

## Mech 4491

### Chapter 4491 Answer From His Heart

Ves closed his eyes and tried to formulate a proper response to Lady Aisling Curver.

Normally, he would have tried to avoid this topic at all cost, but he was tired of running away from this issue.

The specter of Aisling was hardly the only person who questioned the wisdom of hooking up with Gloriana. Plenty of clansmen and outsiders had asked the same question, and he never managed to form a coherent reply.

However, now that he was being cornered by four female ghosts, Ves had no choice but to process his feelings on the matter and supply an answer that came from his heart.

"Gloriana... is an intense woman." He began. "She is a passionate woman. She knows what she wants and is decisive in her actions. I admire all of those traits. Sure, you have shown the same qualities, but there are differences."

"Like what, Ves?" Patricia asked as she adopted an expectant expression.

He glanced at Iris for a moment. "We had chemistry, for one. Something just clicked between us in a way that never happened when I met you. My impression of you was that you wanted to use me for your own ends and that your obsession towards me is only skin deep."

"And how is Gloriana any different?"

"Gloriana is more willing to respect my demands and readily agrees to compromise with me on many matters." Ves retorted. "She truly treated me as an equal. Sure, there are times when she behaves as if she is better than me, her heart is in the right place."

"That's not enough, Ves."

"I know. I wasn't finished, Aisling. Look, my impression of Gloriana was fairly bad at first, but she steadily addressed many of the points that I objected to the most. She didn't always succeed in that, but she had been nothing but earnest in her attempts to change herself for my benefit. What happened over the years since we started our relationship has largely matched my expectations."

Neither of the four women looked convinced as of yet. They still stared at him with the judgemental eyes that seemed to be intrinsic to females.

"Go on." Aisling urged.

"I never got the impression that you would ever get better, Aisling. You were like a force of nature that would not bend to anyone's will. You wanted me for my design philosophy, but you also looked down on me as a poor and powerless Brighter, isn't that right? My status would have never been able to measure up against yours. You were the proud direct disciple of Master Huron of the most powerful coalition partner of the Friday Coalition. That boosted your ego to an insane height. Please tell me the truth. Would you have ever respected me as your equal or your superior once I became better at my job?"

The woman who was supposed to be dead in reality became troubled all of a sudden. She clearly wanted to defend herself, but she wasn't really allowed to cover up her faults.

If a specter couldn't be honest in this mysterious dream sequence, then why should Ves be held to a higher standard?

"Exactly." Ves pointedly said. "I don't know whether I properly figured this out at the time, but my instincts have never led me astray. For one reason or another, Gloriana vibed with me. Her forceful actions appealed to me in a strange way. While I like a gentle woman like any other man, I cannot deny that I have an attraction to more assertive women as well. Not everyone has

the same tastes, you know. We all have our quirks, and I suppose my attraction towards a woman like Gloriana is one of my many strange traits. I can't help it. This is just who I am. Is that enough for you, Aisling?"

The stubborn specter still refused to give up. "Gloriana's actions directly led to numerous confrontations between you and your former allies. If she hadn't meddled with your relationships behind your back, you wouldn't have lost so many friends. You would have still been able to remain on friendly terms with the Bright Republic, the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Friday Coalition. Instead, you allowed Gloriana to mesmerize you with her Hexer charm to the point where she played a principal role in provoking conflicts that has led to the death of many Larkinsons. She has blood on her hands."

Ves vigorously shook her head. "I reject your assertion. Gloriana did not set out to spark hostilities between me and the rest. She could not foresee that others would react so strongly to her actions given that I was just a third-class mech designer back then. Besides, the main fault lies with the Brighters, the Ylvainans and the Fridaymen. They did not act out against me because someone forced their hand. They targeted me because they were consumed by greed and never had my interests at heart. They betrayed me, Aisling. I trusted them and valued my friendships with them, and they did what? They violated their own principles in exchange for naked benefits!"

"You can't fault them for that, Ves." Aisling responded. "States regularly operate this way. You of all people should know about the hard choices that leaders must take in order to serve and protect the citizens that are depending on them. Back then, I too acted on behalf of the interests of the Gauge Dynasty and the Friday Coalition, but that doesn't mean I would have treated you poorly because of their say so. We would have become a great couple if you had just given me a chance."

Ves didn't take her answer seriously. "Huh, really? Didn't you tell me you would bring me straight towards the Clarion University of Mech Design where Master Huron resides? How do you think all of those Fridaymen would have treated me? They would have treated me as a prisoner instead of a guest of honor! Don't tell me that you don't know what could have happened! Your fellow Fridaymen might not resort to outright brainwashing in order to preserve my talents, but they would have definitely applied all sorts of pressure and indoctrination on me until I became more acceptable in their eyes! Knowing that this would happen to me if you dragged me back, can you truly claim to respect my wishes and care about my well-being?"

"I... that... I was attempting to restore your original life." Lady Aisling Curver said in a deflated tone. "My approach may have been more abrupt and forceful than you would have liked, but the ends justify the means. As long as we managed to convince the public that you have returned to the side of the Friday Coalition again, we wouldn't have bothered you anymore."

He sneered. "After all of the crap you Fridayman pulled, you have burned your bridges with me. You could have employed many ways to bring me back to your side. It was not completely impossible for you to pull me away from Gloriana's clutches. You just needed to show up and competed fairly against her. I would have given you a fair chance to prove yourself if you played by my rules."

"That wouldn't have worked. She already sank her claws too deep in you by that time. Her first mover advantage was so great that the only way I had a fair shot was to break the game."

Ves became more and more disgusted by what he heard. "You aren't helping your case, Aisling. You are making it worse. Just face it. You may have loved me, but your loyalty to your Master, the Gauge Dynasty and the Friday Coalition is too strong. You would have never put my interests above theirs."

That is ultimately what makes Gloriana different. Even though she was an avid Hexer, she has readily submitted to my demand of breaking off from every other state so that we will no longer be beholden to any government."

He felt more comfortable about this situation as he squared his thoughts. In that sense, this confrontation had done a lot of good to him. His arguments might not entirely pass muster, but as long as they calmed the restlessness in his heart, that was enough to satisfy his needs.

This dream sequence was ultimately about resolving his own uncertainties. He had no obligation to obtain the approval of all of the ghosts of his past.

"You get it now." Ketis smiled at him. "Right or wrong doesn't matter. Everything is fine as you are certain about the choices you have made. We are here to help you, even if it looks as if the opposite is taking place."

"I get it." He told her before he addressed all of the women at the same time. "I think I am almost done here. I have one last thing to say to you all. Like you, I am a mech designer. Like you, I care about my design philosophy and my work."

The swordmaster among the women rolled her eyes once again. "Here he goes again. He's about to make another pedantic statement."

"I am being serious, Ketis. My work and my life is centered entirely around designing mechs. Almost every decision I make is at least indirectly related to mechs. I judge my actions on whether it will help me or hinder me in my journey to design a better mech. When I met Gloriana and found out about her design philosophy, I became attracted by the prospect of cooperating with her. It is just so obvious for us to work together, and since we were both eager and willing to collaborate on joint projects, it was a match made in heaven."

That made the women look upset, but Ves didn't care about their feelings.

"Our initial collaborations largely proved how well we were able to work together. The fact that we held opposite design philosophies did not pull us apart. Instead, we recognized and valued each other's strength and worked hard to compensate for each other's weaknesses. The results of our efforts were massive improvements over the mechs that we have previously designed. I became happy. Gloriana became happy as well. While I don't think it is necessary for two mech designers who synergize well with each other to marry each other, I do not object to this practice."

As mech designers, the other women should certainly be able to understand his argument.

"Enough." Ves said with a tone of finality. "Begone, ladies. I appreciate you all for clearing the fog in my heart, but you have served your purpose."

He was tired of getting jerked around by this dream sequence. Since when did he passively accept someone else's arrangements? This was his life! No one was allowed to steer him in a direction of their own choosing. Only Ves had the right to set his own course!

Perhaps the dream sequence listened to his demands, because the scene finally changed.

His four old flames blissfully disappeared.

Ves took in his new environment. He appeared to be hovering in space at the moment. The planet down below looked familiar to him. It took only a few seconds for him to identify the planet he was orbiting at the moment.

Just before he uttered the name, the surface began to change.

Large clouds of sand and dust broke out from the surface. They appeared in various places and began to sweep across the landmasses in a slow but inexorable path.

Cities became engulfed while countless human lives perished during the time the sandman race had broken through every form of resistance and engulfed the economic heart of the Bright Republic!

"Bentheim..."

Ves still remembered the day he witnessed this tragedy. It affected him so much that he even named his factory ship and flagship after the planet where he essentially earned his first pot of gold.

"Beautiful, is it not?" A smooth and elegant voice spoke up from behind.

Even though Ves was floating in space without any obvious footing on his feet, he smoothly managed to turn around to face an individual that he couldn't recognize in the slightest.

"I can count the number of CFA officers that I have met in person with one hand." Ves stated despite the lack of air in his current environment. "Can you introduce yourself, sir?"

The man wearing a resplendent CFA officer uniform made a shallow bow. "I would be glad to, Mr. Larkinson. I am Captain Zonrad Reze. I have the privilege of commanding the Babylon Excavator, a reconnaissance cruiser operating under the auspices of the Common Fleet Alliance in the Red Ocean."

"Er... okay?"

#### **Chapter 4492 A Random CFA Officer**

Ves took a good look at the CFA officer that was floating a small distance away from him in this illusionary space landscape.

The man carried himself around as a snobby, highborn fletcher. Ves had encountered this demeanor enough times to know that it was a common trait among the officer corps of the mighty Common Fleet Alliance.

The mechers already came across as elitists who thought they were better than the so-called space peasants and lesser galactic citizens, but the fleeters took it on a whole new level!

Whereas the MTA at least made the effort to stay in touch with normal human society, the CFA existed as a detached state within human civilization.

There were much fewer channels for humans to get in touch with the CFA. No one among the common folk had any chance to apply for a job aside from the highly insular and nomadic spaceborn clans.

All of these factors and more had caused the people who worked for the Common Fleet Alliance to come across as enormous douchebags who expected everyone else to obey their directives without question.

The man who claimed to be Captain Zonrad Reze carried the same sort of air, though he took the initiative to soften his stiff demeanor with a welcoming smile.

His impeccable black-and-blue uniform that was embellished with golden cuffs and an aiguillette allowed him to present himself as an extension of the CFA.

Various medals, badges, rank insignia and so on discreetly decorated the front and sides of his uniform. Ves frankly did not understand what most of them meant and whether Captain Reze was an accomplished officer within the hierarchy of the CFA.

The only part that he was certain about was that the fletcher's rank insignia indeed matched that of a line captain of the Common Fleet Alliance.

The man's slightly youthful, handsome and self-assured face suggested that he may be among the younger fleeters to have been promoted to captain, but who knew how much a combination of life-prolonging treatments and cosmetic augmentations slowed down his aging process.



Overall, Ves still couldn't figure out much from the CFA captain and why the man was related to him in any way. He had met a few aloof and snooty fleters over the course of his career, but he went out of his way to avoid them as much as possible.

This was also why he embraced the patronage of the MTA despite his misgivings about answering to a higher authority.

Ves was involved in too many initiatives that had the potential to do enormous harm to the interests of the Common Fleet Alliance. From the MSTs to the transcendence glow, each of his major innovations could structurally elevate the power of mechs on a universal scale!

How would the fleters react to all of his innovations?

They certainly wouldn't approve of his work! Anything that changed the balance of power between mechs and warships would most certainly attract their scrutiny and condemnation if they understood what he had been up to as of late!

Who the hell thought it was a good idea to manifest a member of a hostile rival super-organization?!

Ves really hoped that these specters of different people did not pass on any crucial information about himself back to their counterparts in reality!

Since Ves still couldn't figure out how Captain Zonrad Reze related to him in any way, he bit the bullet and broke the silence.

"Do... do you know me, captain?"

"I do." The fleter replied in an easy tone. "I have been tracking your exploits with great interest."

What?! To hear that a CFA officer had not only taken notice of him, but actively paid attention to him on an individual basis was an alarming revelation!

It was one thing if this bastard was an enthusiastic officer who coincidentally stumbled upon Ves' living mechs and became interested in the maker of these machines.

It was another thing if Captain Reze was part of a greater surveillance or monitoring group that comprehensively monitored mech designers who could form a significant threat to the interests of the CFA in the future!

"Does the CFA have a habit of spying on little old Journeymen like myself?"

"The CFA tracks every mech designer, particularly the high-ranking ones." Captain Reze charitably exposed. "You are all agents of the MTA in one way or another. It is only logical for us to spend a fraction of our vast resources to keep abreast of your developments."

"How much does the CFA know about me and my work?" Ves asked as he tried to remain as impassive as possible.

"Not as much as you think, Mr. Larkinson. You do not need to worry too much. The MTA has already laid a strong claim on you. Our CFA institutions are not allowed to cross their boundaries. Since that is the case, we primarily obtain our intelligence from public sources and third-party sources. Only the mechers are allowed to invade your privacy on an unrestricted basis."

"That... is reassuring."

Though there was a small possibility that this CFA captain was lying or did not know the full truth, Ves didn't think that was the case.

He had an ongoing working relationship with Master Termenao Dervidian and the Transhumanist Faction. Given how much they care about the

transcendence glow, they most certainly took precautions to prevent the fleters from snooping around and obtaining sensitive information.

"So the CFA doesn't know what I am up to?" Ves hopefully asked.

"That, I cannot say. Our Alliance is made up of many fleets, departments and institutions. The left arm doesn't know what the right arm is doing, and we have more arms than we can count. I do not think the chance is likely, but as I have said there are no guarantees. I have heard rumors of intelligence departments that employ the most state-of-the-art high technologies to collect information through methods that you cannot possibly fathom."

Though Ves was a strong believer in the hybrid approach of the MTA, what Captain Reze just revealed to him was a reminder that the CFA weren't dummies.

Perhaps the fleters might not have access to the reality-defying powers of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers, but their total dedication to pushing the boundaries of pure technology most certainly allowed them to master their own kinds of wonders!

Captain Reze made a reassuring gesture. "These methods are extremely expensive to employ, so you can rest easy, Mr. Larkinson. We do not have a habit of using an anti-matter missile to swat a single mech. I believe these observation methods are exclusively used to monitor the highest echelons of the MTA, the first-rate superstates and major alien civilizations."

"I see. Thank you for disclosing that, captain. Anyway, I believe you are here for a different reason, right?"

"That is correct. You have already encountered numerous different personalities. A man of your intelligence should have discerned a pattern by now. Can you deduce the purpose of this meeting?"

That was a good question. Ves shifted his gaze to the planet that they were orbiting.

The Scouring of Bentheim was one of many tragedies that had befallen the rimward side of the Komodo Star Sector.

It was the capstone of the Sand War as the Big Two's strong retaliation had completely wiped out the alien aggressors!

Nothing was left of the sandman race anymore aside from broken leader cores that the CFA had repurposed into powerful AI processors.

The sight of all of the sandstorms raging across the surface of the first port system where Ves sold his mechs evoked several emotions.

He felt regret for the fall of such a highly developed and densely populated planet.

He felt a sense of loss for the disappearance of a major influence of his early life.

He also felt a touch of guilt for playing a small but indispensable role in setting the Sand War into motion.

"I guess... this is about the consequences of my actions." Ves said. "There are not that many reasons to bring me here. If you wanted me to reminisce about something else related to Bentheim, then I would have been greeted with the trading hub in its heyday."

"Your guess is close enough." The CFA captain acknowledged. "Let me show you more of your handiwork."

Bentheim disappeared. In its place came another planet that Ves didn't recognize.

The only thing the two had in common was the fact that the sandman fleets overcame all resistance and managed to land their enormous fleets composed of countless sentient sand particles to engulf the surface!

"6 billion humans dead." Captain Reze announced.

Another populated planet came into view.

"1.3 billion humans dead."

A smaller and more rural planet appeared.

"27 million people dead."

A lunar colony showed up next.

"78 thousand people dead."

A planet that was larger and more developed than Bentheim appeared into place.

"37 billion people dead."

On and on, the environment changed to show a succession of planets that turned from lush or highly urban paradises into desert globes.

The sandmen left nothing intact in their wake. Their hunger and desire for resources was destructive to a degree that essentially turned them into living weapons of mass destruction!

It would have been fine if the sandmen race knew its place and conscientiously respected the border of human space.

Yet now that they had egregiously sand-blasted so many population centers across a sector-wide scale, the Big Two eventually had to step forward and put a stop to this naked assault on humanity!

As Ves continued to watch random planet after random planet getting resettled into ecological blank slates, his heart and emotions grew numb at the sights.

The slideshow of genocide and massacre was so excessive that Ves no longer had the stomach to track the total loss of human life.

It was too much. That was for certain.

He didn't want this show to go on any further.

"What is the point of showing me all of this?" Ves impatiently asked. "Will you continue to show me each and every individual planet that has befallen the same fate? I'll be stuck here forever if that is the case!"

Captain Reze did not look impressed. He swept his gaze towards the next populated planet that got showered by sand. "The fault for this lies with you, Mr. Larkinson. You are merely being confronted by the consequences of your reckless actions. Are you not responsible for releasing the hybrid artificial intelligence and sandman admiral known as Sigrund into the galaxy? You should have known how much of a threat a sentient, rogue AI poses to human civilization."

"It's not my fault!" Ves vehemently insisted! "Look, all of this is really sad and all, but I have nothing to do with it! The chain of events that has led to this outcome is so exaggaratingly long that you can't put any of the blame on me. I was just a trivial Apprentice Mech Designer at the time! I was forced to serve in the Mech Corps and was subsequently assigned to the Flagrant Vandal Mech Regiment which subsequently had to complete a secret mission. If you should blame anyone for provoking the disaster, you should lay the guilt at the leaders who truly set these events into motion!"

Captain Reze chuckled in a manner that was patronizing. "Interesting response. I see that your habit of pushing the blame onto others is as alive as ever. Who bears the greatest guilt for provoking the Sand War, then?"

"Not me. It's Sigrund, right? I don't know why that insane sandman AI decided to bring his race on a suicidal collision course with humanity, but he is

definitely the entity that has turned the sandmen from a bunch of slackers into warmongering aliens! I have nothing to do with that crazy AI. You should hold a trial for him instead and end this silly farce!"

That should work, right?

#### **Chapter 4493 Exploiting A Metaphysical Circumstance**

The CFA officer chuckled. "Not so fast, Mr. Larkinson. Sigrund is undoubtedly responsible, but you are the person who has enabled the hybrid AI in the first place. You are the equivalent of a child who pressed a button on a console that accidentally caused a battleship to fire a main cannon onto a populated planetary surface. The weapon systems merely do as instructed. It is you, the button pusher, that holds actual responsibility for the damage inflicted as a result of your actions."

"That's unfair! Your analogy is complete nonsense! Those 'weapon systems' you are referring to are not unthinking machines. They are instead controlled by at least one sentient, intelligent alien individual. Sigrund is the real button pusher!"

Ves quickly came up with two names.

"The first bastard who ruined so many planets is Senator For Life Camden Tovar. That old geezer was desperate to obtain a vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum, but didn't have the MTA merits to redeem one through the proper channels. Instead, he followed up on the alien equivalent of a scam call and send a troop of disposable soldiers into the deep frontier where the sandman race traditionally resided. Even if that old and greedy scumbag could not foresee the existence of a monster like Sigrund, he is definitely the original decision maker who bears the guilt of tipping the first domino stone!"

Captain Reze weighed this argument but shook his head shortly afterwards.

"His hands are stained with blood. There is no doubt about that. However, his guilt does not absolve yours, Mr. Larkinson. You were in a position to stop or prevent multiple states from getting wiped out in their entirety, but instead you decided to act in your own self-interest which inadvertently doomed more than a quadrillion human lives. You can deny your culpability for these crimes all you want, but it is through your hand that all of these life-bearing planets have died en masse!"

"I reject your description." Ves stubbornly crossed his armored arms. "You can spin the tragedies of Sand War in so many different ways. What you say might be true, but only if you look at it from a specific angle. It just so happens that I completely disagree with your stance. I may have been closer to the action, but I was just a single cog in an enormous machine. How can you possibly expect me to exert any agency over my actions? I was drafted by the Bright Republic's Mech Corps at the time, so I had no choice but to follow orders and complete the mission to the best of my ability. Are you saying that is wrong, Captain? Is the CFA in the habit of allowing its subordinates to disobey direct orders and deliberately sabotage their assigned missions?"

That was a clever argument. Captain Reze could pretend as if he was a harbinger of justice all he wanted, but Ves knew quite well that the CFA had far more blood in its hands!

The fleeter responded with an acknowledging nod. "You have made a decent point. The CFA's hierarchy must be respected. Officers have the ability to disobey their instructions, but only under a strict set of narrow rules. To be frank, I am opposed to the blind respect towards authority and lack of flexibility in our organization. While that may have held the CFA together over the centuries, many developments have taken place that leads me to suspect that we are not adapting fast enough to respond to the threats that are approaching from multiple directions."



Ves looked surprised. "That is... a rather progressive take on the situation. I did not expect to hear that from a fleeter."

"I am not an average fleeter." Captain Reze grinned at Ves. "I truly wish that my real self is here at the moment. He could make excellent use of the information that I currently bear. Would you like to make contact with him after you have concluded your ordeals? You can contact me directly and without attracting the attention of the Big Two by sending a specific code to this address."

The CFA officer projected a galactic net address as well as an entire page that was composed of random numbers, letters and symbols.

Ves grimaced at the sight. "I don't have a habit of colluding with the CFA. Besides, do you think I'm a fool who knows nothing about spycraft? I also see no reason why I should send an encrypted message to a remote stalker. Who knows how many of my secrets you are attempting to leak to your principal!"

Captain Reze did not admit his guilt but waved the encrypted message away.

"Fine, then. Just send a random message if you wish. The contents of your letter are of no consequence as long as my real self is able to deduce that it comes from you. He will question you why you have learned about him, but I am sure he will be happy to open a dialogue with you. Even he is able to tell that you are a mech designer that will wield great influence over the mech industry and human society in the future."

"No offense, Captain Reze, but don't you have a job to do at the moment?"

Ves grew impatient again. "You're supposed to be judging me for my sins or something. I don't think this dream sequence will be happy if you keep taking advantage of this special moment to help your original self."

The CFA officer smiled.

"You are correct. Do not reject this opportunity. You will need all of the allies that you can get in the Red Ocean. My real self may be a part of the CFA, but that does not mean he rejects what mechs and the MTA stands for. If you talk to him, you will find that he is more open-minded than other fleeters. Sooner or later, you will grow influential enough that you will attract greater scrutiny from us. Would you prefer to be monitored by a hardliner who detests mechs with every fiber of his being, or would you rather be handled by a more supportive element of the CFA?"

"Hm, you make a good point. I will consider your offer."

Avoiding the CFA all the time was not a permanent solution. Although Ves relied on the MTA to shield him from probes, sooner or later he would become too prominent to hide the full implications of his expanding works.

If Ves managed to build a bridge with an arm of the CFA, then he would not only be able to understand the powerful naval organization's stances a lot better, but also have the option to negotiate deals with the help of an insider.

"Let us get back on track." Captain Reze said and waved his arm across the surrounding space. "Seeing that you refuse to admit culpability towards the massive death toll of the Sand War, let us move to a different war that is much more directly related to your actions."

The surroundings changed to show a cityscape that was engulfed by fires, explosions and lots of fighting.

Ves initially wondered where he was, but soon noticed several mobs of armed and angry heavy gravity variant humans fighting against each other.

Hardly any of them looked like professional soldiers. They all appeared to be civilians that had just picked up a weapon or two before proceeding to run out into the streets and fight against any dwarf that belonged to the other side!

"The scripture doesn't lie! Vulcan is a human!" A fanatic claimed as he lifted up a small totem of Vulcan in the guise of a human in one hand and recklessly fired his laser rifle with his other hand.

An opposing dwarf lifted up a statuette of Vulcan in the guise of a dwarf. "You foul tall folk admirer! Our greatest dwarven god is not a human! He is a dwarf and the most magnificent one of all! Death to the tall folk and their misguided slaves!"

Dwarven blood spilled across the ground in such great quantities that whatever street maintenance bots were active simply weren't able to mop it all up fast enough!

Soon enough, mechs started to get into the picture as well.

A stocky mech of dwarven proportions even crashed the current firefight by stomping through a structure and planting its feet directly onto the largest concentration of Vulcanites that were aligned to the Dwarven God Cult!

"Our prayers have been answered!"

More mechs showed up. Loyalists and rebels began to tear up the streets with such great intensity that the fanatics on foot who tried to contribute to the fight in their own way inevitably got squashed or struck by collateral damage.

The surroundings shifted. A different planet came into view. The architecture was different, but the battles were roughly the same.

The dream sequence rapidly flicked from planet to planet.

Sometimes, Ves got a close and personal view of the ground action.

Other times, he hovered in orbit where he could look down on how the religious dispute had engulfed so many different population centers.

The civil war that had spread across the Vulcan Empire had become so violent and destructive that too few dwarves were paying attention to the humans anymore.

That was a mistake.

While the Vulcanites were completely absorbed by the throes of fanaticism, the surrounding human polities bordered the Smiling Samuel Star Sector sharpened their knives while watching with glee.

Once the Vulcan Empire had beaten itself up extensively enough, those human states pounced!

Mech army after mech army poured in from all sides!

Though the Vulcan Empire's vast and extensive military still maintained a large amount of defensive troops who had largely stayed out of the religious strife, the dwarven mechs could only hold the line for a time.

Without the support and unity of a functional dwarven state, there was no way for the Vulcanite mech armies to hold back the onslaught for long!

Planet after planet that had already become half-ruined by dwarven infighting toppled within days as vengeful human invaders easily crushed the remnants that were still fighting their futile struggle.

The dream of an ideal dwarven state was over. The Vulcan Empire collapsed and much of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector returned to human hands.

Though the human invaders tried their best not to commit wholesale slaughter on the dwarven people in order to avoid condemnation, they were anything but gentle in their treatment of the humanphobic Vulcanites.

Ves watched all of this happen with a neutral expression. He understood quite well what had happened to the Vulcan Empire during this period.

Unlike the Sand War, it was not easy for him to deny his involvement in the events that took place in Smiling Samuel!

"Well? What do you have to say, Mr. Larkinson? Do you acknowledge your primary responsibility for stoking sectarian strife in a large dwarven state that has directly led to the deaths of countless dwarven lives and an even greater loss of property? Do you admit your culpability in the fall of the Vulcan Empire and a direct loss of confidence among the dwarves who live in the rest of human space?"

Ves vigorously denied the accusations. "What? No! It's not my fault these dwarves decided to go to war over each other! I just distributed a lot of statues, that was all. What the Vulcanites do with them is their business. Those fanatics decided to go to war against their perceived enemies on their own accord. I never compelled them to ruin their own state."

"Look at what you have wrought, Mr. Larkinson! You are the progenitor of the Vulcan Empire! Your meddling of the past has led to the rise of a dwarven state that has always rested on a foundation that is deeply flawed. It is through your reckless and thoughtless actions that the division among the Vulcanites existed in the first place. A destructive civil war was already on the horizon. Yet instead of using your abilities to mend the wounds and temper the Vulcanites as you have done with the Hexers, you instead abused your craft to escalate the conflict, thereby causing it to set the Vulcan Empire aflame!"

#### **Chapter 4494 Ves The Righteous**

"The most ridiculous aspect of it all is that you deliberately exploited the fault-lines of the Vulcan Empire for the sole reason that the Vulcanites have rejected your entry into their space." The CFA captain added.

"We had free passage!" Ves complained! "We had a pass from the MTA, but the Vulcanites chose to violate the rules first and attack my fleet without any

justification! Is it justified for me to let that go? They attacked me and my alliance, so that gives me the right to strike back at the Vulcan Empire! It's not my fault that they couldn't take my blows as well as I was able to take theirs."

Captain Reze crossed his arms. "Is it so hard for you to make contact with a friendly and sympathetic dwarven group to take up your quest on your behalf? You could have contracted a group of dwarven agents that could travel to your original destination."

"That wouldn't have worked." Ves shook his head. "I have no power over any dwarves. How can I ensure they hand over the treasure to me without attempting to take it for themselves? In fact, I bet the mechers would find out about the Timpala Steel somehow and claim this extremely valuable resource for themselves! It had to be me to make contact with it. As long as I can reach its hidden location and absorb it on the spot, I can minimize the chance of any interception, whether it is from the dwarves or from the mechers. Besides, it turned out that the Iron Emperor and his pet ace pilot had been waiting for me all along. The dwarven emperor would have taken the Timpala Steel before any of my hired agents could get out of the star system!"

The CFA officer looked disappointed.

"All of this may sound logical from your perspective, but you are completely ignoring the immense amount of suffering that your selfish actions have inflicted on the greater population. Have you ever thought about forgoing the retrieval of the Timpala Steel and resume your journey to the Red Ocean? Not every prize is worth the sacrifice. Not every coin on the street has to be picked up by you. Letting go of opportunities takes just as much courage, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves snorted. "Yeah, right. If I held that mentality, then I would have remained a mediocre Apprentice Mech Designer who is still struggling to reach Journeyman back in the Bright Republic or some other worthless third-rate

state. No thanks, captain. I am not in the habit of sowing death and destruction for my own amusement, but if a group of hostiles stand in the way between me and my goal, then it is their fault for losing in a confrontation against me. Those Vulcanites you are trying to portray as victims are anything but bloodless. They have bullied many different human groups in the past. They shouldn't complain when the tall folk that they have disparaged and attacked so many times decided to answer their provocations!"

Captain Zonrad Reze threw a disbelieving look at Ves.

"Have you forgotten about your role in founding the Vulcan Empire in the first place?"

The surroundings changed to show the mines of Desala X. It showed how a mining camp underwent upheaval as the dwarven rebels broke out and fought against the human camp guards.

"Using Rion Aaden as your puppet, you directly agitated and fermented rebellion against the owners of this underground mine." Captain Reze continued. "While it is noble for you to lend your aid to the cause of these underprivileged dwarves, you did so in the ugliest fashion possible. You used that Devil Tongue of yours to fill their minds with crude and anti-human propaganda that you don't even believe in. You even dressed yourself up as Vulcan, the God of Mechs, Dwarves and Craftsmanship. After all of the damage you have done to the Vulcanites, you even had the audacity to hijack the center of their faith and claim it as your own! Do you feel no shame, Mr Larkinson?!"

Despite the CFA officer's thunderous tone, Ves did not feel guilty in the slightest. The events that took place around him might as well be a drama show in his eyes.

He waved his arms around the current environment. "Look at these dwarven rebels. Do they look as if they could become founders of a powerful all-dwarven state one day? No reasonable person would have thought that these bunch of barely literate, uneducated dwarven mining serfs would succeed in toppling not just one, but every other state in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector!"

"And that matters because...?"

"Don't play coy with me, captain." Ves sneered. "I only had suspicions before, but now that I have a better understanding how the MTA operates, I am 100 percent certain of my guess. The Vulcan Empire is nothing but an experiment."

"An experiment?"

Ves nodded with certainty. "Yes. A powerful official from the Association took advantage of the dwarven rebels that arrived with a sample of Timapala Steel in their hands and facilitated the ambitions of the escapees. Every step of the way, those bumbling dwarven fools received just the right help to advance their cause but not enough to expose the meddling from an MTA official. Eventually, the dwarven rebels succeeded in their cause and founded the Vulcan Empire, but it is not through my hand they succeeded, but that of an arm of the MTA!"

"So your answer to this matter is that the Mech Trade Association is responsible because they oversee the Smiling Samuel Star Sector and regulate it as necessary. That is not a strong argument, Mr. Larkinson. The MTA oversees every region of human space. It is part of their mandate. The conspiracy theory you are espousing may be plausible enough to be true, but you were the person who granted the dwarves their first strong objects of faith. You should have known those weak dwarves wouldn't have been able to divest themselves from the radical beliefs that you have imparted into their heads."



"I sincerely doubt the MTA cannot handle a bunch of dwarves." Ves retorted. "The mastermind had every opportunity to steer the Vulcanites into a moderate direction, but instead encouraged them to become more radical about their anti-human beliefs. If anything, you should look to accuse this fellow for setting up the Vulcan Empire to fail. All I did was help a bunch of captive dwarves break out of their prison planet. What they did after that is none of my business."

"Is that your answer to this entire affair, then? You continue to stick to your tried-and-true solution of passing off responsibility to other scapegoats, thereby completely denying your own culpability in the process?"

Ves proudly nodded. "Yup. Hey, if it works, it works. Look, I admit that I may not have behaved as neatly as I could have, but I was practically working under duress! The System practically pushed me into obtaining the Timpala Steel at all cost. If anyone or anything deserves to bear the ultimate fault, it is the Mech Designer System! It is the System that pushed me into this life. It is the System that pulled me into Rion Aaden's mind when I just wanted to enjoy a calm and relaxing Mastery experience. It is the System that wordlessly blackmailed me into fetching the TImpala Steel that it had initially found. In the end, it was the System who benefited the most from this disaster!"

"..."

The CFA captain did not even deign to respond to such an absurd line of reasoning.

"Very well." Conrad Reze eventually said. "Since you are adamant about admitting your guilt on these affairs, let us address an issue that is more directly tied to your work."

The surroundings changed to show a random space battle in an unknown star system.

Ves initially didn't know what the fight was all about, but he quickly figured out that a powerful group of aggressors were assaulting what appears to be a civilian refugee fleet.

While the latter possessed a sizable escort, the attacking force happened to possess a clear advantage.

The reason why the attackers gained the upper hand was because they fielded living mechs while the defenders of the refugee fleet did not have that privilege!

Ves could see how Desolate Soldiers worked to stiffen the hearts of mech pilots as they launched attacks against harmless vessels that were filled to the brim with ordinary people.

He could see how a group of Ferocious Piranhas surrounded the flagship of the refugee fleet. Their oppressive and disorienting glows paralyzed and disabled most of the crew, allowing the vessel to be captured intact!

"Hey, that's a good tactic. I should note that down." Ves whispered to himself.

The scene changed again. This time, it showed the invasion of a planet by a hostile state.

Planetary invasions were often brutal, especially when the local citizens armed themselves to resist the incoming occupiers.

Yet as the residents of the captured areas commenced their noble opposition, the Pacifiers designed by Ves showed up whenever an incident occurred!

The rebels who fought desperately against the violent and murderous invaders fell into artificial tranquility as the Pacifiers swooped in and doused the surroundings with their glows.

Though not all of the rebels ceased their struggle, enough of them had lost will to fight, causing them to become easy pickings!

Similar scenarios came into view. Ves saw on and on how different groups of customers made use of living mechs for purposes that were less than honorable.

"Okay. I get what is going on." Ves flatly said. "Are you attempting to lay the guilt of their crimes on my feet?"

Captain Reze nodded. "Do you not feel any responsibility for their actions? You may not be the man who pulled the trigger, but you are still the person who handed the actual culprits weapons that are far too destructive for their own good. Do you not see the parallels between what you are doing and what has led to the end of the Age of Conquest? Humanity back then almost ruined itself due to wielding too much power than they are equipped to handle. Your unbridled hunger and desire to design mechs that are more combat effective than your previous works will lead to consequences that are so dire that entire wars will be fought with your living mechs as a catalyst. Do not even get me started on your other 'inventions' that have an even greater chance to detonate humanity."

Ves huffed and shook his head. "You should have started with this to begin with. What you are talking about is small fry compared to what you had brought up earlier. If I follow your line of reasoning, then pretty much every mech designer should resign from their jobs and work in amusement parks or something. Hah! The human race is a violent race. War and conflict is rooted in our bones. If I don't develop the weapons that humanity craves, then someone else will. Even if the mech industry disappears overnight, then people will just go back to building and using warships on a massive scale again. I don't know about you, but if I had to choose between mechs or warships to feed humanity's addiction to warfare, I would pick the former within a heartbeat!"

"What a lazy answer. Instead of admitting to the damage that your products have wrought by making them widely available, you instead lean on the argument that warships are worse."

"It's true, right?"

"Both are harmful!"

Ves chuckled. "What do you expect us to do, then? We can't fight with nothing. Humanity needs to maintain an effective means to fight against hostile alien races. Even if you limit the use of mechs and warships to the Big Two, that does not remove the need for mech designers such as myself."

"There are other, more benevolent mech designers that can do the heavy lifting." Captain Reze stated. "You are not needed. The mech industry is already oversaturated with mech designers. Why not pass on this responsibility to more capable hands? You already have a habit of passing off your guilt in a similar fashion."

"I refuse to step aside because I am on the side of humanity." Ves seriously responded. "I have only glimpsed a hint of the greater threats that you have mentioned earlier, but that is enough for me to conclude that human civilization will likely come under existential threat in the future. Instead of cowering underneath the skirts of the Big Two, I chose to step up and do my part in helping fellow humans resist whatever is coming. Is that not a noble goal?"

"Yet the abuses—"

"—SHUT UP!" Ves snapped. "You don't get to judge me. No one can judge me! From the moment that humans left their home planet and strode across the stars, they have entered a survival contest that pits their very survival against that of countless other races. Right or wrong doesn't apply here. Every race deserves a chance to live, but on the other hand no race has an

inviolable right to survive. We are living in a part of the cosmos where the survival of the fittest reigns supreme. In the face of so many external threats, any attempt to advance humanity's military might is a virtue. I believe without a shadow of a doubt that my work is both noble and righteous, because everything I do is ultimately to the benefit of my racial group! Unless you want to sound like a cosmopolitan and sympathize with aliens that would love nothing more than to make humanity extinct, then shut your stinking fleeter mouth and begone from my sight!"

The entire background reset into an empty void. Captain Zonrad Reze stared deeply into Ves' eyes.

"That is not the answer that I expected to hear from you, Mr. Larkinson. You are right in a sense. Right or wrong are irrelevant in many cases. The only variable that matters is power. If you are convinced that you are working on the side of humanity by arming its soldiers with ever more powerful and effective mechs, then that is your choice. Just know that your work may not always be what humanity needs anymore. If there comes a point where your mechs causes more harm than good in human society, I hope you will not break yourself by struggling over the hard choices that you have to make at that time."

With that, the annoying CFA officer finally disappeared.

"I hope this stupid ride ends soon. I'm more than tired of ghosts trying to question my principles." Ves muttered under his breath.

He could feel that this 'ride' was finally nearing its end. A deep and profound change was taking place on a level that was too deep for him to track, but he could instinctively feel that it was building up to an extraordinary event that would have massive implications for his life going forward.

"Come on. Who's next?!"

## Chapter 4495 The Last Specters

Everything Ves experienced so far had to deal with his past.

The ongoing dream sequence brought forth different personalities to question every major element of his life.

From his relationships with his friends and lovers to the consequences of his more controversial actions, Ves felt as if he had gone through a shower of recriminations and accusations.

Nobody would feel good after enduring so much pressure.

Yet strangely enough, the pressure also made him feel stronger and more self-assured.

"Strange."

Ves recognized that he occasionally had a habit of avoiding conflict.

This usually happened when he did not wish to confront a difficult issue.

For a long time, this strategy worked, but whatever he was experiencing at this moment left him no choice but to confront his demons.

"Maybe it's for the better."

He felt as if he was undergoing a journey of self-reflection and self-actualization.

By accepting his deeds, letting go of his fears and removing the doubts that had dug into his mind, his mentality became clearer and more sober in a way that Ves found difficult to describe.

"It's as if... I'm cutting off the filth that has been holding me back." Ves murmured as he continued to float in a completely blank space.

The completely dull and featureless space did not match the energy and excitement coursing through his mind and body!

Ves had a winner's mentality right now. He felt like a champion for 'slaying' one demon after another. The high that was elevating his mood at the moment was similar to the times where he won a difficult design duel against a formidable rival mech designer.

Certainly, the more rational part of himself recognized that his answers were less than ideal.

They would not pass muster to everyone, as evidenced by the lack of agreement from specters such as that of Melinda Larkinson.

"So what?"

Ves already figured out that this unexplainable mental examination was mostly if not entirely about himself.

"The only person I need to convince is me." Ves patted the chestplate of his illusionary Unending Regalia. "As long as I am okay with it, everything is fine."

There was no higher authority that he needed to answer to. He rejected the existence of gods and prayed to no one. If he had any faith to speak of, then it probably revolved around the power of humanity.

"Humans are individually weak by nature, but any of them can ascend step by step until they become akin to gods."

Since Ves aimed to ascend to the same level one day, there was no reason for him to submit or surrender to any of the pretenders that claimed to hold dominion over reality!

Any pretender god that attempted to impose his own rules or morality to Ves would have no ground to stand on! There was no chink in the armor or weak point that could be exploited.

Ves only had faith in himself and his works!

There was no point for him to gain the approval of the masses either. Though he recognized how indispensable it was for him to conform to the society which he professed to serve, he rejected the notion that it was necessary for him to answer to the mob.

Whether it was the Larkinson Clan, the Golden Skull Alliance, the Hex Federation, the MTA or other large organization, Ves only cooperated with them because it was in his best interest to maintain those relationships.

Although he did not want to ruin his friendships and turn his back on the people who helped him out, he knew from personal experience that once a relationship was no longer beneficial for either side, it was best to cut any ties before a regretful incident took place.

"The cosmos is big. There are countless different groups and people in the old galaxy and the new frontier for me to associate with. The more powerful I become, the more I am able to gather like-minded people by my side. I will never have to give up my autonomy if the people I care about support my endeavors!"

This was one of the reasons why he chose to found the Larkinson Clan. If he didn't do so, then he would have either found himself isolated or forced to rein in his dreams and ambitions.

As Ves recalled his earlier talks with different specters, he found that he did not regret anything he said. He spoke from his heart and he wholeheartedly stood by his statements.

Perhaps he might not have the courage to repeat everything he said in front of other people in reality, but as long as he was able to convince himself of his own sincerity, then he remained internally consistent.



"Maybe that's the point of it all." Ves idly guessed. "Just like how expert pilots must cast aside all doubt and refine their will into a unidirectional force, I must also get my act together."

This was why he was wondering what came next. He already addressed all of the major doubts that he had tried to suppress. Whatever else was left shouldn't be important enough to merit a serious discussion.

He did not have to wonder for much longer, because the surroundings finally started to shift.

The blank space made way for a view that looked down at the entirety of the Milky Way and its satellite galaxies.

It was a grand view that made Ves feel both incredibly small and incredibly large.

He felt small because he knew that every concentration of light that he could spot with the naked eye likely represented multiple clusters of bright and powerful stars.

There were so many of these clusters that Ves could not even count them all. There were just so many of them, and when they were around each other, they formed a circular tapestry that became so enormous that Ves felt incomparably tiny in comparison.

On the other hand, he felt grand as if he had ascended beyond the realm where he previously resided.

Few people got to enjoy this view in their lives. Only the most powerful and special among humans might gain a similar opportunity to hover above the local galactic neighborhood and look down upon it as if they were gods.

As Ves became more inspired by the grand and magnificent sight, his heart became touched by the galaxies that maintained an active connection to him.

Both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean began to resonate with him as if they were family!

The sensation was indescribable. He felt as if he was experiencing a subtle nirvana on a mental level as his consciousness and his spirit took in the energies provided by those galaxies.

Ves could hardly maintain a coherent state of mind during this soundless ritual. He communicated and conversed with the two galaxies on a level that was far removed from normal human speech.

It was as if the Milky Way and the Red Ocean had become his latest conversation partners!

"The galaxies... are alive!"

This was a ridiculous statement on its face. Nobody would believe in such an absurd statement, but Ves had worked with living mechs and products for many years.

He could recognize the signs of life.

Sure, the galaxies weren't 'alive' in a traditional sense that people could easily determine, but Ves was convinced that the galaxies were either alive or had a living component to their existences!

"They are the wellsprings of life. They are the forest where fauna and flora can flourish. They are the mother of all mothers."

Just like certain people had a tendency to anthropomorphize Old Earth as a female goddess that went by the name of Gaia, Ves almost had a tendency to do the same for the Milky Way and the Red Ocean!

Even though Ves was undergoing a grand sublimation that was changing the very structure of his most inner self, he managed to gain enough awareness to run his analytical mind.

He spontaneously formulated the Living Galaxy Theory and began to note down as many observations and hypotheses as he could come up with. There was no better opportunity for him to do so because he had a feeling that he might forget most of what he was experiencing once this process had run its course!

"The living galaxies are not only alive, but they possess an indeterminate amount of sentience and agency."

If the first half of the assumption was radical enough, then the latter part went way beyond what people could reasonably accept!

He essentially claimed that the Milky Way and the Red Ocean possessed the awareness of what was taking place and the desire to intervene.

Why else would the two galaxies be willing to start a wordless conversation with Ves if they weren't interested in communicating?

Given that they possessed their own needs and desires, Ves made a second assumption.

"Living galaxies have their own agendas. One of them should definitely be self-preservation."

It was a universal quality of life to preserve their own existence. Species that did not care about themselves would eventually endanger themselves to the point where they became extinct.

Since the galaxies existed for an awfully long time, it was logical to assume that they valued their own existences.

To what extent, Ves didn't know. He already knew that the Milky Way Galaxy and the Andromeda Galaxy were set to collide with each other in 4.5 billion years, but perhaps that was a natural part of their life cycles.

In any case, Ves felt strongly about his own survival, so he imagined that he had at least some common ground with the living galaxies.

As the less conscious parts of Ves continued to hold a grand dialogue with the two galaxies, his more conscious side attempted to figure out their personalities and agendas.

This was an exceedingly difficult endeavor!

Ves only touched a fraction of their great and vast existences, but already he felt as if he had come into contact with entities that were too powerful for him to properly interpret!

Whatever feelings, thoughts and emotions they possessed were either far too powerful for him to properly register, or too advanced and abstruse for Ves to be able to understand from a humble human perspective.

His humanity and mortality was limiting his ability to communicate with the living galaxies.

He was like an ant trying to converse with a CFA battleship!

The disparity in scale alone was so great that it was only through the benevolence of the Milky Way and the Red Ocean that Ves did not get crushed under their metaphorical weight!

Still, Ves was nothing if not stubborn. He tried his best to gather enough data, and managed to make a few readings that might be accurate.

"The Milky Way... is old. Scarred. It... is damaged, but unbroken. It... wants to mend its wounds and become whole and strong again."

Ves never thought of the Milky Way as a scuffed and anemic galaxy, but that was what he was vaguely able to interpret through his limited senses.

"The Red Ocean... is like... a body that is kept alive and empowered by its defining exotic. Its star systems are like organic cells and the alien races that

travel from one location to another are like the veins that allow for phasewater to circulate throughout the dwarf galaxy."

Ves picked up a lot of other weird impressions, many of which didn't entirely make sense.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Ves was one of many human intruders of the Red Ocean, the living dwarf galaxy did not appear to treat him as a virus that needed to be purged by its immune system.

The Red Ocean instead welcomed him into its embrace with open arms!

It was... touching in a way. Ves had no idea whether there were any specific agendas behind the acceptance of the two living galaxies, but that did not stop him from accepting their goodwill!

The only doubt in the more sober part of his mind was the price he needed to pay for treatment.

"Nothing comes for free."

#### **Chapter 4496 Gentle Ascension**

Ves did not believe in the existence of heaven. It was a staple of many religions, but he was taught to disregard their claims and descriptions of what the afterlife was supposed to be like.

Did this mean that Ves denied the existence of an afterlife? That was not necessarily the case.

It was still possible for a secularist like himself to believe that there may be a form of life after the physical death of the body.

Ves had witnessed too many cases of entities coming back from the dead.

However, the afterlife might not look anywhere close to what people imagined it to be. Mortals were just too confined by their limited perspectives to describe the greatness of reality and all of its facets.

Yet if a place like heaven could ever be real, then he imagined that the enormous living galaxies might be such a place.

In any case, people could understand his theories a lot better if Ves claimed that he was communicating with 'the heavens' rather than a pair of 'living galaxies'!

"It's just that this is how I am able to interpret them based on my understanding and life."

Ves was most sensitive to life and built up his entire views around this central concept.

If Gloriana ever went through a similar experience, then she might perceive the galaxies as intricate machines that were far closer to perfection than anything smaller!

In any case, an indeterminate amount of time passed by. Ves did not have the awareness to count the passage of minutes or hours. It was all fuzzy to him, but even if he could track the passage of time, it was pointless.

A part of him understood that his dialogue with the living galaxies proceeded at its own pace.

He recognized that his ability to maintain this wordless exchange depended on a large part on his own psyche, mentality, spirit and other mental factors.

"Maybe that was what those previous challenges were all about." He guessed. "They serve to test me and prime me for this pivotal contact."

If a lesser individual went through the same process, then their weak and messy minds would not be able to bear the burden of communicating with such vast and elevated living existences!

It took a strong mind to bear the enormous pressure and process the influx of information.

To be honest, Ves barely understood a fraction of what he was getting from the living galaxies! Over 99 percent of what he received from them was functionally useless to him given that he could not make heads or tails of what they conveyed.

He could barely interpret whatever was left, but that gave him enough food for thought.

The Milky Way came across as something akin to a wounded emperor that had been driven out of its palace and was reduced to begging on the streets.

While the Milky Way was likely one of the largest and most powerful beggars in the cosmos, this did not change the fact that the living galaxy needed help!

The source of help didn't matter. Regardless of how much smaller and weaker Ves may be, as long as he had the potential to grow and transcend his own mortality, he might attain a level of strength one day where he could provide material aid to an entire galaxy.

Of course, even if he fell far short of that goal, it was enough for him to get by with what he could understand.

"Even living galaxies have needs."

The best way that Ves could interpret his relationship with them was that he was one of the many bacteria that had been born inside their bodies.

Every human had benevolent bacteria in their bodies. They played a small part in keeping the human body healthy and functional. A single bacterium might not be able to do anything meaningful to a body that was countless times greater, but a large group of them could still make a significant difference!

What was significant about his current state was that he was a bacterium who had mutated from the rest of his ilk. He became more powerful and was

increasingly able to affect the state of the enormous human body where he resided.

Mutations weren't always good.

Cancer usually occurred when body cells malfunctioned and started to replicate uncontrollably.

Ves was also transcending his original role as just one tiny cog in an immense machine!

Perhaps this was what his current experience was all about. He was enduring one final test to see whether his mutation allowed him to be able to keep his identity as a benign influence or whether he became harmful all of a sudden!

Ves had the vague idea that this test was supposed to be far more difficult than it should.

As much as Ves was happy about his mental state, he did not have any illusions about its development. He should have been far from qualified to receive so much pressure and converse with entities that were far too massive for him to behold.

"It doesn't make any sense."

The belief that he wasn't ordinarily qualified to handle so much power became stronger.

For some reason, the living galaxies were giving him preferential treatment. They could have exerted a tiny fraction more pressure on him, and that would have strained his mind to the point of breaking!

Instead, these vast and powerful existences meticulously controlled the expression of their endless might to a level where Ves could endure their power.

Ves tried to figure out the reason why he was having it so easy.



"Is it because I employed some of the theories and methods imparted by the Orven Ritual Sacrifice Altar enlightenment fruit?"

He shook his head. That couldn't be it. The enlightenment fruit did contain knowledge that referenced a bond to the Red Ocean as a whole or something, but much of that was dressed up in superstitious language.

"Maybe not all of those crazy statements were nonsense."

Yet even then, the orvens all talked about how terrible it was to harmonize with the dwarf galaxy that they were a part of. Many of the ones that survived the experience but received too many injuries in the process claimed that they had fallen short at this junction!

"Ah. Maybe it's the System again."

That made the most sense. The specter of Carlos Shaw already mentioned that the System had actively intervened to make this entire trip less dangerous.

It also fit with the Spiritual Ascension upgrade track that Ves had recently chosen. These were exactly the kinds of situations where the System had to fulfill its purpose!

"Maybe this is one of the most important factors why I can bear the pressure of two living galaxies at once. I'm not just enduring the pressure of the Red Ocean at the moment. I'm also communicating with the Milky Way!"

That was odd. Why was he 'talking' to two living galaxies at the same time? Shouldn't a single one suffice?

Ves vaguely recalled that he interacted with the Milky Way Galaxy when he advanced to Journeyman.

This caused him to develop a connection with the Milky Way though Ves wasn't clear about the nature and the properties of this bond.

The reason why the Red Ocean had joined the party was because he had traveled to it. Since he was undergoing an unknown ascension process in its territory, it was logical for the living dwarf galaxy to get involved!

"This is anything but normal, though."

As Ves continued to receive a continuous influx of information, the nature of his exchange with the living galaxies slowly started to shift.

It took a while for him to figure out the nature of this change.

"I'm starting to get energy instead of information."

Ves felt as if his body, his mind and his Spirituality were starting to get hot and stuffed with lots of energy that was far too potent for him to bear!

He started to get worried. He was pretty sure that he would blow up if more and more energy started to fill up his entire being!

Yet before he could come up with a way to cut this extraordinary process short, he felt as if the vast majority of all of this excess power was being shunted to an entirely different location!

Ves silently sighed in relief and tried to figure out where all of those energies were going.

He soon figured out a possible answer based on what he had learned.

"Wait... is all of that extraordinary galactic juice going to my divine artifact?!"

There was a reason why they were called that way. Divine artifacts were so powerful and special that they defied normality to a ridiculous degree.

Now, Ves came up with a potential answer why that was the case. The cyborg cat that Ves had empowered with a small piece of his divine core was a fundamentally different existence.

With the knowledge that he now possessed, he guessed that the cyborg cat was made to be a tailor-made container for this exceedingly high-grade energy!

"I see now! So this is why the orvens are able to ascend to 'godhood' so easily despite being individually weak. They cheat by crafting themselves a purpose-built tool that can naturally contain all of these 'galactic energies' in their stead!"

He was tempted to call the energy bestowed by the living galaxies by other names such as 'divine energy' or 'heavenly energy'.

However, that would impose an unnecessary superstitious bias to this phenomenon, so he settled for a more neutral-sounding term instead.

Ves could feel the changes taking place outside of this mysterious illusionary space.

His cyborg cat was undergoing an immense transformation!

The mundane was about to become divine.

Though Ves himself was not receiving much of the benefits right now, this was okay since his divine artifact acted as an intermediary of sorts.

Ves could slowly absorb the powerful galactic energies or whatever when he became strong enough to absorb all of that might.

The channeling of energies slowed down. Ves could feel that his divine artifact was nearing saturation. There was little point in pumping his relatively small cyborg cat with more galactic energies than it was equipped to handle!

He momentarily felt a lot of regret for one of his past choices.

"A larger divine artifact could have absorbed a lot more of this galactic energy. I doubt there will be many opportunities to obtain so much of this high-grade energy!"

He had already made his choice, though. He was unwilling to make a major sacrifice or carry around a large and unwieldy divine artifact.

He chose to limit the volume of his cyborg cat and that meant it became full long before Ves was satisfied with what he received!

"Wait, that's not all. Not only am I absorbing a tiny amount of juice, some of it is also going elsewhere!"

Ves soon figured out that he and Blinky both became baptized by the galactic energies, but only to a tiny degree.

Both of them were not qualified yet to handle such powerful energies, Blinky also became baptized with a minute amount of galactic energy.

It hardly amounted to much, but that was all they could take at this moment!

This meant that until they matured and grew strong enough, they wouldn't notice much of a difference.

"For now, much of the power is concentrated in my divine artifact. That will be the medium for me to harness this new power!"

As Ves and Blinky both absorbed a fraction of those powerful energies, they could develop vague guesses of what they received.

From the Milky Way, Ves received the impression that its galactic energy was related to spirituality and spiritual energy. He could already feel his Spirituality and his design seed singing joyously as they became baptized by the gift of his home galaxy, as if that made any sense!

From the Red Ocean, Ves could guess that it was related to phasewater in a way. The galactic energy from the dwarf galaxy coursed through his body, fortifying it and changing it in subtle ways that made him think that augmenting his blood with phasewater might be a realistic possibility in the future!

All of these changes made him want to scratch his head.

"What the hell is going on? What is the point of receiving all of these galactic energies?"

### Chapter 4497 Definitions Of Gods

Ves was starting to think that all of those native stories of the Red Ocean might have a kernel of truth.

There were so many myths and tales among the indigenous alien races where their members managed to become gods by injecting their bodies with phasewater!

While there were other sources that claimed that certain alien heroes managed to ascend to godhood first before their mundane blood made way for phasewater, there was no doubt that this liquid exotic was ubiquitous in all of these tales!

Ves initially dismissed these fairy tales as superstitious claptrap that conveniently utilized a widespread powerful exotic substance as a common plot device.

Now it appears that phasewater played a much more important role to those myths.

"Maybe... there are different species of so-called gods!"

The entities that claimed to be gods in the Milky Way were mostly extremely powerful energy-based life forms.

Whether they had bodies or not, Ves had no doubt that their strength could be measured by the quality and quantity of the energies that made up their spirits!

The Red Ocean was different.

While Ves had encountered plenty of instances of entities with powerful spiritualities, it only became apparent to him now that the indigenous alien races did not put much stock in developing their spiritualities.

Instead, they focused on developing an alternate form of ascension that was much more corporeal and reliant on a local resource.

"Anyone can become a god as long as they can tolerate enough phasewater!"

This was a bold statement and one that significantly subverted his current paradigms!

However, it made too much sense for him to dismiss this absurd theory. Too many indigenous alien races worshiped entities that had lots of phasewater running through their bodies that there wasn't a place for any illusionary or invisible gods that watched over the mortals from an ethereal plane!

"Interesting!"

An exoanthropologist would probably be able to analyze these differences on a much deeper level, but Ves already became fascinated by the contrast.

"Doesn't this make the phase whales the most divinely blessed race in the Red Ocean, then?"

Perhaps one of the reasons why few indigenous races dared to mess with the phase whales was not because they feared their enormous individual might, but because they regarded them as living gods!

Every mature phase whale had organs that contained phasewater. The more powerful ones somehow managed to turn all of their blood into phasewater!

"The former could be considered the Red Ocean version of a demigod while the latter is probably regarded as a real god!"

This not only meant that the phase whales had the highest concentration of gods in their midst, but that any other alien organism that was able to tolerate phasewater in their bodies also amounted to different varieties of local gods!

Ves looked at the battle against Titania's original astral beast incarnation and the Purgatory Campaign in a completely different light after he made this realization.

The battle against the monstrously huge astral beast was like fighting a massive indigenous god beast!

"Damn, we really lucked out back then. If that astral beast hadn't escaped from a death match with another phase whale back then, it wouldn't have been easy for us to land the killing blow."

Even then, the Golden Skull Alliance only managed to slay the Titania by employing their trump cards, of which their expert pilots played a crucial role!

The raid against the Phase Kingdom during the Purgatory Campaign was the equivalent of invading a divine territory and challenging a subordinate god and its 'angels'!

The Phase King was indeed powerful enough for the local aliens to regard him as a god. It took Venerable Vincent advancing to expert pilot and entering the state of Unity of Man and Machine for him to wield the power that was equivalent to a halfgod to beat up the fish-whale king!

"It appears that I have fought against more pretender gods than I initially thought." He muttered.

While Ves had no issue with the superstitious practices of the indigenous alien races, the problem was that he had just undergone a baptism where the Red Ocean was essentially grooming him into an indigenous 'god'!

Oh, the Milky Way also pitched in. It was simultaneously setting him up to become an old school 'god' like the Unending One or the powerhouses from the Five Scrolls Compact!

"I never asked for this." He complained.

Unfortunately, neither of the two living galaxies showed any consideration for his opinion.

To be fair, it was his fault for undertaking this process to begin with. He was pretty much following one of the methods of ascension that the System offered to him. A scenario like this would have happened sooner or later.

"Maybe every high-ranking mech designer must go through this experience when they grow strong enough." He guessed.

The only question was whether this was a trial and an opportunity that took place when advancing to the rank of Master Mech Designer or Star Designer!

Ves already began to experience strain in his head.

"Damn it. This is going to mess up my progression!"

He essentially used a combination of the Mech Designer System Version 2.0 and a bastardized version of a local indigenous alien ascension method to receive this transformation while he was still a Journeyman Mech Designer!

Although the incredibly messy hybrid process worked out somehow, Ves had essentially complicated his previously pure progression track by mixing in Red Ocean-style ascension characteristics!

While this might bestow huge benefits to him, it also meant that he developed on phasewater!

Would he have to copy the behavior of those reclusive phase whales and tinker with his body until he found a way for phasewater to safely flow through his veins?



"Urgh."

What would other people think if they found out what kind of craziness he got mixed up in? Would they regard him as a freak?

And what about the indigenous alien folk? They might regard him as one of theirs if he became powerful enough one day!

Given the reaction displayed by the orven captives when Ves channeled the Phase King, he had a suspicion that it would be easy for him to join the local 'pantheon'!

As the enormous influences of the Milky Way and the Red Ocean continued to course through his entire being, Ves felt as if these two living galaxies had violated his identity and forced him to become more removed from his humanity.

He already had trouble with identifying himself with the human race due to all of his physical augmentations. Now he deviated even further from his original self!

As his crisis of identity began to grow stronger, his mind and spirit were beginning to experience a lot of strain.

It was as if they were beginning to crack!

Yet before they did so, much more the turbulence suddenly ceased.

"I am a mech designer. That is all that matters." He spoke with a remarkable degree of clarity in his voice.

It might be silly, but it worked for Ves. He clung so strongly to his identity as a mech designer that it superseded his attachment to his identity as a human!

"I see. I understand. This is one of the sacrifices that I had to make."

There was no gain without pain.

Ves received a life-changing baptism of two different galactic energies. That was probably far more than most individuals ever got to experience.

Though the relatively compact size of his divine artifact limited his intake, he still had to shed different pieces of himself.

Perhaps he had already started to do so from the beginning of the entire dream sequence.

His talks with Carlos Shaw and Marcella Bollinger were about letting go of old resentments. They were also about reconciling with his past so that he no longer felt the need to avoid it as much as possible.

His argument with Melinda Larkinson was about doubling down on his commitment to subject his family and clan to difficult challenges, knowing that many people would die as a consequence.

His group talk with the four women was about... making peace with choosing Gloriana over any other alternative. He developed a greater love and appreciation for what his current wife brought to his life, despite knowing that marrying a Hexer would introduce a lot of intercultural conflict in his relationship!

His talk with Captain Zonrad Reze was about deflecting the enormous amount of guilt accumulated by many different circumstances connected to his work and actions. He did not deny that abuses and injustices took place, but he considered them a necessary price to pay to serve a greater goal, one of which was ensuring the survival of the human race.

It was profoundly ironic to Ves that he had to give up a part of his humanity in his next and last dialogue!

Whatever the case, each different instance represented a step in a mystical transformation process.

After going through so many changes, his baptism was complete.

"I am... born again."

It was difficult to describe his current mood and state. He still looked like the same Ves as before on the surface, but only he knew that he was fundamentally different.

Before he entered this dream sequence, he could still claim to be a mortal who just happened to be good at designing mechs.

He wasn't sure whether he could truthfully say these words after all of this was over.

"Perhaps... I'll become a 'god' who just happened to be good at designing mechs instead."

He did not object to this idea as much as before. It didn't matter what race or type of existence he was turning into as long as he could still design mechs!

The excellence of his products would be the tickets that ensured he retained the acceptance of the human race.

"I bet that many god pilots and Star Designers are struggling with the same issue."

They were already so far removed from their human roots that they could easily leave the confines of human civilization and strike out on their own, much to the detriment of the rest of humanity!

This was why it was so important for them to retain their anchors to human society and remain involved by contributing to their original race.

Just as he contemplated more about the importance of maintaining ties to humanity, the dream sequence abruptly ended.

"What?"

He was back in the Sacred Hearth that was in the middle of the Sacred Temple.

His return to the System Space happened so nonchalantly that Ves struggled to adjust to the new situation.

He soon noticed that he was holding something powerful that also happened to register as another part of himself!

"My cyborg cat!"

Different from before, the cyborg cat not only held a small piece of his Divine Core, but was also brimming with two different types of galactic energies!

Those powerful high-end energies had already changed and transformed his initial work in many ways.

This process was still ongoing, but he could see that his small divine artifact was struggling to contain the galactic energies!

Not only that, he began to feel as if something massive and powerful was beginning to form above his head.

Ves looked up at the ceiling and noticed that the middle of the roof actually featured a hole.

"I did not know that was there."

Normally, the false sky of the System Space generally showed pleasant weather with relatively clear skies.

Now, dark and ominous storm clouds had gathered. As the clouds continued to roil, a lot of potential energy started to form.

The sight caused Ves to recall a particularly ominous event.

"Uh oh..."

Ves had witnessed the appearance of an unexplainable lightning storm during the creation of the Superior Mother.

Now, his intuition told him that he and his cyborg cat were about to receive the same treatment!

He immediately unfolded and sealed his helmet in order to insulate his body from electric shocks!

"Why?!"

He did not have any clear answers why this was happening. Perhaps it was because he had broken the rules and forced himself to ascend through an unusual method, thereby committing a grave taboo.

"Oh, come on! You could have issued a fine if you wanted to punish me. Why would you go straight to corporal punishment? That's so uncivilized!"

CRACK!

"AHHH!"

Ves suddenly suddenly became shocked by an enormous lightning bolt that completely bypassed his Unending Regalia and directly struck his actual body!

Fortunately, his cyborg cat somehow attracted most of the power of the lightning bolt, though Ves had been forced to toss his divine artifact from his grasp as a consequence.

Just as Ves got over the initial pain, another large lightning bolt coursed through the open roof!

"AHH! NOT AGAIN!"

#### **Chapter 4498 Primordial Justice**

CRACK!

"AHHH! Hey, cut it out already!"

CRACK!

"AHHHH! How come you have so much energy?! Your attacks are getting stronger!"

CRACK!

"AHHHH! Didn't I already pass my tests? I'm not guilty! I proclaimed myself free from blame for any misdeeds that I am only tangibly related to. It's not like I personally pulled the trigger on over a quadrillion people."

CRACK!

"YEOUCH! You know what?! Screw you! Who are you, anyway?! Are you some arbiter of justice? Well I don't recognize your authority over me! I never signed up to be judged by you and your stupid criteria to determine guilt. You don't even have a mechanism for me to lodge any appeals! What a dumb and primitive justice system!"

CRAAAACK!

"AAAHHH THAT HURTS EVEN MORE, GODDAMNIT! If you think you can make me acknowledge the validity of your judicial authority to me, then think again! I will not let any pretender god or delusional spiritual entity boss me around! I only respect my own rules and principles. I'm not fooled. Whoever or whatever you pretend to be, I will never be coerced into following your mystical regime."

CRACK CRACK CRACK!"

"AAAHHHHRRRRRRRRHHHHH!"

No matter what Ves said, the lightning storm above his head never abated.

Instead, it continued to grow stronger and more violent as the lightning bolts descended down onto his body with unerring purpose and accuracy.

A grand and overpowering sense of oppression emanated from those dark and energetic storm clouds.

While Ves had witnessed numerous storms before on different planets and most notably on Davute, those were merely ordinary weather phenomena. They did nothing more than frightening children and cats with their loud noises and explosive light shows.

Occasionally, the heavier storms inflicted light infrastructural damage. Numerous trees and other objects that weren't properly equipped to resist powerful currents always had to be replaced after the passing of the storm.

That was all Ves really knew about them. He never ascribed to any of the fringe theories that lightning storms were a manifestation of Zeus' wrath or a more generic form of divine punishment.

Yet what was happening right now made it seem as if this was exactly what was happening!

It was one thing if this seemingly sentient and living lightning storm attacked an individual with religious inclinations.

It was another thing for it to launch an unprovoked and undeserved attack on a secularist!

"Have you ever heard about a concept called freedom of religion?! I'm free to choose what I believe in, even if it amounts to nothing. Can't you leave me alone and bother someone gullible enough to fall for your deception?"

CRAAAACK!

"AAHHHH! My flesh is burning!"

The lightning bolts that struck him were anything but normal!

While he was not a meteorologist, he was still a mech designer who was well-versed in the sciences. This gave him an excellent understanding on how electricity was supposed to behave.

If a lightning bolt wanted to strike him at all, then his Unending Regalia should have redirected much of the incoming current to the floor without zapping his body in the process.

Ves had personally designed the Unending Regalia for this eventuality because he anticipated scenarios where he might be performing repairs on a damaged starship or something and accidentally bump into an exposed power line.

None of that work was being put to use as the lightning bolts were either empowered by phasewater or metaphysical power!

"This doesn't make any sense! How can you bypass my armor and strike my body directly?" As soon as he spoke those words, inspiration suddenly dawned on him. "Hey, do you mind if I study and record your lightning bolts so that I can reverse-engineer your punishment mechanism in an innovative electricity-based mech weapon system? It'll be great! Just think of all of the mech pilots, starfighter pilots and starship crews my soldiers will be able to zap. Can your attacks go through energy shields as well?"

Ves manually activated his shield generator, causing a small energy shield to surround his armored form.

CRAAAAACK!

Yet as the next powerful lightning bolt struck his body, it went straight through the energy shield as if it didn't exist!

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHH! If you think that's enough for me to stop, then think again! I will figure out your secrets!"



The apparent power of the lightning bolts should have fried his body into burnt steak by now. No ordinary human would have been able to resist this kind of punishment for long!

However, Ves somehow managed to tough it out for the time being.

He wouldn't have remained so defiant against the storm if not for the help provided by his cyborg cat.

Pride welled in his heart as he saw his latest creation come to life.

Though it wasn't a mech that he preferred the most, he had largely designed his cyborg cat as if it was a miniature living mech.

Though his divine artifact was just in the early stages of coming to life, it already possessed an abundance of raw power!

The majority of the galactic energy baptism that Ves had received from the Milky Way and the Red Ocean ended up pooling inside his cyborg cat.

Normally, those exceedingly high-grade energies could never be contained by a relatively small and ordinary material product, but the addition of a fragment of his Divine Core seemed to change its very nature.

The cyborg cat had spontaneously evolved from the moment it received the fragment of his Divine Core. The galactic energies that were stuffed inside its half metallic, half organic body began to flow into the fragment, causing it to grow and mend the trauma that it had suffered from getting torn out of the greater whole.

As the fragment of his Divine Core went through a metamorphosis where it was gradually transforming into something greater for the cyborg cat, Ves could clearly sense that his powerful cat became even better equipped to receive and absorb the incoming lightning bolts!

The greater protection offered by his cyborg cat largely compensated for the escalating power of the lightning bolts raining down on him, but it wasn't enough.

CRACK!

"AHHHH!"

He could sense that the strength of the lightning bolts was growing faster than the rising absorption capacity of his cyborg cat.

It was as if his new divine artifact was trying to raise the height of the walls to block out a flood that threatened to engulf a village, but simply couldn't do so fast enough to keep up with the rising tides.

For now, his augmented body was coping against the electrical damage pretty well. He was never so thankful for the mostly involuntary augmentations he received during the Groening Mission.

The operations performed by Dr. Jutland may have turned him into a half-alien monstrosity, but it was those very same alien traits that were helping him cope with all of the excessive destructive energies!

The same biology that allowed the hexapod beasts to absorb and feed off powerful energy sources with unsurpassed efficiencies was now working hard to absorb and rein in the remnant power of the incoming lightning bolts.

Even though his resilient flesh still incurred a bit of damage, his organic body was already hard at work trying to redirect much of the energies to the floor or into his Jutland organ.

Normally, his Jutland organ never earned any consideration from him because it never provided him with any help in his work activities.

This time was different. Ves was truly thankful to Dr. Jutland as this alien-derived organ which had subsumed his heart and taken its place was readily absorbing much of the excessive foreign energies!

Not only was it sucking up a lot of electrical energy, it had also absorbed a fair amount of the high-grade galactic energy that hadn't been able to merge with his flesh or his Spirituality.

Even though the lightning energy seemed to be powerful enough to cause a bit of harm to the Jutland organ, it was so resistant against energy damage that it repaired its wounds within a matter of seconds.

Each time it did so, the Jutland organ changed.

Though Ves couldn't see this happen with his own eyes, his senses had received such a large boost that he was able to sense what was happening to his own body in surprising detail.

"Amazing."

Each time a lightning bolt struck, it delivered a lot of damage to whatever it struck, including his Jutland organ.

Yet as the destructive electrical energy ran its course, it strangely did not keep frying everything it touched.

Instead, it reversed its very nature, in a manner of speaking.

Ves couldn't explain it.

In one instance, the electrical energy was like a rampaging brute that sought to hack and slash everything in its way.

In the next instance, it transformed into a gentle and innocent-looking doctor who healed and mended the wounds that its previous incarnation had inflicted.

"What the hell is going on? Are you bipolar or something? Do you have a split personality? If you have a mental illness, don't you think that disqualifies you from acting as an arbiter of justice?!"

CRAAACK CRAACK CRAAACK!

"OUCH OUCH OUCH! NOT SO MUCH, PLEASE!"

Although the latest salvo was more violent than the last time, Ves had made sure to pay close attention to what the incoming electrical energy was doing.

The lightning bolt fried his cyborg cat and his own body with great fury, yet as they ran their course, they suddenly changed from a force of destruction into a force of creation.

"It's... it's beautiful..."

Ves became utterly entranced by observing the second half of the lightning attacks.

They mended wounds and injected vitality into damaged tissue.

The lightning bolts even repaired inorganic matter such as the damaged metal plates of his cyborg cat!

Ves couldn't figure out how it worked or why it was doing this, but that didn't stop him from collecting as much data as possible.

As Ves continued to observe this powerful and surprisingly beneficial aftereffect, he saw that they didn't merely repair what was broken.

They improved upon the parts that had proven themselves to be too weak to cope with the incoming destructive energies.

"It's... as if we're being refined in real time!"

It was so strange to see this taking place on him of all people!

He was no stranger to seeing his works improve or transform, but they were all designed with the express purpose of facilitating their own growth.

This was why he was not so surprised to see that his cyborg cat was continually becoming stronger and more cohesive after undergoing so many phases of destruction and creation.

It was a lot more unnerving to see this happening to his own body!

"I'm growing stronger in every single way!" Ves gasped as he understood the amazing extent of this transformation.

His body, his mind, his Spirituality and even his companion spirit was undergoing a painful baptism of lightning that not only made them stronger and more resilient, but also integrated the potent galactic energies that he had received a short time ago. The power of creation seemed to be able to merge and integrate everything it touched!

"Amazing!" Ves repeated even as he tried to resist the pain of repeated lightning strikes.

The galactic energies that were too powerful and high-end for him to control with his paltry strength suddenly became as docile as kittens in the face of this lightning energy.

The way those galactic energies obediently integrated with his own being reminded himself of the times where he utilized his own Spirituality and life domain to create new life out of a bunch of spiritual ingredients.

The processes were so identical that Ves eventually made a profound realization.

"The lightning storm... contains the power of life!"

It was a counterintuitive idea, but the empirical evidence did not lie. The destructive storm clouds hovering over his head were mostly preoccupied with

raining down punishment, but also conveyed a small measure of mercy by attempting to revitalize what it had just broken.

The problem was that the power of destruction was far greater than the power of creation!

"Damn it, do you know how to balance out your energy composition? You're too violent! Have you ever heard about restorative justice? You would be able to do a much better job in reforming my wicked ways if you give me a carrot instead of a stick!"

CRAAAAAAAAAACK!

"STTTTOOOOOP IITTTTT!"

#### **Chapter 4499 Destruction And Creation Energies**

There was clearly more going on with this freaky lightning storm than he initially realized.

"No wonder the Superior Mother started off so strong after her birth. The lightning baptism she received back then must have reduced all of her flaws and increased her growth potential as a consequence!"

On the one hand, this was good news to Ves. Who didn't like to undergo a comprehensive round of refinement? He could clearly feel he was transcending to a higher state of existence, though only slightly.

His cyborg cat received most of the benefits of this entire sequence of mystical events, so it also experienced the most dramatic changes.

Ves understood that it was for his own good. He was nowhere qualified to ascend to this degree in his current state. He would have never been able to absorb so much powerful galactic energies or resist so much raw destruction. Trying to challenge the lightning storm alone was a surefire way to commit suicide in his opinion!

This was why his cyborg cat served as an excellent surrogate. The divine artifact was able to attract the lightning bolts first because it was a true extension of himself since it absorbed a fragment of his Divine Core.

His cyborg cat may be an extension of his most fundamental self, but it was also a purpose-built product that was designed with a much wider tolerance for damage and a capacity for growth than his primary body and self at the moment.

Although the escalating power of the lightning bolts threatened to exceed the mending speed of his cyborg cat, for now his product was coping remarkably well with this situation.

Sadly, Ves wasn't doing nearly as well even though he was being protected by his own divine artifact at the moment.

"I'm the weak point!"

Even as his mind, Spirituality and body received continuous shocks that destroyed a lot in their wake before subsequently trying to mend the damage, not every part of himself was breaking down as quickly.

His Spirituality was faring the best. This was no surprise as it was his strongest Attribute by far. Ves had always been proud of how much spiritual energy he was able to harness and how finely he could manipulate it. He exercised his Spirituality as if it was a muscle almost every day, and it showed.

Now, his already strong Spirituality was not only handling the incoming damage like a champ, but also absorbed and harnessed the more benevolent creation energy for its own growth.

What Ves cared about the most was that the creation energy was able to act as a bonding agent that allowed him to merge small amounts of the powerful

galactic energies into his Spirituality, thereby boosting it in a qualitative fashion!

His Spirituality became more substantive, more resilient, more sensitive, more precise, more versatile and so much more.

Though a part of him regretted that he wasn't receiving as much of a boost as his cyborg cat, he would take what he could get. As long as he was able to survive his current ordeal, his upgraded Spirituality would definitely allow him to boost his subsequent works to a much greater degree!

His mind also received a large upgrade.

He was no stranger to stressing out his mind or pushing it to its limits. The large amount of design work he engaged in was intellectually stimulating and always forced him to exercise his problem-solving capabilities.

Although his mind wasn't coping as well against all of the incoming damage, it was still able to maintain a stable equilibrium. The damage his mind sustained did not exceed its capacity to repair itself with the help of the incoming creation energy, at least for the time being.

He wasn't sure what would change after it survived this violent baptism, but he expected his productivity to soar after this. His ability to design products and conduct research should see massive improvements because of a massive boost in mental capacity and cognitive functions.

"It's as if my mind is becoming a more powerful processor."

His precious Intelligence-related augmentations had already allowed him to perform complex calculations in his mind. The boosts he was receiving right now would supercharge this aspect along with all of his other existing advantages!

"It's a pity that my flesh isn't able to keep up." He sighed.



CRACK!

As another lightning bolt smacked his cyborg cat and his body, he felt as if his brain was literally frying as his relatively vulnerable brain tissue was receiving way more damage than he could cope!

Although his body and more specifically his Jutland organ successfully managed to divert much of the current away from his most vital organs, there was simply too much destructive energy to spare his fragile brain from getting fried!

"I'm literally losing brain cells with every strike!"

CRACK!

"AHHH!"

It was a profoundly painful and distressing experience. His mind needed the support of his brain in order to function.

The rest of his body wasn't coping so well either. Even his Jutland organ that was best equipped to absorb all of the incoming energies was beginning to push closer to its limits.

Ves didn't really care about most of his body. Just liked his sawed off leg, he could make use of many different technological solutions to regrow or replace his missing limbs.

What he couldn't replace as easily was his brain!

It was the most sensitive, important and least replaceable human organ of all. If the ongoing rain of lightning bolts continued to shock him like this without end, then sooner or later the insides of his head would turn into a burnt egg.

"I won't be able to design any mechs anymore if I go stupid!"

Ves experienced a greater sense of crisis than before when he made this realization. The lightning storm was truly being serious about punishing him for his many sins, regardless of how well he had justified his case.

He could already tell that the lightning storm was just warming up at the moment. It hadn't even gotten serious yet because this mystical authority decided that Ves bore the blame for the deaths of so many humans and dwarves that he needed to be taught a lesson!

"Okay, okay! I will behave more carefully and stop acting as recklessly as before?! Is that what you wanted to hear?"

CRACK!

"AAAHHH! I will try my best not to trigger any cataclysmic wars that end up depriving quadrillions of people of their lives! I will try my best to limit the scale of victims. How about I limit any potential casualties to just a few trillion people?"

CRACK!

"AAAAHHHH! Oh, come on! You can't expect a mech designer to do much better! Almost everything we make is designed to kill! Besides, every other action I take could potentially lead to the outbreak of a war. Do you expect me to lock myself in a cage and limit my interaction with the outside reality for fear of getting even a tiny bit involved in the onset of any violent incidents? That's impossible! Your judging criteria are way too strict!"

CRACK!

"AAAAHH!"

As Ves continued to be 'judged' for his 'sins', the more vulnerable parts of his body were starting to receive serious damage.

He could already smell his burnt flesh from within his suit!

The repeated frying of his central nervous system was also making it more and more difficult for him to maintain his focus and awareness.

He could not allow his cognitive functions to degrade much further. If he could no longer think straight, then he would no longer be able to solve this life-changing crisis!

"How can I prevent my body from failing?"

He tried several different solutions.

He changed his posture. He lifted up his arms. He lied down on the temple floor.

He even tried to leave the Sacred Hearth, but found that he was unable to move much further from his starting point for some unknown reason!

After conducting many quick experiments, Ves concluded that there was no way to avoid this punishment!

No amount of eloquence or movement could bring him away from this torment.

He developed the impression that if he managed to teleport himself to a completely different location, this damned sentient lightning storm would follow suit and continue to do its job!

"If evasion is not a workable solution, then I should put more effort into defense."

He began to treat this as a scenario that was similar to a mech exposed to withering fire.

Ves had already implemented a couple of solutions such as letting his Jutland organ do the heavy lifting.

This was not without a consequence. The Jutland organ was responsible for converting heat and other forms of energy into Worclaw energy, which was incredibly powerful but also highly destructive.

The Worclaw energy cycle that was coursing through his torso became more and more powerful. Only the fact that his body was getting better at coping with the pressure from this high-quality energy was stopping him from exploding.

Ves couldn't care that much about this process at the moment. The destructive damage inflicted by the sequential lightning bolts was a much more acute threat to his health and existence!

"I can't handle so much energy! My body was never meant to cope with so much power!"

Ironically, the limited size of his divine artifact was hindering his ability to cope with the situation. If it was larger and more powerful from the beginning, it could have been able to unload a greater proportion of the incoming strikes, thereby sparing him from much of his current suffering!

As Ves thought about how his cyborg cat was able to absorb much of the violent energies in his stead, his eyes suddenly lit up as he realized that he hadn't exhausted his box of solutions.

"Blinky! Get out and do what you are best at! I might not be able to handle so much excess energy, but you're different!"

Mrow!

Blinky was already getting shocked along with the rest of his Spirituality, but was different once the companion spirit took on a more active role.

The spiritual cat remained in his head but began to change the way he interacted with the destructive energies.

The cat opened his maw and began to suck in a part of what the lightning bolts were delivering.

Both destruction and creation energies entered its deceptively small maw and began to roil inside his stomach.

Mrow mrow mrow!

The destruction and creation energies were of much higher quality and potency than the normal attributed energies that Ves handled on a daily basis.

They were manifestations of fundamental concepts. They were energies that probably stood at the same level as the five elements. Ves even suspected that they ranked higher!

Still, no matter how fancy those energies turned out to be, as long as they entered the Star Cat's digestion system, they rapidly lost their power and transformed into spiritual energy that precisely aligned with his own domain.

As Blinky began to siphon away more destruction and creation energies, Ves began to overflow with far too much life energy than he could harness!

Much of it leaked from his body and dissipated into the environment. Though Ves found this to be a gigantic waste, it didn't matter as long as he was able to preserve his life.

Ves relaxed a bit as the addition of Blinky finally completed his defensive line.

His two cats absorbed so much of the power of the incoming lightning strikes that the proportion that went on to shock the more vulnerable parts of himself were much more manageable.

Of course, receiving less destructive energy also corresponded to receiving less creation energy.

The pace of his personal evolution slowed by quite a bit, but Ves did not mind too much.

"It's nice for me to grow stronger, but everything has a price. I don't have enough money to pay for the full treatment, so I can only settle for the budget option instead."

His body was way too fragile to cope with anything stronger, especially if this lightning storm was determined to continue to rain down punishment for a long amount of time.

Ves would rather play it safe and reduce the incoming energies to a more tolerable level to ensure he could preserve his life at the end!

While he was doing a lot better after putting Blinky to work, he frowned when he noticed that the power of every subsequent lightning bolt continued to grow a little stronger.

"If this goes on, then my current measures won't be enough anymore. I need to prepare another solution!"

### **Chapter 4500 Rapid Problem Solving**

The lightning baptism continued. Ves and his incarnations continued to grow stronger in ways that made him fearful of how much of his original self would be left at his end.

Although he had already made peace with the fact that he had sacrificed his humanity, the depth and scope of the transformations went way beyond anything he could have anticipated from the start!

He did not believe the scope and magnitude of punishment by lightning was normal by any means.

The reason why it was so much bigger and more destructive was because Ves had lived a more eventful life than most entities despite his relative youth.

"It also doesn't help that I never received any proper warning!"

Nothing in his knowledge base taught him how to defend, mitigate or avoid the punishment from 'the heavens'.

Unlike his prior interactions with the Milky Way Galaxy and the Red Ocean Galaxy, the System was no longer able to provide him with any further VIP treatment.

This suggested that the lightning storm was sent out by a different and potentially greater authority!

Ves truly couldn't imagine what sort of living existence could exceed the power and authority of an entire galaxy.

Was it a galaxy group? A supercluster? Perhaps the force that was responsible for forming this lightning storm might be standing for the entire universe!

That sent a bolt of fright through his mind.

Ves could never possibly challenge a living entity of that magnitude!

He recalled his earlier words and would have sweated if his sweat glands hadn't been dried out by the continuous electrical shocks.

Why did he taunt such a powerful existence? He could never withstand the power of a great existence once it directed more of its attention in his direction!

While Ves did not renounce any of his principles and beliefs, he was not as stubborn and inflexible as a high-ranking mech pilot.

He knew when to bend and keep his head down when he was confronted by an overwhelming party.

He had done so towards the Bright Republic, the Friday Coalition, the Hexadric Hegemony up to the Mech Trade Association.

Ves merely bided his time during the moments where he bent the knee. He had already surpassed a couple of those parties by this time, and he had no doubt he would surpass the rest as long as he experienced enough growth.

No matter who was responsible for sending out this unjust and illegal punishment mechanism, Ves would eventually ascend high enough to be in a position to punch the culprit in the face in person!

Of course, that was a matter for the far future. He needed to solve his immediate problem first!

Employing Blinky was just a temporary solution. While his companion spirit was visibly growing stronger and more capable, the same problem existed as before.

He and his cats couldn't keep up with the growth in power of the incoming lightning bolts!

Ves performed a lot of mental calculations that compared the growth of his ability to resist the incoming destruction energy to the growth in power of the incoming lightning bolts.

Since the lightning storm appeared to be increasing the power of consecutive lightning strikes on a linear scale, it was quite easy for him to calculate how long it would take before his defenses might get overwhelmed.

"I have 7 minutes and 33 seconds to come up with a solution!"

Ves grew nervous again. Although the recent changes enabled him to tolerate the lightning strikes a lot better than before, it wouldn't take long before his flesh would start to get increasingly more fried.

A huge amount of pressure piled onto his shoulders. His thoughts were racing as he tried his best to figure out a means to strengthen his defenses further.

"It's as if I am thrown back into a design tournament again."



The circumstances were familiar to him. He was put into a position where he had way too little time to come up with a proper solution to the current problem.

There was no way that Ves could come up with a way to cobble together a proper means to resist the escalating power of the lightning strikes.

Material objects didn't seem to make a difference and his inability to leave the Sacred Hearth prevented him from buying an emergency solution from the Divine Bazaar.

Ves could only work with what he had at the moment, which wasn't much.

A normal person would have despaired and given up on the spot.

A competent mech designer was different, though!

This wasn't his first rodeo. He already understood the attitude he needed to assume to dig his way out of this hole.

"If I don't have the time to come up with a proper solution, then I'll just have to resort to a quick and dirty one instead!"

Ves needed to think outside the box and make use of any or every resource at his disposal.

He first examined his body. There was hardly anything that was originally human about his half-alien body. His genes and biology had been altered to the point where he was like a beast in human form, but even that was not enough to resist the power of high-level destruction.

Only his Jutland organ was able to fare well under the circumstances, but that only compromised a small part of his body composition.

He then glanced at his Unending Regalia and noted how little it contributed to his defense. Neither its Unending alloy nor its B-stone components played any role in blocking the incoming strikes.

The only contribution it made to his defense was futilely trying to ease his overburdened body by regulating the internal temperature and injecting his body with useless medicinal substances.

He glanced at his two cats. Both of his feline incarnations were doing much better at resisting the incoming energies.

There wasn't much he could do to improve Blinky's efficiency. The poor Star Cat was already working as hard as he could.

Ves had no way to improve his companion spirit's alien-derived digestion system because he did not understand any of its working principles.

It might as well be a black box as far as he was concerned!

"I need to remedy that in the future."

His cyborg cat presented a much more optimistic sight. He had personally designed and fabricated it not too long ago. The living divine artifact which was growing increasingly more conscious and aware of its own existence might be undergoing a massive qualitative transformation, but its fundamental concept should still be the same!

"Upgrading my cyborg cat's capabilities is the key to surviving this lightning storm!" Ves concluded.

So far, his cyborg cat was doing an excellent job absorbing the bulk of the lightning strikes and using all of the incoming power to grow stronger.

As more and more of the Milky Way and the Red Ocean's galactic energies integrated into the cyborg cat, it began to develop new and stronger traits that helped in different ways.

The boost provided by the Milky Way largely increased his cyborg cat's spiritual foundation. It became dramatically more powerful and resilient, allowing it to resist the escalating lightning strikes for a long time.

The boost provided by the Red Ocean partially strengthened the spiritual foundation as well, but also induced many spontaneous upgrades to the organic and mechanical halves of the cyborg cat.

Many points that Ves previously considered to be rough and crude were gradually becoming smoother and more refined.

As Ves paid closer attention to how the changes were not only improving the existing parts of his cyborg cat, but also spawning new components in a spontaneous manner, he suddenly came up with a radical idea!

"I got it! It will be risky and crazy, but as long as it works, who cares?!"

Ves transmitted the command to disengage his body from his Unending Regalia.

Once he hopped out and tried to maintain his balance on one foot by leaning onto his hollow armor, he waited until he got struck by another lightning bolt to confirm that he wasn't incurring more damage.

Now that he confirmed that his situation hadn't changed all that much, he proceeded with the next steps.

He first retrieved a backup knife from one of the hidden weapon holsters of his Unending Regalia.

Now that he had a sharp blade in his hand, he carefully dropped his body to the temple floor and lay in a prone position.

He activated a command to his smart uniform that caused it to part in the middle and expose his torso.

At this time, he transmitted a silent command to his Unending Regalia that prompted it to activate a projection of the current state of his body.

This was no ordinary mirror image, though. It was a wireframe model that showed exceptional detail of all of his internal organs. Tiny information panels showed various essential pieces of data.

Ves studied the wireframe model and the data carefully. The enormous upgrades that he had already received massively increased his analytical capabilities, so it hardly took any time for him to perform the necessary calculations and formulate his plan to excruciating detail.

Though he would have wanted to spend more time setting up this operation, time was ticking.

He lifted his backup knife and pointed the tip on his chest at a predetermined angle.

"Here goes nothing!"

He plunged the knife into his thick flesh, trusting his sharp blade to cut through his reinforced and augmented flesh.

"AAAHHHH!"

The pain of stabbing his own chest was greater than enduring the lightning strikes, but he could not afford to get overwhelmed by the pain.

He gritted his teeth and continued to observe the projection of the state of his body. He coordinated his movements as best as possible to use his knife to widen the initial incision and continue to dig deeper into his chest.

Soon, he could see that the tip of his knife was closing in on the Jutland organ that occupied the place where his heart should have been.

This was where he needed to be more careful. Even as a copious amount of blood leaked from the awful-looking wound in his chest, he did not rush his next move but minutely adjusted the angle of his backup knife until he was satisfied.

"Now!"

He plunged his knife deeper, causing it to tear into his Jutland organ!

The spike of pain that surged from his chest was so great that he almost lost consciousness right then and there!

It took a lot of willpower and determination for him to maintain his wits under these circumstances.

The Jutland organ was too important to his current body. Damaging it in any way had major repercussions and might actually cause it to stop functioning entirely!

The only reason why he built up the courage to operate on himself like this was because his body received a regular influx of creation energy.

Even now, the remnant power of the lightning strikes were working hard to stem the bleeding and close up the wounds that he had just made.

Of course, the severity of his current wounds meant that his injuries couldn't be solved right away, and that gave Ves enough time to complete this operation.

Ves made another painful stab and finally managed to slice off a small but significant slice of his own Jutland organ!

He wheezed a lot harder. His body weakened considerably after sustaining such major wounds, but Ves was confident it would be able to pull through under these exceptional circumstances.

He had to wiggle his knife at different angles in order to pull out the slice of his own Jutland organ out of his own body.

As soon as he pulled out his blade with a part of his own organ resting on the blade, he raised it up as if he was presenting a plate.

"Bon appetit!"

His cyborg cat dove down and ate the Jutland organ piece in a single bite!

Ves had designed his cat so that anything it ate would enter his biological belly, where it could break down any organic matter and either use the nutrients to upgrade its biological components or void it all out of its backside.

Fortunately, his cyborg cat did not consider his own flesh to be a waste product.

Soon after eating its first meal, the living divine product began to glow brighter as his heart underwent a substantial transformation.

With the help of the massive amounts of creation energy that it was receiving from the lightning storm, the cyborg cat was rapidly able to grow its own Jutland organ that was completely adapted to its own biology!

Meanwhile, Ves continued to wheeze as his wounds were being mended at an accelerated pace due to the energies he received.

As his flesh began to mend, he could even see that they were changing into another form that made his body a lot more compatible with phasewater.

The galactic energy originating from the Red Ocean was beginning to make its mark on his being, causing him to resemble the indigenous alien races to a much greater degree than before!

Ves had mixed feelings about these changes. Though he could definitely sense that his body had grown a lot stronger and capable of surviving grievous wounds like the one he had just inflicted upon himself, he also feared what might happen if others found out about his radical physiological mutations!

"I've gone native!" He complained!