."

"Thanks, Ves. That means a lot to me. I have done my best to milk you dry. Nowadays, business is booming. The Friday Coalition is investing a lot of money and resources to rebuild the territories that used to belong to the Hexadric Hegemony. I'm continuing to get a lot of practice and I hope that I will eventually be able to hit Journeyman before I become 50 years old. I know that doesn't sound impressive to a mech designer of your caliber, but not everyone has a superrelic in his possession like you. I think I am doing quite well for an ordinary person."

"You are." Ves affirmed. "I don't look down on you, Carlos."

"Don't lie to me. You totally are looking down on me. I'm the dirt that is beneath your booth. You have advanced so much in the last ten years that you have begun to hobnob with high-and-mighty MTA Masters. As for me, I'm still working in the trenches as a lowly Apprentice."

"...I guess you're right." Ves said. "I do look down on you, but that is a natural response when a superior mech designer meets an inferior mech designer. You're not much different from the assistant mech designers who are working diligently in my Design Department. I can easily hire hundreds of them at a time, you know? There are so many of them that they aren't worth that much unless they have exposed their talents at an early stage. In my eyes, most Apprentices are simply normal people. They are decent and all, but they're too... plain to have what it takes to take a step further."

"And you think I'm one of those plain and boring guys?"

Ves nodded. "Yeah. I don't know the full details about what has happened to you lately. While you look a lot more successful and content with your life, I don't feel the drive in you that is common in most high-ranking mech designers. You haven't even mentioned your design philosophy to me yet. Are you truly committed to your work?"

Carlos, or the facsimile posing as him, paused for a moment. "I don't know. I clearly think that I am doing enough, but it may not be enough for other people. I am pretty happy with where I am, though. I have a good life in the Friday Coalition and I've even started dating. I will see where my life will lead me. I am not in a hurry to become a Journeyman. I overcame my feelings of jealousy towards you. I have accepted that I will never be as good as you, but there is no need for me to feel upset about it. Everyone has their chances. Mine are not as great, but as long as I work hard enough, I believe I can make something of my career."

"And what if you can't?"

"Then I'll just accept the fact it was never meant to be." Carlos shrugged. "I'm fine, Ves. I am totally over it. Mech design is not the beginning or the end. It just is. There is more to my life than trying to catch up to you in vain. You may look down on me for that, but this is what it is like for little guys like me. I'm not good enough to attract the attention of the Polymath."

An awkward silence ensued. Ves didn't know what to say. He was glad to hear that Carlos ostensibly accepted his lot in life. He was much better than he was back when they had separated.

"Talking to you like this is nice, but I know that the real Carlos won't pick up on any of this." Ves eventually said. "I feel tempted to call the real you once I have dealt with my current ordeals. I... I was always afraid to contact you or even check up on you, but... now I feel like it could do us both a lot of good if we just talked with each other like old times."

"We've grown older, haven't we?" Carlos grinned.

"We have."

"Well, I would love to catch up on you further, but I've reached the end of the line." Carlos spoke as his body began to fade or phase out of existence. He waved at Ves. "Anyway, I appreciate the talk, even though my real self won't remember most of this conversation."

"Wait a second. What do you mean by 'most'? I thought you said that the real you isn't involved!"

"That's not entirely correct, old friend." Carlos shook his head. "Look, I can't explain this either, but don't let this stop you from speaking frankly to the guys that come next. All I can say is that the real Carlos who is blissfully living his life back in the Friday Coalition will obtain an impression of my current feelings. He will feel better as if he has received closure in his life. Do you understand?"

"How can you prove all of this? Can you explain— hey, don't leave yet! I'm not done with you, Carlos!"

Carlos left at the same time the environment shifted.

In one moment, he was standing in the middle of his first mech workshop.

In the next moment, he appeared inside the office of a place that shouldn't have existed any longer.

Now that Ves had become primed to what was going on, it didn't take as long for him to recognize this environment.

"Marcella Bollinger."

"You called, Ves?"

Ves turned around and beheld his first ever business partner. The mech broker and veteran didn't look much different from the last time he saw her. The fact that she hadn't been as affected by the passage of time suggested an uncomfortable truth.

"You..."

"It happens." Marcella casually replied. "It's not your fault. The galaxy is dangerous. No place in human space is safe. I used to be a soldier so I have always accepted my mortality. So much fighting took place in the star sector that you have left that it was always possible for any of us to croak."

"I see." Ves nodded. "Well... since we are obviously meant to talk to each other, let me ask you this. Why did you sell me out to the authorities?"

"Why wouldn't I?" She retorted. "I don't know if you have noticed, but I am, was, a citizen of the Bright Republic. No matter whether the government or the Friday Coalition that is backing the suits wants to grab a hold of you, I obey the law and follow orders like a good citizen should."

"Don't you feel any remorse for betraying my trust? I thought we were friends, Marcella. I thought you were the kind of person that would honor our relationship."

"We were business partners, Ves. There is a difference." The older and much more muscular woman corrected him. "Sure, I got along well with you, but I only invested in you because I recognized your potential to earn a lot of profit for me. My hunch turned out to be right and I was happier for it, up until the situation changed. Once you started making enemies that were way too powerful for us to handle, it was no longer worth it to maintain our previous relationship. I don't like it any more than you do, but I am not so eager to abandon everything I've built and run away like you have done."

"Was it worth it to sell yourself out to a state that was corrupt to the point where the founding families practically ran the Bright Republic as their own personal backyard and where the Friday Coalition could swoop in and override everything?"

Marcella Bollinger stood as straight as a military serviceman. "I was a soldier, Ves. I served in the Mech Corps. I pledged my loyalty to the Bright Republic and nothing could have changed that. Even knowing that my state is full of warts and other ugly parts doesn't change anything as far as I am concerned. Orders are orders. No matter whether they are issued by a Senator of the Tovar Family or a faceless bureaucrat of the central government, it is all the same to me. I have always been trained to obey."

"...I see."

"Are you upset, Ves?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "Too much time has passed for me to feel any resentment towards you. To be honest, I can fully understand your own position. It's too hard to refuse the whims of those who hold authority over

you. What you have done wasn't really all that bad now that I look back on it. In the end, you taught me several lessons."

"What lessons, exactly?"

"For one, I can never put my unreserved trust in my friends. Their interests always weigh more than whatever sentiment they hold towards me. They would screw me over in a heartbeat if this is the most rational course of action. You have taught me to always watch out for this and make sure that I always remain useful to the parties that want a piece of me. I think I have done quite well for myself ever since."

"What is the second lesson that you have learned from me?" Marcella curiously asked.

"That it is best to never put myself in a position where I have to answer to a higher authority." Ves replied. "All of the times I got screwed over by one government institution after another has driven me to remove myself entirely from their rule. I painstakingly built up my Larkinson Clan as a sovereign fleet-bound state so that I would never put myself or my friends in a position as yours. This has also worked out well for me. Few people are able to get a hold on me anymore."

The specter of Marcella sighed in disappointment. "I wouldn't have wanted you to learn those lessons from me. Isn't it great to embrace service in all of its merits? It is not as if you would have ended up badly, Ves. You showed value and people wanted that. The Friday Coalition could have become your greatest backing. Instead, you ended up consorting with Hexers of all people. Don't you feel any guilt for providing material aid to a group of people that has embraced a horrible ideology?"

"Nope. If you think I feel any regret for getting turned away from the Friday Coalition, then you are wrong. In hindsight, I think hooking up with the Hexers

was the best that could happen to me at the time. I have witnessed the ugly side of the Friday Coalition so many times that I would have never been able to trust the Fridaymen."

"They're not that bad, Ves. You have met and befriended several Fridaymen."

"And I have met more Fridaymen who would have liked to do nothing more than to end my life." He snorted. "Don't talk to me about the Fridaymen any further. They are too consumed by their infighting to value their friendships. The Hexers on the other hand may hold awful ideas, but they are much more honest and sincere. The fact that they have honored their friendship with me time and time again has earned my respect."

"You also aided and abetted their aggression towards the Friday Coalition. The Komodo War killed a lot more people because of the effectiveness of the Hexer mechs that you have designed."

Ves scowled. "And I'm supposed to feel guilty for that? The Fridaymen targeted me first. I never wanted to antagonize them. What I have done is justified revenge. Besides, whether I helped the Hexers or not, I have always made sure to maintain my distance. If I stayed chummy with the Fridaymen, then the Coalition would have assimilated me sooner or later, thereby limiting my potential. The Hexers are much more abhorrent as you have said, which made it a lot easier for me to avoid them as much as possible. I ended up better for it because the clan I have founded has grown into a formidable independent power that has much better growth potential than the Hex Federation. That is a win in my book."

Marcella sighed. "It is clear that we will never see eye to eye on this issue. No matter. It is fine as long as you are happy. Anyway, I hope that you will remember everything good that I have done for you. I truly did not want to turn my back on you and I tried my best not to surrender more than what was expected of me."

Chapter 4488 The Most Difficult Dilemma

Ves took in the idyllic back garden of the Larkinson Estate. He missed this place. He could already imagine his aunts and uncles chatting leisurely while the children laughed and played among themselves.

The ancestral home of the Larkinson Family was a beloved site for many Larkinsons. Ve had fond memories of this place, so much so that he had tried to recreate the general atmosphere throughout his entire clan.

"Family is important, don't you agree, Ves?"

"I do, Melinda."

Ves turned around and greeted his older cousin with a smile.

Of all of the Larkinsons of the original family, his relationship with Melinda was probably the best.

Though they hadn't spent as much time together as he would have liked, he always considered her the oldest sister that he never really had in his own family.

"You look good, Ves." Melinda said in a happy tone. "You're not the Ves I know anymore, but you definitely have an air of greatness and confidence around you. It is as if you are projecting a magnetic field that makes it easier for people to take you seriously."

"Thanks. That is a necessity for people like me. I have learned the hard way that bad things always happen if certain groups of people don't take me seriously enough."

"Mmhmm. I can understand that. We have been forced to adapt as well. The Garlen Empire is anything but a paradise."

"Were you guys doing well over there?" Ves asked with concern.

"We were doing okay. You don't need to bother too much about how we were faring when we were staying in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. We have already left this cesspit of violence and grandstanding. Our family is making our way over to your clan, remember?"

Ves nodded. "I do. The journey is perilous, though. I won't mention much about the dangers of traveling through the old galaxy, but the new frontier is way too chaotic. Your family should contact our clan the moment you have passed through the greater beyonder gate. We can arrange to pick you up once your fleet has reached the Vulit Central Star Node."

"Don't patronize us, Ves." Melinda. "Just because you are a Larkinson doesn't mean we like getting told what we should do. We can take care of ourselves for the most part. If we want your help, we will call you, but until then, please respect our dignity. There are already enough Larkinsons who oppose our planned reunion as it is. The naysayers are afraid that you will treat us all as your personal property. That won't happen, right?"

"Oh, of course not, cousin! You guys aren't strong or important enough to merit so much personal attention from me. I have better lackeys to play with these days."

"Well, you certainly aren't cutting back on how much you despise your old relatives." Melinda Larkinson mirthfully said.

"Why should I tip-toe around the obvious? We both know what is left of the old Larkinson Family is but a shadow of my clan. You guys are living entirely from the handouts from us. Without the dividends that you have earned from your shares of the LMC and without the powerful mech designs that I have permitted you to use, would any of you have been able to regain your footing in the Garlen Empire?"

"We would have managed with or without you, Ves. Ark Larkinson is still a genuine high-tier expert pilot. A mech officer of his caliber would have easily been able to find employment elsewhere as long as he is open to switching his loyalties."

"Well, I will give you that, but that still doesn't change my point too much. No matter what, your Larkinson Family would never be able to equal my Larkinson Clan."

"I wouldn't have minded if that was the case." Melinda retorted. "The decisions you have made in your quest for power have brought your clan to the brink of annihilation multiple times. This isn't the way you take care of your own people, Ves. One of the reasons why I have stuck with the Larkinson Family is because we value stability over greed. We just want to live a decent and honorable life. There is no need to chase after greater power and riches."

Ves obviously didn't agree with that sentiment. "Then why is your family heading over to our clan? You know what will happen once we reunite, right?"

"It wasn't my decision." Melinda grimaced. "Don't get me wrong. I am genuinely looking forward to meeting you in the flesh again. I just don't like the idea of putting my children and my other family members under your wing. The stories I've heard about your escapades leave me with little confidence that our family will be safe under your 'tender' care. Larkinson will die. The people that I have lived with and known for many years will meet their ends prematurely because of your compulsion to chase after the shiniest opportunities."

Ves had heard these complaints so many times that he had become immune to them. He simply crossed his arms and maintained an impassive gaze.

"I won't force any of you to join my 'escapades' as you have described them. Our clan has set up a branch system where the meek among you can choose

to settle at our branches. Right now, we only have the Cat Nest in Davute, but I can assure you that it is a safe enough place for you and your children to reside. You can even take up a semblance of your old job and help with guarding our property against possible threats."

Melinda still didn't look happy, but she begrudgingly nodded her head. "I suppose that is the best that we can get. I don't know if rival colonial states or angry alien retribution forces will appear in orbit one day and bombard everything below into pieces, but we will take what we can get. I may be a mech pilot, but I am not cut out for the campaigns that you have become addicted to. How come you are so desperate to tempt danger, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be a mech designer? I thought you are all content to stay in your labs and design your mechs behind closed doors."

"You're not wrong, but those aren't the only sort of mech designers out there. I'm a different type of mech designer. I have discovered that I work best if I embrace new experiences."

"That doesn't sound so bad if I ignore that your own people must brave death in order to cover for your mistakes. No normal mech designer is okay with that. You've changed, Ves. All of your power and wealth has corrupted you." Melinda accused.

"I have changed, but not in a bad way. I grew up, Melinda. I changed for the better. If I was my old self, I would have never been able to make it this far. You may think ill of me all you like, but I don't regret the decisions that I have made. I have become a better mech designer than I could have ever imagined by following my current course."

His cousin scowled deeper. "I can't believe you. It is so difficult for me to reconcile the Ves I grew up with to the monster that you have become. These obsessions of yours have ruined you. Every time I see you, I see a Larkinson that could have been a hero, but chose to become a villain instead. Tell it to

me straight. If you have to make a choice, what do you prioritize the most, your family or your mech design career?"

Ves grew angry this time. "I don't like false dichotomies, Melinda. I am not falling for your word trap. I have always tried my best to never let my mech design ambitions stand in the way of my love for my family. I have tried to combine them instead. Becoming a better mech designer will help my children and the rest of my clan a lot more than if I settle down and choose a stable course like the old family has done."

"You haven't answered my question. You can't avoid the hard choices forever, Ves. One day, you will be put into a position where you cannot get away unless you make your decision. Are you willing to sacrifice your family or everything you have worked for in your professional life?"

This was by far the most painful dilemma that Ves was confronted with. He truly loved his children to death, but as a mech designer he was incapable of compromising his mech design ambitions.

Ves almost felt as if he was tearing himself in half whenever he considered one unpalatable choice or another!

He would never be as great of a man as before if he gave up on either his family or his design philosophy.

He gritted his teeth as he tried to squirrel his way out of this awful dilemma.

"I... am not... going to play along! I reject your false dichotomy! There is always a third, a fourth and a fifth option! I am a mech designer, Melinda! Don't you know what that means? That means I am good at thinking outside the box! I excel at coming up with solutions that no one has ever thought about before because I am just that good! No matter how much I have been pushed into a corner, I will always do my best to find a superior solution!"

"And what if you fail? What if your third or fourth or fifth options are unobtainable?"

"Then I guess I suffer the consequences of my failure." Ves growled in response. "At least I have tried. Look, I don't expect you to agree with my stance, but I am completely fine with my current course. I may be endangering my children who I care about the most, but I think that what I am doing will eventually help them survive in the long run. There are much greater dangers in the cosmos that they need to prepare for. I can coddle them as long as I can, but that won't help much when an unfathomable enemy shows up that we cannot run away from. The only way for us to survive is by gaining enough strength. Do you know the motto of our clan?"

"I do. Per angusta ad augusta."

"Well, you have done your homework at least, but I don't think you interpret the meaning of this phrase in the same way as us." Ves responded. "You don't know anything about what is going on in the galaxies and the rest of the cosmos. I don't know that much more either, but what I have learned and witnessed over the course of my life terrifies me. There are so many enormous threats out there that I am scrambling to rise up the ranks. The more powerful I become, the more I am able to protect myself and my family. If you know as much as me, then you too would support the current course of our clan."

The specter of his cousin remained silent as she kept pinning Ves with a judgemental gaze.

"Is this the man you want to be, Ves? A man who is incapable of putting his trust in others and just has to do everything himself?"

"I am content with who I am." He replied with conviction. "I could always be better off, but at least I am being proactive about improving my situation. I am

a mech designer. I will do whatever it takes to design better mechs and provide humanity with what they need to stave off the many threats to our race. My children will inherit my mission and follow suit once they grow up. They will be grateful for me when they grow old enough to understand, just like how I understand the decisions made by my parents."

"You obviously have bad role models."

"What would you have me do instead? I am not going to live blindly like a space peasant and assume that the Big Two will take care of everything." Ves contemptuously snorted. "I have the ability to arm the people on my side with stronger weapons that they can use to protect us and everyone we care about. Any problem can be solved as long as I design the right mech, so I am working hard to reach this ultimate state! That is my purpose as a mech designer!"

Melinda shook her head in disappointment before turning her back to Ves. "I give up. You are so stubborn. You cling to your identity as a mech designer as if it is a universal talisman. You can't deflect every problem with that excuse. Mark my words, Ves. One day you will have to choose between the wellbeing of your family and the future of your mech design career. I hope there will still be enough of a genuine Larkinson left inside of you to make the right choice. Sacrifice is a virtue. There are more important things in life than your work."

"Life and work are the same to me. My family and my mech designs aren't opposed to each other. They are on the same side. My clan exists for this reason. The scenario that you have described will never happen."

"You can't postpone all of your problems forever, Ves. One day the chickens will come home to roost."

Chapter 4489 Missed Opportunities

Ves appeared in a different location this time. The bulkheads, the bridge stations and the tech around him looked familiar.

It was the modified bridge of his former flagship, a Friday Coalition Stanley Crux-class Standard Mobile Supply Frigate called the Scarlet Rose.

He spent years aboard this ship alongside Gloriana. Though the ship was small by his current standards, she was his first true mobile home.

Ves had plenty of memories of this vessel.

He went on several adventures before his clan received the Spirit of Bentheim.

He designed plenty of mechs back when the Design Department only comprised a handful people.

He imprisoned Cassandra Breyer in a secret chamber within his flagship so that he could gain a constant supply of Breyer alloy.

As Ves reminisced about the past, a voice interrupted his musings.

"You could have thanked me for my gift, you know." A particularly incisive and posh voice called out from behind. "I handed such an excellent ship to you, and you went ahead and executed me before you gave me a chance!"

What was it with the specters and announcing their presence from behind? Ves was getting tired of turning around all of the time.

He sighed and proceeded to turn around.

"Lady Aisling Curver. I had a feeling I would meet with you again."

The blond and not-entirely-sane Journeyman Mech Designer from the Gauge Dynasty directed a brilliant smile towards him. "Did you have fun abusing the remnants of my own power? I don't like getting killed, but I'm grateful that you still saw fit to recycle my remains to make your wonderful intangible puppets. I would like to think a small part of me still lives alongside you in the fragment that you inserted into Blinky and Vulcan. I am also honored to see you using a

much larger portion to turn Titania in the way she is. The only issue I have with you is the fact that you put the other larger portion into GLORIANA!"

"Hey, you were already dead, Aisling! You screwed me over, so it is only right that I try to get compensation from what you have left behind!"

"DON'T YOU HAVE ANY RESPECT FOR THE DEAD?! YOU COULD HAVE PRESERVED ME AND BROUGHT ME BACK TO LIFE LIKE YOU DID WITH THOSE OTHER 'DESIGN SPIRITS'!"

"And why would I do that?" Ves looked at her as if she was a fool. "First, I don't even know if that is possible in the case of mech designers. Second, I've had bad experiences with hostile design spirits in the past so I did not look forward to bringing a semblance of you back to life so that you can harass me again."

"..."

"Wow. So you're the lady that wanted to have Ves all to yourself, huh? He most certainly dodged a laser beam."

"What?" Ves uttered as he turned around to see a woman that he never expected to see again. "You... you're Iris Jupiter?!"

Unlike Lady Aisling Curver who looked as old as she was before her capture during the Battle of Reckoning, Iris Jupiter looked radically different.

She came across as a youthful girl the last time Ves had spent time with her during the last Bright-Vesia War, but now she appeared as a more mature and mellow woman.

"You look... beautiful." Ves couldn't help but utter as he couldn't control his attraction towards her matronly appearance. "It looks like you have managed to live a much better life than Lady Aisling. How is the Vesian Revolutionary Front doing these days? Does it still exist?"

Iris, who wore a casual but fairly luxurious dark blue dress with multiple folds, tittered as if he was a child who made a foolish statement.

"You are behind the times, Ves. The VRF disbanded a long time ago. With so many greater calamities taking place in our star sector, our little rebellion was just making life worse for the commoners of my state. Besides, with the expansion of the Vesia Kingdom after the Sand War, the nobles have opened up many more promotion opportunities in order to speed up the colonization effort. I have accepted an amnesty offer and have done well for myself ever since. I married, had kids and advanced to Journeyman along the way. If you had looked me up in the galactic net then you would have known all of that. You haven't been paying any attention to what has happened in your old neighborhood, is that right?"

"Eh... yeah. I don't really like to look back to the past. I would much rather look forward to the future."

"Hm, I don't blame you." Iris said. "It is certainly working out for you. That said, your constant refusal to reflect on the past is making this much longer and riskier than it needed to be, you know. Take it from a neural interface specialist. A well-balanced human individual should always find a way to reconcile with the regrets of his past. This is even more important for a man who wishes to attain greatness. Terrible consequences can happen if broken individuals gain way more power than they can responsibly handle. What you are going through right now is... an entry examination of sorts. Pass the test and you may proceed."

"What if I don't pass the test?" Ves pointedly asked.

"You will get stuck." A different voice spoke up from another direction.

"Hey! Since when has this place turned into a clubhouse?!"

"Don't ask us, Ves." Ketis spoke as her strong and athletic form exuded a sharp and domineering presence. "This is your ordeal, not ours. We are here for your benefit."

Ves turned around and beheld the three ladies. Lady Aisling Curver, Iris Jupiter and Ketis surrounded him in a triangle. That made it difficult for him to keep his attention on all of them at the same time.

"I am picking up a theme here." He stated.

Ketis rolled her eyes. "Duh. You had a crush on all of us, did you not? Each of us could have been your 'Gloriana' if you had chosen differently."

"I wouldn't exactly say that I had a crush on you all." Ves retorted as he pointedly did not look in the direction of Lady Aisling Curver. "By the way, can you act like you are not an inquisition that is in the middle of holding a tribunal about me? It's really annoying for me to turn around all of the time."

Fortunately enough for Ves, the specters accepted his suggestion and no longer made life difficult for him. They stood at the same side this time though they definitely maintained a bit of distance from each other.

There was obvious tension between the three ladies. It was as if they were three different hens trying to exert their dominance over each other.

"Can we get this over with?" Ves said in an annoyed tone. "As much as I'd like to reminisce about the past with a couple of old friends, I don't see why this is necessary. I have already tied the knot with Gloriana. I have three beautiful children with her and we plan to expand our collection in the near future. I have absolutely zero interest in rehashing old relationships."

Neither of the three ladies found him credible.

"We wouldn't be here if you had truly moved on as you have claimed. There is a small part of you that still thinks what it could have been like if you pursued any of us instead." Iris Jupiter explained.

Ves seriously doubted that. "That doesn't make any sense. Why is Aisling here, then?"

The lady in question gave him a brilliant grin. "I may have behaved more excessively towards you than was wise, but you cannot deny that you were attracted to me. There was still a part of you that was thinking about accepting my gracious offer and separating yourself from the banshee that is your current wife. She intruded into your life, you know? Why did she succeed in manipulating your life to the point of severing your ties with Master Carmin Olson and the Friday Coalition while I only received your scorn? Her crimes are worse than mine! I did nothing but attempt to bring you back to where you truly belonged!"

He experienced a mix of emotions as Lady Aisling mixed truth with self-serving claims. Although he wanted to refute her arguments right away, they were too tricky for him to come up with a good counter argument!

"He's hopeless." Ketis rolled her eyes again. "He's stupid and he makes decisions that have no logical basis. I don't know what he is thinking 50 percent of the time, and I have been working under him for many years!"

Ves pinned his former student with a glare. "Why are you here, Ketis?"

"Isn't it obvious? For all your denials about your interest towards me, there was still a chance that we could have been together. Why did you let your stupid rule about not dating your own students get in the way?"

"Because it's unethical!" Ves exclaimed!

"You never let the rules get in the way of your ambitions before!" Ketis forcefully shot back. "The Swordmaidens and I were all pirates back then.

None of us cared about the rules! You may have taught me a lot of stuff, but you weren't that much older than me. It would have been totally okay if you acknowledged my hints and reciprocated my affection. Instead of doing the obvious, you turned your back to me and married a Hexer of all people!"

Ves was just about to defend himself until he was interrupted.

"Hello, ladies and gentleman. It appears that I am late to this occasion. Odd."

A new voice spoke up at this time.

Ves groaned. He already recognized the voice even though it had clearly aged a bit over time.

"Patricia Schneider. Of course you would show up here. How have you been doing?"

"I go by Patricia Cain, not Schneider, though I would not fault you for your mistake. I only married a Fridayman for expediency, not affection." The calm woman spoke in the familiar flat manner of a rational mech designer.

"Oh. I remember." Ves spoke as Patricia automatically joined the company of the other three women. "How are you doing these days? Did the Komodo War threaten you or anything?"

From the way that Patricia carried herself, she had obviously matured and done well for herself. Her understated but high-quality clothing underneath her lab coat suggested that she had achieved notable success in her professional career.

"Master Null has taught me much." Patricia replied. "The Komodo War may have ruined large parts of the Carnegie Group, but it has also given mech designers such as myself many opportunities to assimilate into the Friday Coalition. I managed to become a Journeyman during the closing days of the war, and accepted many work orders as the great reconstruction effort went underway."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Hm, just like Carlos, then. I'm happy that you are doing well for yourself. I don't really understand why you are here. Of all of the women here, you have the least reason to hold any interest towards me. You are clearly happy with leading your own life."

"Do you truly think that is the case?" Patricia raised her eyebrow.

"Aren't you supposed to be a rational mech designer? People like you suppress your emotions."

"That is not entirely true, Ves." Patricia shook her head. "You misunderstand our kind. As long as we are still human, we still experience emotions as much as everyone else. The difference is that we have trained ourselves to lower our sensitivity towards our feelings. We simply refuse to get affected by our mood swings in order to maintain a more objective outlook towards our work. We do not turn ourselves into unfeeling robots that cannot understand the meaning of love."

"Oh. So what does that mean?"

"I think the answer would be obvious to you." Patricia responded in a tone that possessed a hint of snideness.

Ves didn't know what to do as he faced the four women that... he could have been closer with if he chose differently. This entire scenario felt like a highly uncomfortable school reunion where he became confronted by all of his past lovers at once!

Chapter 4490 Putting Down Old Flames

"Can I say that I am really uncomfortable with this reunion?"

Ketis smacked her palm against her face. "This isn't supposed to be a picnic, Ves! If it wasn't obvious to you already, you're supposed to man up and make peace with us all. You're not going to get past us if you continue to deny the obvious."

"And what is the 'obvious' that you are referring to?" Ves suspiciously questioned. "By the way, why are you even here? Whatever flame that once sparked between us has snuffed out a long time ago. As far as I am concerned, you are happily married to Joshua. He is a much better fit to you than me in my opinion."

"That may be true, but we humans don't always abide by what is correct and proper." She responded. "Can you truly tell me that you have never thought about whether you should have entered into a relationship with me instead of Gloriana?"

"I..."

Iris Jupiter coughed. "Don't deny your true feelings, you fool. The first step to making progress is acknowledging the truth that you have always tried to deny because it wasn't convenient to you. That may work for you while you are living your life as normal, but now that you have embarked on a greater journey, you're not allowed to sweep the dust underneath your carpet anymore."

Seeing that Ves wouldn't be able to overcome this hurdle without confronting a number of painful truths, he sighed and decided to be more forthcoming.

The women were right. Continuing to resort to outright denial and evasion wouldn't get him anywhere.

"Alright, I was interested in you all, is that what you wanted to hear?!" He forced himself to say. "I have tried my best to forget about feelings towards you, and I think I did a good job of doing so. I have already moved on and so have most of you. I really don't see the need to retread the past and think about what I could have done to end up with you as opposed to Gloriana."

"Gloriana isn't as good for you as you think." Lady Aisling Curver claimed. "Have you ever properly acknowledged how that witch manipulated and

coerced you into becoming her eternal boytoy? There is a difference between being polite and respectful towards a woman and letting an abusive Hexer ruin your life to the point where you have nowhere else to turn! Can't you acknowledge all of the crimes she committed to string you along her finger?!"

So it was about that, huh? Ves felt extremely upset at being forced to confront this issue. The only reason why he didn't shout back was because enough years had passed for him to be able to look back at his past behavior and circumstances from a more detached perspective.

Ketis found herself nodding in agreement with Aisling. "I can accept getting beaten by another woman. I am no stranger to competition. Losing is just as part of the game as winning. What I can't accept is that Gloriana cheated her way to victory. While I followed all of the rules, she just inserted herself into your life and forced you to keep your attention on her with her invasive actions and her damned perfumes!"

"Hey! Don't insult her scents! She smells good! It's one of my favorite parts about her!" Ves complained. "Look, ever since I... went through an involuntary augmentation process, my sensitivity towards a lot of stuff has dropped. A lot of food has become a lot blander for example. While my physical tolerance for pain and hazardous environments has grown, I miss some of the pleasures that others have taken for granted. Gloriana has at least brought back a part of that in my life."

"Maybe I should have doused my body in hypnotizing smells as well." Lady Aisling Curver furrowed her brows. "If something as simple as titillating your sense of smell is enough to reel you in, then I should have paid more attention to this variable."

"Pleasant scents alone cannot form the basis of your attraction to your current wife." Patricia Cain clearly observed. "You can have each of us apply the scents that appeal to you if you inform us of your desires. There has to be

more substantial reasons why you have eventually decided to put Gloriana above the rest of us. We wouldn't be here if that was the case."

"What do you want to hear from me, then? Why does this even matter when one of you is already dead and gone while the rest of you have settled into your own relationships?"

"I'm not entirely dead, Ves!" Aisling claimed! "Pieces of me still live on inside of you and those other 'spirits'! You can bring a semblance of me back anytime."

Ves did not bother to respond to Aisling's absurd proposal.

"We are not going to leave unless you properly deal with us." Ketis stated as she moved her hands as if she was holding her Bloodsinger. "Take it from a Swordmaster like me. If you want to unlock your potential and harness a greater form of power, you must prove your worthiness. Your conduct up until this point falls short of what is required of you, so stop being a pussy and step up already!"

He never asked to undergo these trials! Although he read hints about tests and other stuff from the knowledge granted by the Orven Ritual Sacrifice Altar enlightenment fruit, he just thought that all of those ordeals were actually drug-fueled trances. He also thought that any failures experienced by those who attempted to become orven gods were all caused by botched or sloppy rituals.

Ves tried his best to gather his thoughts and figure out a way to get past this uncomfortable reunion. He would rather suffer the complaints of Melinda than keep his temper in check in front of these women!

"I may... not have been entirely fair to you all." He admitted as he turned to his earliest crush. "Patricia, I had a crush on you back when we were younger. Your performance was much better than mine and you were practically the

belle of our class. I had fantasies about you, but I never dared to ask you out on a date. We lived in two different worlds as far as I was concerned. I never thought I could measure up against you until the time we graduated from the Rittersberg University of Technology."

Patricia calmly nodded. "I could guess about your feelings towards me. You are not the first boy who looked at me in this way. You were not wrong to hold yourself back, Ves. I would have rejected you if you attempted to make an advance on me. That might have changed once you have graduated, though. At one point, your successes and your growth have made you more... attractive to me. If you contacted me by the time you have become a well-established Apprentice, I would have responded differently to you. Do you regret that, Ves?"

He shook his head. "Nah. We both went our separate ways after we graduated. Sure, we met with each other a few times during a couple of tournaments, but we simply didn't belong in the same orbits. I think I managed to get over my childish crush towards you at that time."

Although Patricia did not look completely satisfied with his answer, it at least sounded honest enough.

"I acknowledge your words."

Ves turned to Iris Jupiter. "As for you, I won't deny that I enjoyed your presence. In the short time we have been together, I felt comfortable and became engaged in the topics that we talked about. Now that I am looking back at this period, we definitely had chemistry going on between us. It's just... our identities make it impractical for us to further our relationship. I'm a Brighter while you are a Vesian. I don't know about you, but I am not a fan of Romeo and Juliet."

Iris frowned. "We spent time together despite our awkward identities. We aren't as different as you think we are. I was a Vesian dissident. I opposed the traditional order of my state at the time. If you showed more sympathy for my cause and offered to provide aid to the Vesian Revolutionary Front past your mission, you would have been able to meet with me again."

"I don't care one bit about the Vesia Kingdom." Ves flatly said. "You clearly care a lot about the state of the Vesia Kingdom and the welfare of its underclass, but what does that have to do with me? I don't even care about the Bright Republic anymore. While I don't think it is necessary for us to share the same interests in order to make a relationship work, I don't think it was meant to be considering you are such a strong Vesian nationalist."

"So that is your answer to me, Ves?"

"Yes, Iris. Can I move on, now?" He turned to Ketis without waiting for a reply. "As for you, I have already supplied you with my reasoning. I know that you and many other people can't fathom why I would possibly reject your hints and maintain my professionalism, but this is what I was taught in school. Patricia can attest to that. There are strict boundaries between teachers and students, and I have always respected them because I would be abusing your trust in me if I acted on your vulnerabilities."

That seemed to trigger Ketis. "I am not a weak and vulnerable girl! I am a woman! I have even become a swordmaster! If this weird dream sequence hadn't deprived me of my Bloodsinger, I would have chopped off your other leg for that remark!"

Ves remained unimpressed. "You were a child back then, Ketis. Your growth circumstances were hardly ideal. I know the Swordmaidens did their best to raise you as well as the other girls that came under their care, but I don't consider their approach to upbringing to be comprehensive enough. You spent so little time with men who you can treat as peers that you were just

beginning to cope with attraction. Your crush on me was just as juvenile as my crush on Patricia."

"You treated me like a child!"

"Maybe I did." Ves admitted. "I don't see anything wrong with that. Look, I rejected your advances because I did not think you were ready for that and because I don't think we would have been great together."

"Do you think I am ugly, Ves? Do you despise my messy genetics or my unfeminine appearance? Is that the reason why you went with Gloriana instead?"

Ves coughed. "Please don't put words in my mouth! You are beautiful, okay! There are many forms of beauty out there. Just like there are many pretty mechs, there are also many pretty girls. Gloriana is like a slender and agile medium mech while you are a stockier and more massive heavy mech."

"ARE YOU CALLING ME HEAVY?!"

"Can we please move on, Ketis?! I still have to go through Aisling."

"Fine." Ketis huffed in a familiar manner. "The real me won't be happy if she heard what you have said., though."

"I'm not here to please you or anyone else." Ves mildly replied before he turned to the last lady. "As for you, Aisling, my repulsion towards you is quite simple. You deprived me of my freedom. You forced me to go along with you. The sole reason why an elite Gauger like you expressed interest to me was because of my design philosophy and potential. Nothing more. For all of your obsession towards me, your affection was never pure."

"You can say the same about Gloriana. Perhaps the only difference is that she got to you first. I was trying to correct the damage that she has done." Lady Aisling Curver shot back.

"I never asked for your 'help'!"

"You never asked for Gloriana to utterly ruin your relationship with the Friday Coalition either! Why have you never confronted her on that, Ves?! Why did you let her get away with this and many other actions that have proven detrimental to your life and career?! Why was she allowed to get away with her misdeeds while I received the full brunt of your animosity?!"

Ves... found it difficult to formulate a proper answer to that. Lady Aisling Curver may have been a madwoman, but the same could have been said about Gloriana as well.