

Mech 4531

Chapter 4531 Rage Spirit

"What is your name?"

"What were your positions in phase whale society?"

"Where can I find more phase whales?"

"Do you know the coordinates of any phase whale enclaves?"

Ves asked one question after another to the most powerful prisoner of the previous battle.

Much to his disappointment, the interrogation of the salvaged spirituality of the unclean whale did not proceed as smoothly as he thought.

Each time Ves asked a question, the raw and damaged spirit violently tried to resist his captivity and leverage as much power as possible against his killers!

"What did you do to condemn yourself to the Palace of Shame?" Ves inquired again as he stood in front of his floating cyborg cat.

RAGE! GODBLOOD! DESTROY!

A burst of lethal fury emanated from the new cat's belly! Ves could almost see the manifestation of the unclean whale trying to drill his way out of the small but surprisingly strong prison!

Ves was not amused.

"Blinky, help me out here. This whale needs to learn he's not the top dog anymore now that he has been divested of his body."

Mrow.

The purple companion spirit dove out of Ves' head and began to hover right underneath the cyborg cat.

"Myaow!"

"Hey, it's okay, buddy. Blinky won't harm your tummy. In fact, I don't even know why I have to say that to you as you're just another incarnation of myself. We are all the same people!"

This was starting to get complicated. Ves had split himself up so many times that he now had four different incarnations: his original self, his companion spirit Blinky, his external incarnation Vulcan and his new and as-of-yet-unnamed divine artifact.

Although his evolved and partially ascended mind allowed him to keep track of what all of them were doing, it was not an easy burden.

Human mentalities simply weren't designed to think in parallel tracks. The more Ves tried to split his attention, the more he distanced himself from his humanity, with all of the downsides that came with becoming an impersonal hivemind.

This was why Ves preferred to keep himself grounded. He found it better for his sanity and his life if he just left his incarnations to their own devices. They already possessed autonomous personalities of their own, so they could easily be ordered around as if they were his own subordinates.

That also caused him to feel a bit weird. He wondered whether it was good for him to maintain his distance from his incarnations all of the time. What if they became so adapted to their autonomy that they might become willful enough to refuse his orders?

"None of this is easy." He sighed.

Ever since Ves chose to pursue the route of Spiritual Ascension, he already had an inkling that he would have to go through completely different challenges.

The possibilities opened up by having multiple incarnations were too good to pass up. Ves willingly braved all of the dangers and inconveniences if it meant he gained additional ways to empower his mechs.

He turned his attention back to his captive. The creature's rage temporarily paused as Blinky used his sharp claws and teeth to harm the rebellious spirit.

Unfortunately for Ves, rather than making the unclean whale comply, the stubborn spirit instead lashed out even harder!

RAGE! DEATH! RETRIBUTION! PUNISHMENT!

Ves wanted to slam his head against a bulkhead.

"Can you speak like a normal sentient, at least?" He requested. "This dialogue can be much more productive if you can get over your painful death and talk to your new boss in a civilized manner. I have always heard that phase whales like you are among the most powerful, advanced and arguably the oldest remaining sentient species of this dwarf galaxy. I respect that. I really do. That is why I made sure to harvest your spirit from your corpse so that I can give you a chance to live again."

The entity trapped inside the cyborg cat's belly lashed out again and again! Each word that Ves spoke seemed to stimulate all of the wrong emotions from the unclean whale!

KILL! GOD! CONDEMN! FAILURE! ABOMINATION!

Ves looked intrigued. "What do you mean by those terms? What do you consider to be a god? Are you condemning me or is this a reference to your status? Do you consider yourself an abomination, or have your fellow phase whales unfairly stuck you with this stigmatizing label?"

The dialogue did not progress in the slightest. Ves had the sense that he was continually talking to a wall that was made out of pure irrational rage and resentment.

Ves sighed in frustration. "I can't work with you when you are refusing to calm down and consider your new situation like an adult! It's no wonder the phase whales locked you away in your Palace of Shame. You are truly a disgrace to your species!"

That happened to be the wrong thing to say, because the unclean whale became twice as aggressive all of a sudden!

SHAME! RAGE! UNDESERVED! UNWORTHY! GODBLOOD! GODBLOOD! GODBLOOD!

At least Ves was able to confirm that the captive spirit hadn't completely degenerated into a feral rage machine. The unclean whale could still register and interpret his messages.

The damn whale idiot just chose to respond with violent threats and emotional outbursts.

"Myaow!"

In the meantime, his poor cyborg cat suffered from a progressively more painful tummy ache. The divine artifact's 'food' truly wasn't agreeing with its jailor at the moment!

Ves was running out of patience.

"Hit him harder, Blinky."

Mrow mrow!

RAGE! PAIN! TORTURE! DEFIANCE!

It didn't help. Ves had the impression that he was perpetuating a cycle of violence and hatred.

He had thought that a week of waiting would have cooled the unclean whale's temper, but instead the creature was just as irrational and filled with rage like Zeigra used to be when the Crown Cat initially died.

Ves had encountered relatively few angry and irrational spirits, and each of them were difficult to deal with as they all treated him as their enemy.

So long as the spirits couldn't see reason, there was no basis of cooperation!

"Let's try this, then."

Ves pulled out a small totem of Lufa from his toolbelt and called down the Angel of Tranquility.

"Come help me calm down this angry spirit."

It didn't work. The unclean whale possessed enough spiritual strength to shrug off Lufa's tranquil domain. The agitated creature clung too tightly to his irrational fury!

"Okay! I give up!" Ves threw up his hands in the air! "If you can't look past your demise and talk to me like a civilized sentient being, then I will just have to treat you like a feral beast. Are you happy now, Mr. Whale?"

RAGE! INSULT!

"Yeah, I thought so. Blinky, keep hitting him. I don't want this guy to enjoy any reprieve."

Mrow mrow mrow!

He contemplated his options. There was no way he could make productive use of the salvaged spirituality when the beast was locked in his bottomless rage spiral.

Ves had so many questions about the phase whales and the Red Ocean. The depth of the new frontier was much greater than he initially thought, and he believed that the phase whales were the only natives who knew the most.

No matter whether the unclean whale was a pariah among the phase whales, the creature should definitely be able to provide the answers to some of those burning questions.

Yet... given the current state of the unclean whale, it didn't appear the damn beast was ready to calm down for a long time.

Was Ves willing to wait an indeterminate amount of months and years for the violent spirit to calm down and be ready to talk?

"I don't have the time."

Just like back when he was alive, the unclean whale posed a significant threat to the Larkinsons.

Who knew what kind of powers the unclean whale possessed. If Ves tried to imprison him in a P-stone placed inside his B-stone lockbox, who knew if the creature was able to phase through this cage.

Ves also feared that as long as the unclean whale remained alive, the prisoner was somehow able to transmit his coordinates and maybe a description of his human captors to his phase whale buddies.

There was no way that Ves wanted to be confronted by an angry pod of phase whales!

Seeing that he had no way to secure or subdue a powerful and uncooperative spirit, his thoughts turned to a direction that he hoped to avoid.

"If I can't make use of you when you are still alive and whole, then I'll make use of you in another way!"

Ves turned around and pulled out a totem of the Phase King. The powerful design spirit had been paying close attention to what was happening here and easily manifested a small image of himself.

"Hey there, my friend. What do you think about our guest here? Is this phase whale just as impressive as your progenitor?"

The Phase King regarded the unclean whale with a mixture of awe and disappointment.

The design spirit had lived over a million years in relative isolation. That gave him an awful lot of time to dream about the phase whales who his species was derived from. How powerful was the race of his progenitor? How magnificent would it be for him to meet another member of this fabled race? Would he be able to obtain an answer that could explain the meaning of his existence?

Though the Phase King's childhood memories had faded to the point where he could no longer visualize the Flesh Conqueror, the design spirit had always maintained high expectations of the phase whale race.

They were literally his gods as far as he was concerned!

Yet now that the Phase King finally encountered the unclean whale, his entire impression of the phase whale race had collapsed!

No matter whether the unclean whale was the exception rather than the rule, just the fact that such a degenerate could exist showed that the phase whales were not as perfect as he initially assumed.

A profound sense of disappointment radiated from the Phase King. The design spirit felt as if all of those years spent on building up a perfect utopia about the race of his makers had gone to waste.

"Do you see now, Phase King? Gods can never live up to their reputation." Ves contemptuously spoke. "For all of their ego and boasting, in truth anyone who claims to be a god is actually just a prick with too much power in their hands. This degenerate phase whale isn't even a proper god in local terms. His phasewater concentration was disappointingly low and he never even made much progress in understanding all of his stolen phasewater organs. Now that his physical form has perished, he can't even accept his death with grace. Is this the god and progenitor race that you have always wanted to worship?"

The Phase King radiated a strong feeling of denial while continuing to express his disappointment. There was nothing redeeming about the unclean whale in his opinion.

This was exactly what Ves wanted to see. His lips curled into a smirk.

"What do you say about getting back into old habits? This unclean whale has earned his infamy by eating his fellow phase whales. What do you think about devouring this beast in turn?"

A sense of shock spread from the fish-whale king!

Though the Phase King would think nothing about eating the remains of his fellow fish-whales, doing the same to a member of his progenitor race had always been a taboo among his species!

Ves did not leave this be. "The unclean whale is not a god, my friend. He's a fraud. He's a pretender who wished to become powerful but never put in the hard work needed to become a worthy member of his race. The Red Ocean would be better off if we got rid of him, and what better way to do so than to allow you to assimilate much of the strength and power that he has been wasting all of this time?"

The Phase King could not come to a decision.

Chapter 4532 Devour Your Progenitor

The thought of doing any harm to a phase whale was anathema to a fish-whale.

Ves suspected that the Flesh Conqueror may have programmed this intense resistance towards killing and devouring a phase whale in the genes of the fish-whale race.

It was a logical move to make. From what Ves had been able to figure out during the Purgatory Campaign, the mythical clean whale that had dominated an entire era of the Red Ocean in the past had sought to create a derivative of his own race that addressed many shortcomings.

By creating a hybrid between the phase whale race and a mixture of lesser aquatic races, the Flesh Conqueror managed to bring a budget version of his original species to life!

If not for the fact that something happened to the gigantic clean whale that caused him to abandon this ambitious creation project, the fish-whale race might have helped the phase whales become the hegemony of the dwarf galaxy!

Of course, there was always a possibility that the fish-whale race might become too powerful for their own good.

What if the members of the servant race decided that they deserved a promotion?

What if the fish-whales were no longer content with acting as the slaves of the phase whales?

What if the fish-whales saw an opportunity to replace their masters?

A rebellion would be extremely costly to the phase whales who originally lorded over the inferior aquatic race.

The Flesh Conqueror obviously wasn't an idiot so he had made sure to program strong rules that discouraged the thought of harming a phase whale right into the genes of the fish-whale race!

As such, the Phase King emotionally recoiled each time Ves mentioned the intention to devour the salvaged spirit of the unclean whale.

"Oh, come on! You're no longer just a fish-whale king anymore!" Ves complained. "You have shed your mortal coil. Your gene programming shouldn't affect your thinking anymore. There is nothing wrong with thinking about how a phase whale tastes. Granted, the unclean whale probably isn't as palatable as a proper phase whale, but he should at least be packed with all of the nutrients a growing design spirit needs!"

The Phase King continued to express his rejection of this proposal. It was as if the thought of eating the unclean whale was the greatest form of blasphemy that he could ever commit in his long and extensive life!

"You stubborn idiot!" Ves cursed at his design spirit. "What the hell is your problem? Your race is made up of natural cannibals! Back in the Purgatory pocket space, I have witnessed the members of your race eat each other's bodies as soon as they leak a single drop of alien blood. Why have you grown squeamish all of a sudden? The unclean whale is a cannibal as well, you know! He has preyed on at least a dozen phase whales given the variety of phasewater organs we found inside his corpse. Since this fellow has never hesitated to eat a phase whale, there is no reason why you should be any different!"

The Phase King began to experience more and more doubts, but he was still unable to bring himself to agree with the proposal.

Ves sighed again. "The unclean whale is a reflection of the dark side of the phase whale race. Not only does his existence prove that your progenitor race

isn't as powerful or perfect as you have always imagined in your dreams, but he is also a representation of the whale eat whale reality we all live in. An individual can fall into two categories. He can either be the prey that gets exploited all of the time or become the predator that has taken his own destiny in his hands."

The design spirit he was arguing with had become more thoughtful and subdued.

"What kind of spirit do you wish to be, my friend?" Ves pressed as he sensed he was getting close. "Do you want to be ruled by your instructions from birth and early childhood, or would you rather break out of your genetic cocoon and transform into a greater existence? The power of evolution is within your reach. There is nothing good about sticking to your original form. You are nothing but an overseer of a slave race at your current stage. If you don't want a phase whale to come and browbeat you into submission, then you should take this opportunity to absorb the strength of one of their kind and make sure you can stand up for yourself!"

It took a bit more coaxing, but the Phase King finally managed to overcome his strong rejection towards this action.

The mental shift was significant. From the moment the design spirit stopped looking up to the phase whales as a magnificent god race, the Phase King seemed to double his inherent authority and confidence!

This was the first time that Ves truly thought that the Phase King had the air of a sovereign.

For all of his age and wisdom, his sheltered life and his lack of mental growth had caused him to be severely stunted in many ways.

It was only now that the Phase King started to resemble a proper powerhouse.

Now that the design spirit had made the most essential switch, he started to wonder how he should devour the spirituality of the unclean whale.

Ves grinned. "Let me help you with that. Eating the unclean whale as whole as possible will probably allow you to obtain the greatest yield, but this damned bastard is too strong and possesses numerous advantages on account of his race. I'll have to do what everyone does when they want to turn a big bastard into their next meal. We chop him up into bite-sized pieces!"

This was a far-reaching decision that would have massive implications. Not only would Ves be giving up another potential design spirit, the amount of spiritual energy and other bits that got lost during the butchering process was also painful.

However, Ves deemed that this course of action was the best way to take advantage of the spirituality of the unclean whale in the short term. Every other option was too dangerous or too demanding for his liking.

Once Ves made a number of preparations, he looked at Blinky who had been keeping the unclean whale occupied all of this time.

"You can stop playing with our food now, Blinky."

Mrow?

"I'm serious. It's time to finish the job."

Mroooooow.

"Execute my orders!"

Mrow!

As soon as Blinky stopped amusing himself by inflicting pain and agony to the captive, the cat began to launch an all-out assault on the trapped and helpless spirituality of the unclean whale!

The victim dialed up his curses as soon as he felt that he was being torn apart.

DISTRESS! PAIN! DEATH! REVENGE! AFFRONT! UNWORTHY! ANCIENT! DOOM!

The unclean whale still didn't change his tune at this time. The creature was so unreasonable that Ves no longer harbored any doubts about this momentous decision.

Blinky intensified his attacks. Since the cyborg cat was doing much to suppress the unclean whale, the companion spirit was able to attack to his heart's content.

MROW! MROW! MROW!

Claws rent out slices of intangible matter. Sharp teeth bit off entire chunks of the unclean whale's spirituality. The air of death grew stronger in the room, so much so that another design spirit chose to manifest herself at this time!

"Whoah, little brother. Why didn't you tell me you were about to hold a barbecue?" A gray spiritual entity asked as she floated next to the cyborg cat. "I see you are having whale meat tonight, yum."

Ves greeted the new arrival with a wave. "Helena. Did you come to salvage the scraps of this dying spirit?"

"Heh, you know me so well, brother. As a matter of fact, that is exactly why I have come. It is not every day that I get to eat a piece of an exotic alien soul. The gods of the Red Ocean are so different from the ones back in the Milky Way, but death is all the same for both groups. I'm more interested in the flavors. Dining on the gods of the Red Ocean is like exploring a new cuisine."

The Daughter of Death was practically drooling as she witnessed Blinky go to town on the captured spiritual entity.

It got so bad that the Phase King became more guarded against his fellow colleague. All of his lingering revulsion towards the idea of devouring a member of his progenitor race went away when he realized he had a competitor.

The remains of the unclean whale belonged to him! There was no way the Phase King was willing to share this precious meal!

"Don't worry." Helena said as she crossed her arms. "I won't snatch your food from your jaws. I'm just here to harvest the death qi that the dying is releasing. You can't digest it anyway, so you might as well allow me to suck it up like a cleaning bot."

"Just let her do what she wants. You need to learn how to share. There is enough spiritual phase whale meat to go around." Ves told his friend.

The Phase King soon became distracted as he began to devour more chunks of the unclean whale.

The first pieces already energized the design spirit in a major fashion. It was as if this was the first time the Phase King came into touch with the essence of a superior whale!

Such an introduction was already enough to give the Phase King a possible direction to evolve towards.

As the Phase King absorbed more and more pieces, he began to show signs that he was about to undergo a comprehensive metamorphosis.

The quality of the food was too high!

Even though the ages between the Phase King and the unclean whale diverged drastically, there was still a massive difference in the inherent quality of their life states!

By assimilating the essence of the unclean whale, the Phase King was slowly moving further and further away from his fish-whale king roots.

It was probably a stretch to think that the Phase King would be able to morph into a proper phase whale, but whatever he was turning into should be far superior to his present existence!

Ves became pleased when he saw that the Phase King was digesting his meal without any apparent issues.

It seemed that the same traits that allowed the fish-whales to devour their own kind with ease also helped with devouring phase whale essence.

As the Phase King became more engrossed with trying to digest the highly potent pieces of the unclean whale, Helena grinned and quickly tore a chunk of the dying spirit.

Mrow!

"Hey, what are you doing, Helena?!"

"I can devour life as well as death, Ves. Let me have a taste, okay?"

Helena immediately popped the piece into her mouth as if it was sushi. She savored her portion with great pleasure and appreciation.

"Nice. Phasewater has marinated this whale for many years. This has produced an interesting mix of flavors."

Once she digested her bite, she tore out another chunk from the unclean whale before turning around and offering it towards Ves.

"What are you doing, sister?"

"You should have a taste as well."

"What?! I can't eat that! I'm a human!"

"You're a god now, or at least a god in the making." His sister corrected him.
"You need to familiarize yourself with your new abilities as a nascent god.
Come now. Don't be shy. The first time is always the best."

"This... this is disgusting! I don't need to rely on predation to grow my strength! I have my own ways of growing stronger!"

Helena snorted. "That's too slow. You can't afford to wait that long."

"No thanks. I don't like whale meat anyway."

"Fine. If that is how you want to play it, then you leave me with no choice. It just so happens that I have wanted to try out an interesting ritual that I have recently learned."

His sister suddenly grinned before she threw the chunk torn from the unclean whale in her mouth.

She then dove forward and locked her lips with that of Ves!

It turned out that she wanted to reenact a ritual of the Gemini Family!

Chapter 4533 Ves The Nutrient Pack

"HELENA! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU HAVE JUST DONE?!"

"Hihihihihhi!"

"I know that you are still young in absolute terms, but that doesn't mean you can fool around and violate a taboo!"

"Hihihihihhi!"

"I am being serious, Helena! If you won't take this seriously, then wait until I tell our mother!"

Bonk.

The older sister slapped her fist against her angry brother's head.

"Be cool, Ves. I was just honoring a tradition. There is no need to blow it up. It was just a kiss!"

"WE ARE SIBLINGS, HELENA!"

"So? That hasn't stopped the Gemini twins from smooching each other when they have grown old enough."

"I am pretty sure that you are underage!"

"I AM NOT!" Helena barked back! "I AM OLDER THAN YOU! Since you have already become a father, what is the harm of letting me enjoy a kiss?"

Ves let out a frustrated grunt. "I don't object to your desire to kiss someone in the mouth. You just don't do that with your own sibling! That is a great taboo in both human and alien societies!"

"I'm not even human, brother. You can't impose your legacy race's standards onto me. I am a god. I am above these mortal rules. Besides, isn't it a tradition for human gods to mess around with those closest to them? They don't always have the luxury of choice at times. Their family trees are quite interesting to say the least."

"You're talking about ancient myths invented by power hungry soothsayers! There is no basis in fact in those tales!"

"I am just bringing those examples up because you need to get rid of your attachment to your human norms and values. You have ascended, Ves. You should listen to your own advice. You are not beholden to human society anymore, just like how the Phase King should no longer abide by his biological imperatives."

That was a more serious argument than Ves expected from his sister. He needed to spend more time to formulate his response.

He let out a tired sigh. "I'm not like you, Helena. I did not wipe out a dark god moments after my birth. I entered this life as a bog-standard human baby, and grew up within the rules and structures of human society. I did not receive the treatment of a princess. I grew up in a fairly normal middle-class household on a backwater planet where nothing special happens. The only times my life became more interesting was when I was able to stay at the family gatherings at the Larkinson Estate."

"..."

"I cherish my childhood, Helena." Ves smiled. "My family and the society around me has taught me to be a human. I still value those lessons, especially now that they have become more relevant than ever. I will always stay a human in heart even if I become something completely different."

"..."

"Besides, your contempt towards human society is seriously misguided. Have you forgotten that the Big Two managed to depose the Five Scrolls Compact? God pilots paired with god mechs can eat pretend gods like you for breakfast. I am still a believer in human power."

His sister shrugged. "I guess you are right. I only have a partial glimpse of what humanity is like. The mechs that I am connected to are overwhelmingly used by Hexers. They are fine and all, but they only occupy a tiny corner of human civilization. You need to get to work and design more powerful mechs. I want to see what life is like for first-class mech pilots."

"I'm working on it, but becoming a first-class mech designer is not easy. My recent evolution has considerably accelerated my time table, but it will still take many decades before I am ready!"

One of the most important requirements of first-class mech designers was their mastery of many different fields of high technology.

It was practically impossible for baseline humans to learn all of the essential kinds of high technology that was necessary to design a basic first-class multipurpose mech.

The study load was at least a hundred if not a thousand times greater than the study load of a second-class mech designer!

The only way that students could even keep up with such a brutal study schedule was if they were set up to study so much science and engineering from the start.

Every first-class mech designer was a designer baby that had received many cognitive augmentations over the course of their life. The installation of an expensive cranial implant that excelled at calculation, memorization and logical deductions provided them with another powerful learning boost!

Though Ves could theoretically use the System to skip much of the essential learning, he would still have to spend up a lot of Ascension Points in order to round out his knowledge base.

Ves no longer believed it was necessary for him to scrounge up a lot of Ascension Points anymore.

His recent sublimation propelled his learning ability to an insane height!

Not only that, he believed it would take much less time for him to complete a design project by himself, so that allowed him to free up even more time for his studies!

While Ves thought about his future, his sister had stripped off a couple more pieces from the half-dismembered unclean whale.

The fact that the beast still managed to cling to life was not that unusual among spiritual life forms, but it was clear that the unclean whale was not too far away from dying for real.

"Here." Helena offered up one of the chunks of spiritual whale meat to him. "You should keep yourself nourished. I don't care about your vegetarianism. Our family has always thrived by absorbing the essence of our defeated foes. Let their souls fuel your growth."

Though Ves did not really look forward to this, he did not refuse his sister this time. He was afraid that she might do a repeat of her earlier move.

"Fine. Don't complain if I get a stomach ache or something."

He grabbed the spiritual meat and took a cautious bite.

The mechanism of eating the spiritual whale meat was rather weird. He felt he was chewing on a real piece of raw meat despite the fact that he was not eating anything material.

Once he swallowed his bite, the nutrients seemed to disappear in a bottomless pit in his stomach. He doubted whether he could regurgitate what he had just eaten.

"I feel warmer."

"That is the engine of your growth at work." Helena smiled at him after he chewed her own portion of whale meat. "Death can engender life. It is one of the oldest rules of reality. You have just entered the threshold of a nascent god, so you still have a lot of room for growth. Take advantage of this starter period. You are still in a relatively malleable state which means that you can grow faster without meeting much resistance. Would you like to eat another portion?"

Ves raised his palm. "No thanks. I am good. I don't think I am cut out for this. I would much rather stick to a more sober diet."

He was beginning to feel warmer and more energetic by the second. It was as if he had just stoked a flame in his stomach. It made him feel powerful and more awake than before.

"Hm, there is not much left of the unclean whale anyway. Your Phase King has already absorbed most of this poor fellow."

The Phase King had become so enthused about his meal that he was devouring his portions as fast as he could shove them through his mouth!

By the time Blinky delivered the final remains that marked the spiritual existence of the unclean whale, the powerful design spirit soon began to enter a state of slumber!

The overflowing power contained within the Phase King began to trigger a metamorphosis. The body shape of the Phase King already started to lean towards that of a phase whale.

As the manifestation of the Phase King slowly faded from view, the room became a lot emptier than before.

Mrow.

Blinky rubbed his cheek against the head of the cyborg cat before diving back into Ves' mind.

Helena on the other hand developed an interest in the latest cat to join the family.

"So this is your new pet, huh? I can already tell it is a lot more special than your other incarnations. Come here, you cutie."

"Myaow~"

The Daughter of Death grinned as she stroked the cyborg cat's silvery armor plating.

"Hm?" Helena interrupted her ministrations when she noticed there were no distinguishing marks at the bottom of the cyborg cat. "Am I holding a boy or a girl?"

"I haven't decided yet." He answered. "My cyborg cat is not entirely fixed in shape. It can look the part as soon as I make up my mind."

"I'm surprised you haven't chosen to turn him into a boy. All of your previous incarnations are boys as well."

Ves curtly nodded. "That is why I want to do something different this time. I hate monotony. It's too boring. A bit of variety will go a long way into spicing up my life."

"So you plan to turn this incarnation into a girl?! How adorable!"

"I haven't decided yet, Helena!"

"Oh, it will be so fun! Ves wants to live the life of a pussy cat! Mother will find this so amusing!"

"Don't tell our mother!"

Ves didn't want to talk about this topic any further. While he wanted to settle on a name and a gender for his cyborg cat, he wanted to do this on his own terms. He intended to wait until Helena had left before he finalized his decisions.

"I doubt that snacking on the unclean whale is the sole reason why you have manifested like this. You normally don't bother me that much. What else has brought you here, sister?"

His sister grew serious again. "You're correct. While you may be resistant to your new self, there is no doubt that you have become a greater existence than before. This has granted you greater power than before, but it has also made you vulnerable to gods that like to prey on existences that are packed

with vitality such as you. Life can be dangerous for existences such as you. I can take care of myself because not a lot of gods want to take a bite out of me, but you are different."

"I think you are exaggerating a bit. I already have Vulcan for a while and he has never encountered the threats that you are referring to. Even if he gets into trouble, I can always call upon you and my other design spirits to back up my incarnation."

"You aren't listening to me, Ves! You are a walking nutrient pack for hungry and greedy gods! You are a delicacy that tastes several times better than the phase whale that we have just devoured! Look, it is not as if other gods will drop everything and seek to devour you at all cost, but the temptation is multiple times greater than normal. Neutral gods who ordinarily don't have any reason to bother you might decide to take a risk and attack you out of the blue."

Ves looked troubled. "That... is not what I signed up for. I have been working on hiding my strength. Hopefully that will help with avoiding these opportunistic predators."

"I wouldn't count on that if I were you, brother. You are just too nutritious. It's like a scent that you can never get rid of. Anyone who comes close enough to you will be able to sense how full of life you are. This is why I am telling you that you need to focus on developing more teeth. As long as you are able to become strong enough to deter rival gods, everything will be alright. This is the strategy that our mother has adopted, and it has worked well for her for the most part."

"If that is the case, then why has she fallen in such an awful state?" Ves skeptically asked.

"That's because she was pursued by too many powerful gods who understood her power too well." Helena solemnly replied. "That's also why I am here to guide you. Our mother doesn't want you to repeat her mistakes."

"Oh."

Chapter 4534 The Challenges Of Cheating Death

Now that the Phase King devoured most of the remnant spirituality of the unclean whale, Ves was able to relax now that he cut short a potential Nyxie event.

His armored form sat down on the deck and faced his 'eldest sister' who was currently holding the cyborg cat in her arms.

"She's so strange." Helena said as she had already assigned the divine artifact's gender by herself. "Your new cat is so you, but she is also an individual unto herself. That is not the only oddity about her. Despite the fact that half of her body consists of inorganic parts, they are completely melded with her organic core in a way that turns them into true living extensions of her body. All of the metallic components essentially serve as her exclusive versions of hair, teeth and claws."

When Ves studied his cyborg cat with his spiritual vision, he concurred with her assessment. Life flowed through every part of her body. Her exterior shell was not a lifeless collection of materials that she could exchange with another set like changing clothes. They were truly as much a part of her as her miniature Jutland organ.

It upset him quite a bit that his cyborg cat was actually far more powerful and further ahead in her ascension than himself.

He understood why this was the case. Ves himself started off as a human and was still bound to many of the strengths and weaknesses of his race.

The most relevant shortcomings of baseline humans were that they were not spiritually gifted and that they were completely incompatible with phasewater.

Although it was possible for humans to overcome these weaknesses step by step through a combination of physical augmentation and spiritual advancement, Ves still had a long road ahead of him if he wanted to become a post-divinity life form.

His cyborg cat was different. She was designed for this from the beginning. Though Ves hadn't been able to spend as much time to refine her design as he liked, the lightning baptism she went through made sure to smooth out all of the kinks and comprehensively upgrade her functionality to a level where he could no longer understand all of her mechanisms.

The point was that her optimized existence allowed her to advance much faster and with far greater ease than Ves himself!

Already, Ves could sense that her phasewater blood concentration was about to break through its current limit and reach a slightly higher level.

It appeared that containing and digesting a part of the unclean whale in her stomach had done her a bit of good.

Helena most certainly noticed and appreciated the cyborg cat's prodigious strength. She hugged and cuddled the adorable silver cat as if she was a pet.

"Your new incarnation might not be as strong as myself shortly after I was born, but she can easily become a powerful fighter." Helena spoke as she scratched the cat behind her metallic ears. "Considering the way you operate, I think it is best you focus on empowering the assets that are closest to you for protection against both material and immaterial threats. Your new kitty can help you defend against both."

That made a lot of sense, but Ves had a different idea in mind.

"I'm not keeping my cyborg cat around." He responded.

"What? Why not? She's so powerful!"

"The cyborg cat is my first incarnation that can ignore any range limitation and travel far away from my position. Well, maybe Vulcan fits within this category as well, but he does not have a physical form like my latest cat. What I am saying is that this trait presents me with interesting options."

"What are you talking about, Ves?"

"Are you aware that my divine artifact houses a fraction of my 'Divine Core'?"

"I... kind of guessed that." Helena admitted. "I still don't know how you managed to pull off such a dangerous maneuver. Our mother has told us that this is a highly coveted and incredibly secret ritual that can grant a select few gifted individuals a shortcut to becoming a god. While my mother has never mentioned anything about splitting off your Divine Core into a living cat of all things, it should still be a procedure that is fraught with danger. It is incredibly strange for you to be able to master a variation of this method and pull it off on your own. How did you do it, anyway?"

Her suspicious glance told him that she was incredibly curious at how Ves was able to acquire the secret knowledge to create a divine artifact without killing himself in the process.

He responded with an awkward laugh. "I've had a few adventures. I am not going to spill out my entire life to you, Helena."

"I'm your sister, Ves. You might not be able to trust most people, but I'm family!"

"You may be family, but you are also withholding a lot of information from me, just like our mother."

"I already told you that this is for your own protection!" Helena defended her side. "Our mother and I are both powerful. There can be no doubt about that. It is just that the enemies we are fighting against know our methods too well. If we didn't enjoy the home ground advantage by taking control over the Nyxian Gap, our enemies would have been able to crush us on an open battlefield."

Last he heard about what was taking place in the Nyxian Gap, his mother was still going strong by leading the Oblivion Empire against the enemies that sought to take her down.

The Five Scrolls Compact had tossed a lot of brainwashed fools into the meat grinder, and didn't appear to be stopping at all. The Compact even sent out a number of their powerhouses, who were so strong that only the so-called Oblivion Empress and the Daughter of Death could half them in their tracks.

The odds were incredibly lopsided, but the Compact wasn't able to leverage its full strength against the Oblivion Empire.

The Nyxian Gap was situated in a remote corner of the Milky Way Galaxy. The Ruined Temple was located in the galactic center and could not radiate its influence as effectively across the periphery of human space.

The only convenient way for the Compact to transfer large amounts of personnel to the Komodo Star Sector was by borrowing the Milky Way Galactic Gate Network, but that was firmly under the control of the Big Two.

There was no way the MTA and CFA would let the Compact get away with smuggling its own troops through the beyonder gates en masse!

Besides, it was impossible for the Five Scrolls Compact to draw away so much personnel stationed across the old galaxy. Removing them was equivalent to removing their nails across much of human space.

As such, the Compact was stuck with trying to smuggle over its troops in small and unassuming groups while also converting as many gullible locals as possible to get more bodies in the fight.

The indoctrinated mercenaries and crusaders certainly kept the armies of the Oblivion Empire busy, but they perished in such great numbers that their deaths inadvertently accelerated Helena's rise to power!

"Let's move on since neither of us are eager to expose our secrets." Ves proposed.

"Very well. Back to the topic at hand, what do you intend to do with this lovely kitty if you're not willing to keep her by your side?"

"I plan to pass her off to someone else, preferably a rich and powerful individual who is protected at every turn but also appreciates her company." Ves openly revealed.

"That sounds like you want to turn her into a Lucky for someone who does a much better job of staying away from the battlefield."

Ves grinned. "Yup. I think I can earn a good sum of money if I auction her away. Just look at her. She is literally a divine creation. No ordinary craftsman can make a mechanical cat like her. She even has her own glow!"

Her sister couldn't help but agree. "Even I would feel tempted to claim your kitty as my own if I had a physical form. She's so pretty!"

"In any case, my cyborg cat is my insurance policy. If anything happens to me and my fleet, I can still count on her to give me a second chance of life. However, this will only work if my cat is sufficiently far away from any enemies that are gunning for my life. It is best that there is nothing that can tie my cyborg cat to my original identity."

"Not a lot of humans bother to plan for their own demise. You are smart for thinking ahead." Helena said in an approving tone. "I am afraid you are underestimating how easy it is to revive yourself. Do you think that anyone with a bit of power can cheat death? No one is able to live forever, Ves. If you ever find yourself in a position where your current form dies, you will lose more than you can ever know. Whatever remains behind might be able to pick up the pieces and find a way to regain your old level of strength, but there is no way to regain what is forever lost. The best you can do is to fill up the gaps in yourself with replacement materials."

He understood what she was saying. It sounded similar to his plan to provide Venerable Jannzi with a successor to the Shield of Samar.

The expert space knight had died. Ves couldn't bring back the old living mech in its original form, so he decided to go for the second-best option.

The reborn living mech he intended to make after completing the Dullahan Project would probably be different from the original Shield of Samar, but it would still share many commonalities to its predecessor.

The thought of something like this happening to Ves himself was a bit frightening. Would Ves still be 'alive' if he managed to reconstruct a semblance of himself through his surviving divine artifact?

Given Helena's dire warning, Ves might be forced to reevaluate the soundness of this insurance policy.

That was something to consider for later, though.

"Be that as it may, getting at least some part of me back is better than restoring nothing at all. I will figure out a way to minimize the loss."

"You will have better luck if you become stronger. True Gods are notoriously hard to kill off in their entity."

"That is useful to know." He replied.

He already had a feeling this might be the case. His extrapolation of god pilots and his first-hand observations of the Polymath had given him the impression that these powerhouses had become extremely powerful energy-based life forms.

Their overwhelming strength along with their reduced dependence on their material forms allowed them to get away with far more shenanigans than normal organisms.

Helena grew serious again. "Let's get back to discussing how you can defend yourself, because you obviously need that protection considering how enticing of a snack you have become. As I have mentioned earlier, our mother has developed her own system, but it is far too anchored off the theories and methods of her greatest enemies. It is crucially important that you do not repeat her mistake, as you don't have something as convenient as the Nyxian Gap to constrain the hounds of the Compact."

"You already mentioned a possible direction for me to pursue." Ves told her. "From what I know about our mother, she prefers to fight all of her tough opponents by herself. If she needs backup, she can only count on you and maybe our dad. Every other soldier under her command is too weak to be of any consequence in a battle of this level."

"That is right. What are you getting at, Ves?"

"Well, I'm obviously different. You are correct that I rely on the protection of others to do the fighting in my stead. It is my nature as a mech designer for me to empower others so that they can gain the strength to defeat my enemies."

Helena nodded. "That may help, but you can't rely on your mechs and mech pilots in every possible circumstance. How will you defend yourself if you can't count on your strongest work?"

"I already have a couple of ideas." Ves pulled the Hammer of Brilliance from his toolbelt and lifted it up for her to see. "I may not be a trained soldier, but I can still multiply my strength by arming myself with potent gear."

Chapter 4535 Self-Defense Options

Helena looked approving when her brother expressed his plan to equip himself with powerful gear. She lifted the glowing black lotus flower from her hair and transformed it into its Pistol Mode.

The living weapon had grown substantially over the years. Helena's integral use of its focused beams had allowed for both of them to grow at a prodigious rate.

"Our mother is too old school to change her stance regarding the wisdom of relying on external tools to fight our battles." The design spirit regretfully spoke.

Ves snorted. "The entire reason why humans and the vast majority of sentient alien races in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean were able to rise to power was because they relied on ever more powerful tools. Hardly any alien race relies on their own natural strengths to defeat their opponents."

"I agree with you, but I also see where our mother is coming from." Helena replied. "You don't have to worry too much about me. I am not so set in my ways. I have taken a liking for the first gift that you have made for me, so I know what you are capable of. You are much better at creation than destruction, so it makes sense that you orient your defenses by relying on your strengths. You should make another weapon like the Gray Lotus that you have made available to your mechs. I would be happy to lend my power to your defense."

"That's... a bit of a problem. I was only able to make the Gray Lotus because I 'found' a batch of special materials that happened to be compatible with you. I haven't found any other sympathetic materials that are aligned towards your death attribute."

"Oh." She frowned while lifting her Death Lotus. "Does that mean you can't make another gun to fend off powerful gods?"

"No. Not until I find the right materials. Do you happen to have any suggestions?"

Helena rubbed her smooth chin. "Hmmm. My cult within the Oblivion Empire has managed to salvage powerful materials to build idols in my image."

Ves sat up straighter. "Are you talking about Unending alloy?!"

"What is Unending alloy?"

"It's what I call the alloy that I have used to make products like this." He said while patting the chestplate of his Unending Regalia.

"Oh that? We have lots of these materials lying around, Ves. There are an awful lot of relics and statues of the dark gods that are made with this handy alloy. Our men have taken to melting it all down so that they can make more proper gods. They help a lot with spreading around our awareness. We can drop in any time a detached fleet has encountered trouble."

Ves became disappointed. The Nyxian Gap was too far away to make importing Unending alloy viable, and he already decided to transition away from this material.

Unending alloy was not a sympathetic material. It was decent at containing many varieties of spiritual energy, but it could not be used as the basis of a powerful blessed weapon.

"In any case, my options are fairly limited for the time being. The only sympathetic material I have access to is phasewater, which allows me to borrow the power of the Phase King in battle. In fact, I just managed to swindle over a hundred kilograms of phasewater from different parties. This gives me a lot of leeway in using this exotic for my personal projects."

Helena spent enough time around Ves to grow familiar with phasewater. Though the substance was pretty much nonexistent in the Nyxian Gap, this might change in the future once more and more phasewater flowed into the old galaxy.

"Phasewater is weird." She said.

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. He grew curious about what a self-professed death goddess had to say about this topic. "What is your impression of phasewater?"

The design spirit frowned. "I don't really understand it. To me, it looks like ordinary water but with extra power for some reason. There shouldn't be anything about phasewater that is relevant to me, but a part of me doesn't agree with that logic."

"Is phasewater alive?!"

"No. I wouldn't describe it like that. It is better to describe it as a facilitator of life. It can make a being stronger, though I can't describe in what way."

"Wait for a moment."

Ves concentrated hard and used his expanded control over his body to squeeze out a drop of blood from his body.

He coughed and spat out the drop until it floated in front of his face.

"Can you examine my blood and tell me your thoughts?"

She did so. Her eyes quickly widened.

"Well, well, well. Your evolution is more extensive than I initially expected. You've outdone yourself, Ves. I have no idea how you managed to do it, but you have truly succeeded in blending a small amount of phasewater in your blood."

"I already know that, Helena. Can you tell me anything new that I haven't been able to figure out by myself?"

"My opinion hasn't changed. The phasewater in your blood isn't inherently alive, but now that it has blended into your body, is enhancing and empowering your blood components, though I haven't the faintest idea why. Our mother can probably give you a better explanation. I imagine that this effect will grow stronger once you managed to stuff more phasewater into your bloodstream."

That was an insightful remark. It had a lot of implications for his upcoming biomech projects.

"Do you think that I can leverage phasewater and the power of the Phase King to defend myself against threats of your caliber?" Ves asked.

His sister laughed. "Hahaha! I'm sorry, little brother, but I don't think it will be that easy."

"Not even after the Phase King has just devoured the spirituality of the unclean whale?"

Helena threw a critical glance in his direction. "The native gods over here are just as strange as phasewater. Our mother would call them body refiners if she sees one in the flesh. These phase whales and so on are strong in body. I think their strongest gods can even put up a good fight against the dark gods that I have fought against by virtue of their impossibly strong physiques."

"What's the problem, then?"

"The growth of their bodies also helps them grow the invisible parts of themselves, but it is clearly not their focus. Their defenses against immaterial gods is good enough to keep themselves alive, but their offensive ability leaves much to be desired. They are mainly good at breaking phasewater-enhanced physiques that are all rooted the physical dimensions."

"I see." Ves frowned for a moment. "Well at least I'm not as fragile as before. It will take a lot of effort for a hostile spiritual entity to kill me in my current state. That won't necessarily get me out of trouble, though. I need a weapon that can kill these kinds of threats. For now, I can count on Blinky to help with hurting them, but he has an obvious shortcoming."

Helena nodded in agreement. "Blinky will do well against more primitive gods who know nothing else but to harness their energy like a club, but the more sophisticated ones that have access to a heritage are much trickier to defeat. The latter category of opponents will know better than to get close enough for Blinky to devour their energy. They will stay out of his range and attack you from a distance."

That was a worst case scenario for Ves. If he wasn't surrounded by his expert mechs and if his design spirits couldn't channel a powerful enough manifestation of themselves, then he would be in big trouble!

His eyes rested on her Death Lotus. "I need a ranged weapon."

"It's a start, I guess." Helena shrugged. "Do you have any ideas on how to make one that is powerful enough to defend yourself against predators who are eager to devour your vitality?"

"Hmm... as a matter of fact, I do. Look at this." He said as he summoned the Amastendira from the System Space. "I have always relied on this weapon to defend my life in the early stages of my career. I didn't have as many guards and expert mechs were still a distant dream for me at the time. This gun has

served me well, but it has become redundant nowadays. Anything it can defeat, my guards can defeat as well. It has become a bit tasteless, actually."

"What do you have in mind then, Ves?"

"I planned to upgrade it so that I have an answer to powerful material and spiritual opponents. I already had a few ideas in mind, but recent changes have caused me to revise my original plan. I need to conduct further research and see how I can upgrade this weapon without breaking its existing advantages."

His sister did not really take the weapon that seriously. "Please keep me in the loop. It will be interesting for me to know whether you can succeed. This is not enough, though. There are enemies that can harm you behind solid obstacles or far away. You won't always be able to gain line of sight on your opponents. What will you do then, Ves?"

"I... don't now. I will need to think about that. You just introduced this problem to me. I need more time to think about these scenarios and what I can do with the resources in my possession. Hopefully, all of the loot that our clan has plundered from the battlefield will give me additional options."

"Good luck with that, then."

They talked a bit more. Both of them brainstormed on various different ideas, but Ves either didn't possess the right expertise or lacked the resources to turn them into a reality.

The former was not a big issue. Ves was used to solving problems and he could always mess around until he developed a viable product.

It was the latter that truly hampered his efforts. His clan had access to more materials than ever. Phasewater wasn't even an issue anymore considering how he managed to expand his clan's reserves by a huge amount.

His biggest problem was that there were simply too few spiritually reactive materials within his reach.

Lack of resources meant a lack of output. This was beyond frustrating to a mech designer who was accustomed to realizing his completed mech designs!

"It's hard to build a castle out of nothing." He sighed. "While I have recently come up with a few potential research directions that might allow me to produce my own spiritually reactive materials, it will only partially mitigate my shortages. Part of the reason why I can design so many mechs is because I have an endless variety of materials at my disposal. That doesn't apply to my other works."

His sister paused for a moment.

"Maybe it is because you haven't been looking as hard." She said. "I think you are being limited by geography. There are certain regions of any galaxy that contain much more exotics than elsewhere. I think your best bet is to search for suitable materials in these wealthy areas."

Ves grimaced and shook his head. "I can't. It is too dangerous for me to enter an upper zone of the new frontier without the ability to defeat first-class forces. I suppose I can find a way to put myself under the protection of a powerful party, but I have too many bad experiences with that. I think it is better for me to keep my distance and wait until my clan has become strong enough to travel through the upper zones without getting challenged."

"That will take too long."

"I know that, Helena. I can't do anything about it in the short term. I am much safer if I stick to the less prominent regions of the Red Ocean."

"Hmm... if that is the case, then why not send out your insurance policy instead?" Helena proposed with a grin. She lifted up the cyborg cat with her

arms. "Don't you think this lovely kitty would make for a fantastic pet for a pampered first-class princess?!"

Ves looked intrigued. "That's actually not a bad idea. I can kill multiple birds with one stone!"

Chapter 4536 Working Visit

Putting his cyborg cat in the hands of a prominent citizen of a first-rate state was easier said than done.

It was not impossible, though. Ves and the Larkinson Clan probably wouldn't be able to pull it off alone, but that was what friends were for. He was sure he could use one of his contacts to help him put his beautiful divine artifact up for auction at an exclusive venue in an upper zone.

"That will help in the medium term, but it won't do much for me in the short term." Ves said.

"Then you better spend your time on other projects in the meantime."

"That is definitely on the agenda."

The two siblings continued talking. Though Helena failed to provide any further advice, Ves appreciated her input. Her perspective was vastly different and she had learned enough lessons from their mother to provide him with an expanded perspective on different matters.

Her intangible form stood up and let go of the cyborg cat.

"As much as I like to keep chatting, I am burning too much energy by keeping this form. I think I have helped you get on your way now. You will have to do the rest on your own. You can call me whenever you need help, but please try and become strong by developing your own system. Our biggest problem has always been that we are working with methods that our enemies have largely invented first. Our mother and I have inherited too much from them, and that makes defeating our foes an uphill battle."

Ves understood what his eldest sister meant. It was as if the Larkinson Clan was locked in a struggle against the Mech Trade Association. The latter was the holy land of mechs and knew more about them than any other organization, period.

The only way for the Larkinson Clan to survive such a confrontation was to stay as far away as possible while developing new technologies that could surprise the mechers.

In fact, that was exactly what Ves originally intended to do before the MTA took a greater interest in his work.

Nowadays, anything he invented would eventually get leaked to the MTA, which meant that Ves essentially had to surrender his work to the people he was trying to guard against!

It was beyond frustrating for the MTA to swoop in and demand Ves to share his work all of the time, but that was the reality of being a good mech designer in the Age of Mechs.

This era belonged to the MTA and the CFA, and no one could get away from their influence.

Once his sister departed, Ves spent a bit of time examining his cyborg cat.

"I will find a new owner for you so that you can get pampered every day. For now, I need you to hide yourself. I don't want anyone tying your existence to me, so please bear with the situation."

"Myaow myaow."

The cyborg cat rubbed herself against his cheek before she phased herself into the deck while also camouflaging herself for good measure.

His new cat's hiding ability was much better than his own, so Ves felt fully reassured in her ability to stay unnoticed.

Time passed by. Several events took place.

For one, the Larkinson Clan's lawyers had worked intensely with their counterparts to finalize the contracts that formalized the trade deals that the Larkinson Clan had concluded with the other members of the temporary coalition.

As soon as the contracts took effect, the different parties began to ship over the mech weapons that Ves needed to upgrade.

A small team of guards and observers accompanied each shipment. The Larkinsons had already made plans to accommodate the temporary guests aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, but that did not change the fact that they were annoying to work around.

The foreign guests constantly kept Ves in his sights whenever he approached and touched the powerful mech gear.

Although he had received permission to make small physical changes to the weapons, the specialists among the observers could veto his proposed changes at any time if they thought that Ves would ruin the effectiveness of any of this powerful gear.

He sighed. "I guess I will have to stick to cosmetic changes to make my mark."

There was one commission that Ves couldn't handle in the Spirit of Bentheim.

This was not just because it comprised of more than just a standalone piece of mech equipment, but also because it would put the flagship of the Larkinson Clan at extreme risk!

Even if Ves was willing to believe in the integrity of an ace pilot, there was no need for him to tempt fate!

This was why he boarded a shuttle which brought him to a modest combat carrier that had moved to the midway position between the fleets of the Larkinson Clan and the Santana Group.

The Santanas were rather economical as far as their starships were concerned. Though they did not skimp on the construction of the ships that fell under their powerful Xenoarchaeology Division, the vessels did not possess any additional bells and whistles.

They were merely solid ships that were designed with efficiency in mind but were also devoid of personality.

As the shuttle touched down in a hangar bay that was made up of plain, uncoated metal alloys, Ves greeted a junior officer who had been instructed to guide him to the right compartment.

A short time later, Ves and a couple of guards that had been allowed to accompany him entered an unusually well-equipped workshop.

Ves momentarily paused in order to admire the sight of the sole mech that had already been placed in a work bay.

"We meet again, Thunderer Mark II."

It was one thing to see the powerful ace mech operate on a projected screen.

It was another thing to experience the Thunderer Mark II at close proximity!

Though the ace mech was dormant at the moment, Ves could still feel the echo of power that had been imprinted on the thick and massive frame.

Ves didn't have much experience with high-ranking heavy artillery mechs. Sure, his clan fought against a number of them in battle, but those were mere snapshots in his life.

His mouth already started to salivate as he beheld a foreign ace heavy artillery mech. This was quite easily the most powerful ranged mech that he had the privilege to touch and examine up close.

He even had permission to make small changes to the mech itself!

It was an incredible privilege for a mere 'Journeyman' such as Ves to be granted this honor, so he quickly regained his composure and began to adopt a serious attitude to this commission.

As soon as he came close enough, an unmistakably powerful individual stood up from the crate he was sitting upon and floated over to Ves.

"Saint Osenring. It is a pleasure to meet you in person."

The man was unquestionably more than human. The man not only exuded strength and determination through his dense and powerful will, his body was also augmented by a considerable amount of cybernetic parts.

Ves had read in the man's record that Saint Osenring had once suffered serious injuries in battle. The celebrated mech pilot could have opted for treatments that could have restored him too close to his original form, but instead he chose to integrate cybernetic augmentations that strengthened his parameters beyond the norm.

This was an important turning point in Saint Osenring's life and it spoke much about his priorities and his preferences.

"I could say the same to you as well." The older man responded with an inquisitive look. "Your signature is unmistakable. It was truly you that changed my mech back then. It is amazing that you have managed to do so much with the help of one of your expert mechs."

"I'm quite happy with what I have managed to pull off in a short amount of time, but that doesn't change the fact that it is a rush job. I have come here to finish my work. How has the Thunderer Mark II fared after the battle?"

The augmented ace pilot invited Ves forward. "Please see for yourself. It has undergone numerous changes ever since you imbued it with power."

As Ves stepped closer and closer, he could feel more of the strength of the dormant ace mech. It was as if it had become a sleeping giant. There was so much potential for destruction locked within its large and heavy frame.

Once Ves lifted up his arm and pressed his armored palm against the smooth surface of one of the eight spider-like legs of the machine, he was truly able to inspect the current state of its spiritual foundation.

Nothing much had actually changed since he last came into contact with it. The spiritual foundation had settled into a new structure that was a bit more coherent and more compatible with life, but other than that the willpower baptism from Saint Osenring did not interfere too much.

This was a good sign. It was an indicator that Saint Osenring did not reject the changes made to his trusty ace mech.

Ves could even sense that the Phase King, though currently dormant, also retained its connection to the powerful machine.

"Have you communicated much with the Phase King after the battle has ended?"

Saint Osenring shook his head. "Not much. I have come in touch with this foreign phase whale-like creature during my guard shifts, but I have held off on my explorations out of caution. They do not entirely understand all of the changes that you have made to mech, and I am concerned about any subsequent changes that you will make. This mech is my fortress, Patriarch

Larkinson. I can understand the value of strengthening its attack power, but I do not want to pilot a mech that I cannot recognize anymore."

It sounded as if Ves needed to dial back his more ambitious plans regarding the Thunderer Mark II.

"Don't worry. I will take your preferences into account. The initial changes that I have made are already doing much of the heavy lifting. What I intend to do is to refine and strengthen the existing structure that I have already established. Your ace mech won't gain too many new elements. Instead, its existing ones will become stronger. Does that sound acceptable?"

The ace pilot of the Santana Group could hear the sincerity in Ves' tone.

"I will accept your word. Please proceed, then."

"Thank you. The sooner I am done, the sooner I can go back to my fleet."

Ves proceeded to spend the next hour examining the Thunderer Mark II from every angle.

He floated from side to side and even entered the cockpit for a few minutes to take in the seat where Saint Osenring unleashed his destructive shockwaves against his targets.

There was much about the Thunderer II that impressed Ves. A team of highly accomplished Master Mech Designers had designed this metal monstrosity. From its thick, arachnid legs to its 10 formidable heavy gauss cannons, everything about the Thunderer Mark II reinforced its role as the ultimate artillery platform in the shape of a mech!

To be honest, Ves only spent half of the time on thinking how to strengthen its blessed weapons.

He spent the rest of the time examining the many exquisite implementations of the Thunderer Mark II!

He absorbed many of the best practices that he could figure out and started to gain a deeper understanding on how the Thunderer Mark II worked.

All of the lessons he learned today could be applied to future design projects involving heavy artillery mechs and ranged mechs in general.

Ves especially became interested in upgrading the Transcendent Punisher Mark II's.

The Ylvainan heavy artillery mechs weren't weak per se, but they had displayed clear shortcomings in the last battle.

If Ves wanted to ensure that the artillery wing of the Larkinson Army remained effective in future battles, then he needed to upgrade all of their cannons into transphasic weapons!

Previously, Ves never thought about doing so because the amount of phasewater needed to upgrade so many heavy mechs was excessive.

Now, the situation had changed. The Larkinson Clan had just earned a windfall in phasewater, and Ves did not intend to leave it all unused.

THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 4537 Powerful Influencers

After dealing with all kinds of matters, it felt good for Ves to get back to doing his main job.

The Thunderer Mark II was an overwhelming ace mech. Its size was immense and its mechanical construction was intricate from top to bottom.

Its exquisite design contained so many technical ingenuities that Ves could spend years on studying every single nuance!

It was a pity that Ves only had a limited amount of time to do his job. He also couldn't go too far in trying to steal all of the secrets that made the Thunderer Mark II such an excellent ace heavy artillery mech.

A small crowd of guards, mech designers and technicians tracked his every move. It made him feel more self-conscious and prevented him from being too blatant about his selfish motives.

If that wasn't enough, Saint Jelmer Osenring constantly hovered near his position. Sure, the ace pilot maintained an appropriate amount of distance, but that still caused Ves to linger within the periphery of the powerful champion's Saint Kingdom!

The domain fields of ace pilots were much weaker when they weren't interfacing with their machines, but they still maintained a certain degree of cohesion.

Ves could tell that Saint Osenring had never let down his guard and was constantly judging the motives of the young and presumptuous mech designer that dared to touch his machine.

This meant that Ves had to discharge his duty properly, much to his disappointment.

Fortunately, this still granted him a decent amount of leeway. Understanding how the heavy artillery mech worked and the basic technical parameters of its impressive armaments could still fall within his responsibilities as long as the mech was better off in the end.

This was why Ves paid closer attention to the areas where he could justifiably work upon in the process of enhancing the firepower of the Thunderer Mark II.

Though he wanted to examine every single system of the ace heavy artillery mech in detail, he limited his attention to the heavy gauss cannons that served as its primary armament.

"The cannons were specially designed by one of our Santana Group's resident Master Mech Designers." Saint Osenring explained as Ves asked for the powerful soldier's input. "I have a good relationship with him. I piloted

expert mechs designed by that man in my earlier years, and that has allowed me to become familiar with his style of weapons. At the same time, the Master also became more familiar with my individual preferences. By the time I graduated to the Thunderer Mark II, the cannons made available to me are so... perfect that I can resonate with them from this distance. Let me show you my POWER!"

The ace pilot gained an intense fervor all of a sudden! Before Ves could say anything else, Saint Osenring lifted up his arm towards one of the large cannons of the heavy mech and actually caused the long and intimidating muzzle to get surrounded by a faint corona!

Ves widened his eyes. "Whoa, whoa, let's not play with the big cannon, shall we? I don't want to get blown up by a powerful gauss round or the massive shockwave that it will produce when it hits the bulkhead over there, thank you very much!"

Saint Osenring quickly dropped his arm and relaxed, causing the heavy mech to become dormant again.

"It wouldn't have fired. I know my mech too well, and the changes you have made recently has reinforced my... relationship with my machine. Still... I suppose you are right to respond this way. It was reckless of me to show off my resonance to my mech in this manner."

The bout of uncontrolled behavior caused Ves to become more vigilant. He had a feeling that the Saint might not be entirely right in the head.

Granted, every high-ranking mech pilot behaved as if they were traumatized and brain-damaged soldiers that gained way too much power for their own good.

No ace pilot could be stopped once they set their mind on a course of action. The best people like Ves could do was to adjust his behavior around them in order to steer them away from any undesirable decisions.

In order to prevent Saint Osenring from pulling off another stunt, Ves quickly shifted the topic as he continued to examine the impressive main cannons of the Thunderer Mark II.

"So how come you have continued to pledge your loyalty to the Santana Group?"

The Saint crossed his arms. "Why not? The company offers gainful and honest employment to mech pilots such as myself. I started off as a regular mech pilot and worked my way up the ranks. Is there a reason why I should turn my back on the employers who believed in my potential and invested many resources in my career? I don't turn my back on my friend, Patriarch Larkinson. I thought you of all people should applaud my loyalty."

Ves let out a frustrated sound. "You know what I am talking about. The Santana Group... is a holding company. Its primary goal has never been to serve its dependents. From my limited interactions with its executives, it is clear that your leaders only care about enriching the shareholders while lining their own pockets in the process. Don't you think that sounds... dishonorable?"

"There is nothing wrong with honest business." Saint Osenring disagreed with Ves. "The Santana Group may not have any noble or altruistic aims in mind, but that does not mean it is a force of evil. The company has always abided by the framework of rules that govern the societies it is involved in. It engages in productive activities such as producing goods, shipping products to where consumers need them the most and offering services that are just a little more attractive than the alternatives."

"That's an overly rosy and one-sided description of what a company does, Osenring." Ves scoffed. "Real business is much more cutthroat and brutal. Many companies tend to cut corners, dump waste materials in areas where they don't belong and sabotage competitors in the dark. Can you truly tell me that the Santana Group has managed to keep its hands clean over the course of its successful rise?"

The ace pilot gruffly nodded his head. "I won't deny that the company that I am working for has engaged in misdeeds, but is it any different elsewhere? I know that most expert pilots and ace pilots prefer to pledge their loyalties to actual states, but as far as I am concerned, they are no better than companies. Politicians and bureaucrats can be just as shameless in their attempts to milk the population and concentrate more power in their hands. No one is a saint."

"Except for you." Ves stated.

"Except for me." The augmented man affirmed with a pale smile. "We ace pilots occupy a precarious position in society. We are the odd man out. In a crowd of tainted and sinful individuals, we are the only ones who have stuck to our convictions and maintained a clean conscience. Our existence discomforts people, but that does not stop them from coveting our power. What do you think we should do, Patriarch Larkinson? Should we take advantage of our absolute might and take over the institutions so that we can impose our own ideals onto them? Do you think that our society will magically become better all of a sudden?"

The very notion of letting ace pilots take over sounded repulsive to Ves. Just the thought of allowing a disaster like Patriarch Reginald Cross gain more responsibility was enough to produce nightmares!

Saint Osenring clearly picked up on Ves' reaction.

"Hm, thought so. Life for people won't get any better. I have never gained the illusion that Saints such as myself can excel in other areas. We are mech pilots. We have only ever trained to do a single job. You don't use a hammer to write a policy document. You use a hammer to strike down a nail."

Ves took a second look at the ace pilot. He did not expect someone so powerful to sound so modest.

"That... is a remarkably realistic perspective of your place in society."

Saint Osenring smiled. "I have suffered my fair share of defeats and setbacks. Let's just say that I learned to pick my battles the hard way. Do you think I look like this because I never faltered on the battlefield?"

Ves possessed at least some understanding of cybernetic components, so he could tell that Osenring's augmentations were unnecessarily gaudy and prominent. There were many ways to minimize their inhuman appearance, but for some reason the ace pilot declined to take this route.

"Forgive me for asking this, but is there a particular reason why you have decided to opt for a cosmetically inferior augmentation configuration?"

"I have many reasons for making myself look this way." Osenring generously replied. "For one, it is a constant physical reminder of my hubris and failure. Nothing cuts deeper to me than seeing my ugly face in a projected mirror image every morning. Only a measure as strong as this can get the message through my thick metal-reinforced skull."

"That... sounds like a rather extreme approach to keeping yourself grounded."

The grizzled ace pilot smirked. "It works, doesn't it? I've met my fair share of ace pilots, including the ones I fought alongside in the last battle. Over half of them are so full of themselves that I wouldn't trust them to cover my back."

"I know what you mean." Ves flatly said.

"A scary and intimidating appearance also helps with keeping out the flies." Saint Osenring added. "A handsome and photogenic appearance will do the opposite. I am acquainted with enough peers who are constantly bombarded with requests to intervene in one matter or another because we have attracted many admirers. That doesn't happen as much with me because I do not look like a typical influencer."

"I see. There are better ways to isolate yourself, but I can see how handy it is to leverage your appearance to deter annoying lobbyists."

"So what do you think of me, Patriarch Larkinson? Do I meet your expectations?"

"To be honest, no. I'm surprised. I didn't expect you to be this way. You are probably the most sane ace pilot that I have met so far. Granted, I haven't met a lot of ace pilots to begin with, but for someone who has overcome so many trials and tribulations, it is rare for someone like you to have so much power, yet be unwilling to leverage it to realize your ideals."

The Thunderer Mark II's presence seemed to grow a bit as Saint Osenring grew a little more intense again. The latter's willpower surged in a way that made it clear that he was not as laid back as he sounded!

"Do not misunderstand me." The ace pilot stated. "I am not devoid of ideals. I have merely chosen a strategy that will let me keep the Santana Group honest without overstepping my boundaries. The leaders of the company are aware of my stances. I negotiated and signed a contract with them. If they take any actions that cross one of my red lines, I am free to depart and find employment elsewhere. This is my way of imposing my demands to the company. My desirability ensures that the Santana Group must always abide by the rules I set. This is the proper way for ace pilots such as myself to influence policy."

Ves looked impressed. "That is a clever approach. It's subtle and you can escape all of the pitfalls of leadership."

Saint Osenring straightened his back and exuded a strong aura of righteousness.

"This is why I continue to belong in the Santana Group. It may be a company that is solely driven by profits, but it can never do without protection. I am doing my part to keep a part of our great society on the right track. People like me are needed the most in these kinds of organizations. We are the guardians of virtue! We are the conscience of the human race! We are the watchers who are tasked with preventing humanity from repeating the mistakes of the Age of Conquest!"

"I see..."

Chapter 4538 Phasewater Maestro

Ves ultimately found it refreshing to learn more about Saint Jelmer Osenring.

The cybernetic man was much different from Patriarch Reginald Cross, who had given Ves a bad impression of ace pilots.

Though his opinions regarding the difficulty of handling such powerful warriors hadn't changed, he at least confirmed that Reginald was not the only mold of ace pilots in existence.

In addition, the more he learned about Saint Osenring, the more he understood the Thunderer Mark II.

The heavy artillery mech was one of the most destructive varieties of second-class ace mechs that could be built. There were hardly any other types of mechs that could unleash more mass destruction!

Each time Saint Osenring interfaced with the Thunderer Mark II, he did so with the awareness that the power at his fingertips could destroy entire cities,

rearrange expansive landscapes, blow up expensive space stations and kill millions of humans under the right circumstances!

Yet it was exactly because he possessed so much capacity for destruction that he exercised great discipline over his piloting and his ambitions.

The man styled himself as a guardian who supported humanity and the Santana Group in an unassuming position.

As a heavy artillery mech specialist, Saint Osenring was no stranger to supporting friendlies from the rear. The position was also far enough removed from the heat of the action that the man was able to avoid heated confrontations where he had to take action without thought.

This was a much different approach to battle than the one favored by Patriarch Reginald Cross.

The Mars was arguably a ranged powerhouse in its own right, but the mech was designed in a way that enabled it to excel in duels against other powerful ace mechs.

All of its weapon systems and all of its design elements were designed to perform well in short-range duels.

Ace pilots who specialized in this mode of combat had to adopt different approaches to survive and thrive in this arena.

Ves might fault the many personality defects of Patriarch Reginald as many times as he wanted, but that did not change the fact that the Cross Patriarch was a survivor who made it out with his life intact while many of his contemporaries fell in battle.

That deserved respect, at least.

As Ves continued to expand and revise his understanding of ace pilots, he eventually learned enough about the heavy gauss cannons of the Thunderer Mark II to begin his modification work.

"Okay." He said as his armored floating form approached one of the 10 impressive gauss cannons. "I have figured out what I can do to make this mech stronger."

"What is your plan?" The ace pilot asked.

"The mech designers who designed your Thunderer Mark II are good. Really good. I can tell you endlessly how brilliantly they have pooled their expertise together to develop a machine that integrates all of their strengths in the most harmonious fashion possible, but I think I can skip all of that boring stuff. The point I want to make is that while the designers are truly great, they are still limited by humanity's early foray into phasewater technology."

Saint Osenring frowned. "What do you mean by that, exactly? Are you telling our mech designers don't know how to make use of phasewater?"

"That is exactly what I am saying." Ves boldly replied. His tone made it clear that he was not joking. "Humanity are like children that have just begun to play with a new an exotic toy. Despite the massive increase in the supply of transphasic products, much of them are based on relatively rudimentary applications of phasewater. They are literally child's work in front of a proper native alien phasewater expert. When it comes to making the best use of this exotic, the indigenous alien races who literally evolved alongside it are much better at utilizing its potential."

"I... can believe that. This will only be valid for a generation or two at best. Eventually, our scientists will be able to catch up to the progress made by the aliens before surpassing the locals entirely. We did it back in our original galaxy and we can do it again in this new and exciting frontier."

Ves did not deny the ace pilot's assertion. "That may be true, but we can't wait that long for our scientific community to get to that point. We all need to become stronger now rather than several decades later. What I am saying is that if you are willing to give me permission, I can tweak and optimize the transphasic properties of these heavy gauss cannons so that they can inherently penetrate through obstacles with greater ease than before. These changes will also allow the Phase King to anchor himself more to your Thunderer Mark II, thereby enabling him to amplify its offensive performance to a greater degree."

The ace pilot remained silent for a few seconds as he studied the guest mech designer carefully.

"You are asking for much, Patriarch Larkinson. I find it hard to believe that a young Journeyman Mech Designer such as yourself can improve upon the work of the best mech designers and specialists of our company."

Ves turned to face the ace pilot with a serious expression. "I am not overestimating my abilities. My understanding of phasewater is far better than you assume. I can truly improve the performance of these cannons by making modest changes. All I am asking you is to give me a chance. If it turns out that your cannons are going backwards, then your mech designers can always revert the changes to their original states. You will just have to expend more phasewater to make up for the losses."

He still didn't sound credible enough for the Saint.

"If you have so much confidence in your proposed changes, then you wouldn't showing off your plan to a team of mech designers and phasewater engineers, would you?" Jelmer Osenring asked.

Ves grimaced a bit. "Fine. I will prepare a presentation for them, but they better not hold me back due to their own ignorance. I don't have time to hold an entire lecture."

The meeting took a bit of time. Just as he expected, the people who had spent time on studying phasewater simply couldn't match his level.

Though Ves used to be just like them, his recent experiences had drastically boosted his affinity and understanding of phasewater.

To him, phasewater was just as familiar to him as mechs. Not only did all of the difficult and nearly indecipherable theories that he learned in the past make sense to him, he also gained a powerful intuitive understanding of this special substance.

All of this meant that Ves could easily spot numerous defects and flawed implementations of the phasewater technology applied to the heavy gauss cannons.

To be sure, the cannons themselves were extremely good. Their traditional technological elements made excellent use of the properties of many different materials. The mech designer responsible for them knew his craft well.

It was just the phasewater implementations that Ves slightly objected to. Not even a Master Mech Designer was able to attain the same level of proficiency in phasewater technology as a high-level puelmer engineer.

BANG!

Ves ultimately slammed his armored fist against the metal table. "I am not here to tutor you on what is possible with phasewater! I am here to do my job, which is to improve the offensive capacity of your Thunderer Mark II within my means. I am telling you now that you can either accept my proposal and end up with an ace mech that can easily penetrate the defenses of a powerful

monster like the unclean whale, or forgo this opportunity and settle for a half-hearted solution. What do you prefer?"

That shut them all up for a time.

In the end, Saint Jelmer Osenring decided to follow his instincts and speak in favor of the current proposal.

"We invited Patriarch Ves Larkinson to this workshop for a reason. If his prior work is any indication, then we can rest assured that he is not a mech designer who is prone to failure. Just like anything else in the Red Ocean, we must take risks in order to leap ahead of others. The promise of obtaining an ace mech that can become much more effective at destroying alien warships is too good to pass up. Let us put our faith in him and his abilities."

The ace pilot's words practically decided the matter. None of the gathered technical experts possessed the courage and the confidence to push back against the Santana Group's resident ace pilot.

Once Ves finally gained approval, the ace pilot pinned him with a warning glance.

"You better live up to your promises, Larkinson."

"I wouldn't dream of screwing up your ace mech." Ves steadily replied. "Our clan stands to earn 28 kilograms of phasewater from this deal. While that is not as much phasewater that I have hoped to gain from your Santana Group, I am not the sort of person to turn my back on a trade agreement. You will have ace mech that you have dreamed of by the time I am done. Now let me work."

Ves felt a lot more comfortable now that he was starting to work on the Thunderer Mark II. He already spent enough time on his preparations. His massively improved cognitive capabilities had allowed him to plan out his entire series of modifications in the confines of his powerful mind.

He began to hover all around the enormous ace mech. He directed advanced bots and robotic arms to partially disassemble the heavy gauss cannons and their housing so that he could access the parts he wanted to change.

It wasn't necessary for him to replace them with new parts. He had gained enough mastery and comprehension of phasewater technology to be able to make small technical changes to them that fixed numerous issues while also introducing additional supportive elements.

Saint Osenring silently observed Ves at work, but the ace pilot never raised his voice to cast his doubt.

Perhaps the older man became reassured by the Larkinson Patriarch's absolute certainty and total dedication to his work.

Whatever the case, Ves did not encounter any objections as he continued to modify part after part.

Once he completed all of his work on a single gauss cannon, he put it back together and nodded appreciatively at the results of his initial work.

Ves could already tell that the weapon would perform exactly as intended even without trialing the modified weapon in a live testing session.

"That's one cannon. Now I need to apply the same changes to the other nine guns."

It was at this time that Saint Osenring broke his silence.

"Before you continue, is it possible for me to pilot my ace mech in its current state? I would like to test the performance of the newly upgraded cannon and compare it to the performance of the weapons that you have yet to change."

Ves shook his head. "I wouldn't recommend you do so. I still need to program the changed parameters to the software of your ace mech. Firing the new cannon without taking this step will produce glitches. I also need to make

more comprehensive changes to your ace mech that will complement the improvements applied to the weapon systems. Please wait until I am done with my work."

The Thunderer Mark II was like a sculpture that Ves wanted to refine into a better version of itself.

It was not enough to carve out a few sloppy traces. He wanted the artwork to look comprehensively better, and that entailed a lot of work.

Another reason for him to invest so much effort into upgrading the Thunderer Mark II was that he could leave his own mark on the mech.

He wanted to make it so that if the Thunderer Mark II ever succeeded in defeating a powerful enemy, the Santanas would have no choice but to credit Ves for the work he had done!

The more acknowledgement Ves received for his work, the more he was able to spread his influence.

Chapter 4539 Trust In Ves

Ves enjoyed the process of working on the Thunderer Mark II.

He had recently gained a lot of proficiency in phasewater technology, but all of it essentially remained theoretical.

It was difficult to appreciate the full benefits of his recent sublimation when all of his new and promising phasewater applications were still locked inside his head.

To be able to work with his hands to apply some of those brilliant ideas to an actual machine was incredibly gratifying.

He not only grasped the mechanisms that made the cannons so powerful to a greater degree, but was also able to put his mark on a machine that would most certainly achieve great feats in the future!

Part of the reason why mech designers were so passionate about their jobs was the opportunity to affect the lives of people and the course of human history.

Each of them had the capacity to shake human civilization and alter the trajectories of countless humans. The scope of their influence was only limited by how good they were and how easily they could convince others to use their work.

Ves knew that once the Thunderer Mark II began to show off its enhanced prowess in a future major engagement, a lot of people would begin to explore why the ace mech displayed such fantastic penetration power.

While there was an incredible variety of ace mechs out there that exhibited varying degrees of effectiveness, the anticipated performance boost of the Thunderer Mark II would definitely exceed everyone's estimates!

Without any obvious material upgrades of the physical design of the ace heavy artillery mech, the most observant people would soon be able to figure out that more unusual changes were responsible for the performance improvements.

Those who were clever and resourceful enough would correctly attribute the changes to Ves. This was both a desirable and undesirable development.

On one hand, Ves disliked attracting too much attention from powerful parties.

On the other hand, he needed their phasewater and their other offerings to accelerate his growth and the growth of the Larkinson Clan.

One way or another, Ves did not intend to limit this service to the pioneering groups gathered in this star system. He needed to milk his unique capacity for as long as humanity's utilization of phasewater technology was still in its infancy.

Once human scientists and engineers finally caught up to the level of the indigenous alien civilizations, the relative improvement provided by blessed weapons would no longer be as dramatic as today.

This was because the Phase King's incredible understanding of phasewater would no longer be as superior as before.

All of this meant that Ves only had a limited window of opportunity to milk the Phase King's temporary head start as much as possible!

As Ves continued to change the heavy cannons one by one, he also started to make more general modifications to the ace mech.

He mainly focused on tweaking the program and furthering the spiritual design of the machine.

He was especially interested in turning the Thunderer Mark II into a slightly better living mech.

His initial work already laid the groundwork, but that was not sufficient by his standards.

Although he didn't have the time and permission to turn the Thunderer Mark II into a proper second order living mech, he at least straightened out the machine so that it had the potential to grow into one in the future.

This was a service that went beyond the parameters of the trade agreement between the Larkinson Clan and the Santana Group.

Ves didn't have to make this additional improvement given how little the Santanas were willing to spend, but his professionalism and his pride as mech designer prevented him from ignoring this issue.

"Oh well. I am a generous mech designer, I guess." He said with a sigh.

Every mech deserved the opportunity to enjoy a proper life. This should especially be the case for ace mechs that accompanied their users for a long time.

While Ves had no idea whether living ace mechs would be a boon or a detriment to the future advancement of their ace pilots, he was confident that it would help under the right conditions.

He did not dare to make any predictions on whether Saint Jelmer Osenring would be able to make the jump to god pilot in the future.

The difficulty was simply too great. Far more ace pilots had tried and failed to survive the mysterious Mech Body Merger Process.

He wished Saint Osenring the best of luck. No matter how far his journey brought him, Ves hoped that the ace pilot was able to make it a little further with this additional help.

Before he finalized his work, he wanted to make one last change that was not entirely appropriate.

This was one of the few instances of selfishness that he wanted to indulge in this commission.

Technically speaking, it was not proper for him to add a second and largely redundant design spirit to the Thunderer Mark II.

The Phase King already provided the ace heavy artillery mech with all of the power and assistance it needed. Adding a second external influence would muddle up the purity of the machine.

Yet... as long as Ves was able to justify this addition by rationalizing a solid benefit to the Thunderer Mark II, he might be able to get away with this little change.

He eventually convinced himself that even if he wasn't able to do much at this time, he would definitely grow powerful enough to add a lot of value to this ace mech!

With that thought in mind, he formed a minor connection between himself and the Thunderer Mark II.

The powerful heavy artillery mech was the first mech with Ves as a design spirit!

Ves could already tell the difference. He was not entirely new to this phenomena as Vulcan was also tied to a lot of products.

Yet... it was different now that Ves himself acted as the design spirit. He found that his ability to connect and influence the Thunderer Mark II was not that impressive.

There wasn't enough time to explore much further. He could figure this all out later, assuming that Saint Osenring's strong willpower did not erase this additional change.

"I'm done." Ves announced as he completed his work.

It took quite a few hours, but the Thunderer Mark II had become a lot more effective in battle, even though it didn't look any different on the surface.

The user of the ace mech knew better, fortunately. Saint Osenring gazed at his machine with much greater appreciation than before.

"I do not know what you have done to make it stronger, but it is as if my machine has gone through a second metamorphosis. I can already tell that the performance of my mech will be significantly better than before."

Ves bowed in thanks. "Thank you for your vote of confidence. You have supported my work at multiple turns. I promise you that your confidence in me will not go unrewarded. Enjoy your improved ace mech. If you have

encountered any technical issues that your resident experts can't solve, feel free to contact me. I am open for further consultation."

"I do not think that will be necessary. Goodbye, Patriarch Larkinson. I will make good use of the improvements that you have made to my machine."

That was that. Ves took one final look at the ace mech that he had the privilege to work upon before turning away and making his way out of the workshop.

His mind became preoccupied with all of the intricate design solutions that he had glimpsed. The Thunderer Mark II's exquisite design had provided him with a wealth of insight that he could use to improve his own heavy artillery mechs.

Not only that, but Ves also harvested a wealth of insights on how to design stronger and better gauss weapons, particularly transphasic ones.

All of this provided him with a fantastic boost to any projects related to designing kinetic ranged mechs.

If not for the fact that the Design Department's project pipeline was already full, Ves would have proposed to start an upgrade project centered around designing the latest addition to the Transcendent Punisher line.

The Mark II version that recently came out was not weak by any means, but its lack of transphasic weapons of any kind was a major shortcoming that was reflective of the poorer state of the clan in the past.

The current edition of the Transcendent Punisher also put a lot of emphasis on energy weapons of the heavy artillery mech. Ves had successfully added a powerful pair of luminar crystal cannons to the frame that provided a lot of extra power and versatility.

Compared to the radical transformation of the energy weapons of the heavy artillery mech, its physical armaments had not been able to improve as much.

He previously looked down on the gauss cannons of the Transcendent Punisher, but after learning how the more advanced guns were able to bestow a lot more power to them, he regained his appreciation for this relatively humble weapon system!

He really wanted to work on a design project where he could apply all of the new ideas, but alas that was not in the cards.

"Later then." Ves promised to himself.

Once he returned to his flagship, the expeditionary fleet was finally ready to move on. There was nothing much holding the Golden Skull Alliance back anymore, so the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers might as well go on their way and leave the others to continue their salvaging work.

The Golden Skull Alliance wasn't departing alone. The Third Fleet of the Adelaide Mercenary Company also decided to depart at the same time.

Since they both wanted to get away from this place, they had decided to take the same route so that they could rely on each other for backup if they ever bumped into an enemy.

The two fleets wouldn't be traveling alongside each other for long, but it should be enough to give them a bit of extra assurance in case an angry phase whale who was responsible for the Palace of Shame somehow caught up to the culprits.

As the two fleets slowly left the asteroid belt and made their way to a safe Lagrange point that would not bring them too close to one of the powerful neutron stars in the center of the star system, Ves prepared to resume his long-stalled design projects.

He was no longer the same mech designer that had previously worked on them. He had acquired so many new insights, competences and talents that

he felt ashamed when he reviewed his prior work on his incomplete design projects!

After he reviewed all of the plans he made for the Dullahan Project, the Ghost Project, the Eye Project and the Bloodripper Project, he eventually shook his head in disappointment.

"Outdated trash!"

He subsequently deleted the electronic documents and began to write revised plans that were considerably more ambitious than before.

He put an especially great emphasis on the Dullahan Project because he wanted to implement a radical new addition to Jannzi's successor mech.

"A powerful expert mech like this will benefit more from blood circulation than many other mechs." Ves determined. "It's not necessary to turn it into a proper cyborg mech, but I can at least add a few organic elements to it so that it can forge a Blood Pact with Venerable Jannzi!"

Ves treated the Blood Knight design that he had completed during his stint in the System Space as a short practice run for the Dullahan Project.

All he needed to do was to transplant some of the principles that defined the Blood Knight to the Dullahan Project.

There were two major challenges to this altered plan.

First, Ves had to design an organic blood circulation system within the Dullahan Project without getting in the way of its mechanical internal architecture.

Second, he had to persuade Venerable Jannzi to embrace the addition of numerous bioparts to her successor mech!

"This is going to be difficult." He concluded.

Chapter 4540 The Young Man Who Cared Too Much

Joshua looked thoughtful as he sat at the dining table while neglecting his nutritious breakfast.

His wife made sure their two children did not imitate their father. They laughed and giggled as Ketis showed warmth and concern that was far removed from her public persona.

Once Ketis was satisfied that Kirian and Mayra filled up their bellies so that they could gain the nutrients they needed to grow their hungry designer baby bodies, the swordmaster approached the expert pilot with obvious concern.

"What's wrong, Joshua?" The large and athletic woman asked.

"Nothing is wrong."

His wife looked upset as she sat on the other side of the table. "You can't hide your feelings from me. You know better than that. You've remained unusually silent and withdrawn in the last few days. What happened? Is it about the last battle? Were you upset because you hadn't been able to contribute as much to our victory as before?"

"It's not that. I... had a lot on my mind lately. It's not your fault or mine for that matter."

"Then tell me what is bothering you. I can't drag you out of your funk if you keep withholding information from your family. Didn't we agree to share wealth and woe when we married each other? Part of that means keeping me in the loop of what is going on in your head."

The young but maturing expert pilot let out a sigh. "You're right. I suppose it is unfair for me to tell you nothing. I can't share everything about what I have experienced earlier this week, but I can give you a brief explanation of what is on my mind."

"This should be good." Ketis muttered as she crossed her arms.

"It started when Patriarch Ves somehow managed to reconcile with the Gemini Family and make a deal of sorts. Part of the benefits involved sending us to the family's fleet so that we can attend a special tutoring session."

"A tutoring session? Wait... are you saying..."

Joshua nodded. "Well, it's not that big of a secret. All of the Larkinson expert pilots had a good talk with the Gemini Saints. We first gathered around in a circle and opened up our hearts. After that, each of us entered a private room where we could talk with Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini in confidence."

A lot of mixed expressions flitted across Ketis' face. "So you and the others basically shared all of your mental and emotional vulnerabilities to the ace pilots of a rival pioneering group? Have you obtained any guarantees that the Geminis will refrain from selling this sensitive information or taking advantage of it in any way?"

"We made enough precautions." Joshua reassured her. "Not only did the lawyers fix all of the terms in an MTA-approved contract, but the Gemini Saints put their integrity on the line when they promised to do their best to keep what they have learned to themselves, even going as far as to use their Saint Kingdoms to generate an impenetrable interference field around them that can scramble pretty much any form of monitoring and recording. Not even implants have succeeded in creating any recordings."

"I see. I suppose the clan wouldn't go through with this without establishing sufficient guarantees."

His wife did not ask any further about the potential for leaks. As a swordmaster, she knew more than most people how important it was for the Gemini Saints to keep their word.

"So what was it like?"

"Well, the first topic that gripped me was when we talked about morality and the justification of killing."

"I thought you got over that, Joshua!"

"I can't simply 'get over it'. I don't like to kill."

"You're a mech pilot, an expert pilot even! Why the hell did you even get into this profession when you are still pussyfooting around?!"

"Okay, I admit that I might not be the perfect killer that everyone is looking for in a mech pilot, but there is still meaning in what I do!" Joshua pushed back.

He recalled the exchange of words that affected him the most.

Joshua along with the rest of the Larkinson expert pilots sat on cushions placed in a circle in the middle of a comfortable and luxuriously decorated lounge.

The informal seating arrangement caused everyone to put down their airs and become more open to putting down the masks they wore in their daily lives.

Though their strong force of wills occasionally grinded against each other, they possessed enough self-control to keep their egos and willpower in check.

Saint Sandro Gemini spoke up first about the topic.

"Many humans have written entire treatises about whether it is right or proper for us to use the destructive power at our fingertips to take people's lives. Some argue that all of the senseless killing that is still perpetuated throughout human space should be prohibited because it is degrading our society. Others state that killing is an essential component to maintaining a strong and healthy civilization."

"We are not academics, so we will refrain from exploring these dry opinions in detail." His wife and twin sister continued. "The reason why we bring this up is because our work, our duty and our responsibilities will often demand us to

take the lives of others or deprive them of their livelihoods. We have witnessed many expert pilots over the years who possessed wildly diverging thoughts on this matter."

Saint Kaia Gemini pinned each of the Larkinson expert pilots with a scrutinizing stare. Her willpower was much greater than theirs, so she was able to peer beneath the surface.

"Some of you are completely unbothered by the question of whether your victims deserve the treatment that you have subjected to them." She said as her gaze lingered on Venerable Dise.

"Others have not put as much thought on this matter as they should have, hoping to ignore the warnings issued by their conscience until this will spectacularly blow up in the worst possible way."

The female ace pilot looked pointedly at Venerable Venerable Vincent, who seemed oblivious to her implicit accusation.

"Then there are those of you who have made your own rationalizations about the bloody consequences of your actions."

Saint Kaia Gemini deliberately glanced at Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, Venerable Davia Stark, Venerable Rosa Orfan.

She also spared a glance towards a couple of the newbies who have yet to obtain their expert mechs from the Larkinson Clan.

"Only a handful of you have thought properly about this subject and found a way to reconcile conflicting demands and expectations."

She briefly nodded to Venerable Jannzi Larkinson, Commander Casella Ingvar, Venerable Imon Ingvar and Venerable Isobel Kotin.

"We are surprised about the diversity in progress and thought within your clan." Saint Sandro Gemini spoke up again. "A mech army that is better run

shouldn't have let you flail over this deeply important topic by yourselves. I suppose that is one of the issues that the Larkinsons have hired us to address."

"Let us begin with you." Saint Kaia Gemini said as she turned squarely towards a male expert pilot. "Venerable Joshua Larkinson, out of all of the expert pilots gathered in this circle, we sense that you stand out the most."

The hapless young man looked surprised when he suddenly became the center of attention. "What is the matter, Saint Kaia?"

"All of your other colleagues are killers in one way or another." The powerful ace pilot described. "They all have blood on their hands and take varying degrees of pride in that. You on the other hand are the only individual among us who carries this weight as if it is a burden."

Venerable Joshua frowned. "Isn't that supposed to be the right way to think about murder?"

"Murder is a subset of killing that implies that the act of depriving an individual's life is not legally justified." Saint Sandro replied. "We all know that murder is not normally a part of our job description. We are soldiers. We are not criminals or law enforcers. We are not meant to question whether our actions are right or wrong. That is a matter that is best left to your superiors."

"I don't agree with that." Joshua shot back. "What if our bosses are evil? What if the person giving us orders is abusing his power? Are we supposed to switch off our brains and follow our orders without any form of critical thought?"

Saint Kaia shook her head. "That is not the case. Each of you have met with the MTA at least once, correct? The mechers should have already inducted you into the ranks of galactic citizens. That is important for many reasons, but the most pertinent one is that you have accepted a greater role in human

civilization. Each of you have in some part taken on the responsibility of safeguarding the future of humanity. This means that you have an obligation to stop or discourage any actions that clearly violate the taboos that are meant to prevent our race from backsliding again."

Joshua still looked dissatisfied. "The taboos don't go far enough in my opinion. I get that the Big Two doesn't want to interfere too much in people's lives, but way too many civilians are getting killed due to all of the wars that are being waged across human space. I know I can't stop all of these greedy leaders from abusing their power to pursue their selfish motives, but I don't like it when pilots such as myself must contribute to all of this unjustifiable death and destruction."

The other Larkinson expert pilots looked at him with varying degrees of disapproval and discontent, but Joshua didn't care. It felt good for him to voice what he had bottled inside his heart all of the time.

"You speak as if you want to change these perceived injustices."

"I do want to change humanity for the better. I just think that we could redirect all of our capacity towards self-destruction towards a more productive purpose."

Saint Kaia Gemini smiled. "Our civilization is already in the process of doing that, Venerable Joshua. The opening of the Red Ocean has given you and your clan an excellent opportunity to direct your killing potential towards the indigenous aliens that are occupying the territory that humanity wishes to conquer. During the previous battle, we got rid of a dangerous collection of alien pirates that would have posed a significant security threat to the human colonies that will most certainly arise within this region."

"..."

Both of the Gemini Saints narrowed their eyes at Venerable Joshua.

"You... evidently do not think that defeating the aliens who were residing at the Palace of Shame was entirely right."

"Yes." Joshua admitted with a sigh. "Pirates they may be, they were just poor alien chumps that had never committed any raids in human space. Look, I know it is not that popular for me to argue in favor of the aliens, but... they are just as alive as our fellow humans. Is it really right to mow them down with extreme prejudice just because they belong to a different civilization?"

"Careful now, Joshua." Commander Casella Ingvar felt compelled to interject. "Those are cosmopolitan sentiments. That is taboo in our society. Humans are not allowed to spare any sympathy towards aliens. Our justice does not include their kind. Our earlier history is filled with all of the mistakes that have been made by consorting with aliens. It is not without reason that the current consensus strongly rejects any misplaced concern about their wellbeing."

"A taboo again!" Venerable Joshua burst out as he threw up his hands.

"Taboo this, taboo that. Why are there so many taboos?! Why do we have to abide by them all?! Can't we question the rules without getting shot in the head by secret mecher or fleeter agents? Am I not allowed to think that all of these wars we are starting against ourselves and against our alien neighbors is desecrating the sanctity of life?!"

"..."

The Larkinson expert pilots all became speechless at what they heard. A few people such as Venerable Dise and Venerable Imon Ingvar couldn't help but palm their faces.

To their credit, the Gemini Saints did not mock Venerable Joshua's sincere feelings.

"Is that what is all about to you, then? You value their lives too much to bear the thought of snuffing them all out." Saint Kaia Gemini asked.

"I... guess so. Am I a fool for thinking this way? Everyone I consulted on this topic seems to think so." Joshua whispered as his voice and force of will became weaker. "I try so hard to make myself agree to their well-meaning advice, but that is not who I really am. I can clearly sense and appreciate the lives of everyone I face on the battlefield. To be put in a position where I have to cut all of those beautiful lives short is repulsive to me. It feels as if I am acting against my true nature. I usually try not to think too much about that during the battle, but once I am no longer obliged to defend my fellow Larkinsons, it all comes back to me in the worst fashion."

"..."

It sounded as if Venerable Joshua truly needed help.

"Yeah... pretty much." Venerable Rosa Orfan concurred.