

## The Mech 5491

### Chapter 5491 Powerful Vitality

Everyone held their breaths as the Monster Slayer piloted by Captain Gheri astonishingly landed on the back of the Giant Stone Eater and plunged its greatsword straight through the center of the spine!

The massive creature had stilled.

All active forms of earth energy manipulation froze.

Did the Larkinsons manage to fell the beast?

"Its legs are giving in. The beast is starting to collapse!"

"Be careful and don't get affected by the crash!"

The crater rumbled as the considerable weight of the heavily injured Giant Stone Eater collapsed onto its belly!

All of its remaining limbs no longer moved anymore as the damage inflicted by Captain Gheri's final move proved to be too devastating!

Though the volume of her final resonance-empowered attack was not great, the concentration of energies had become so high that her energy attack successfully managed to sever the hardy bones that made up the spine!

A huge amount of critical nerves had been cut apart in a way that ruled out any way for the beast to regenerate the damage.

The Monster Slayer that stood triumphantly on the monster's uneven back still managed to stay upright under this situation.

The damaged and beaten mech looked especially heroic in this unique moment. Though its physical condition had deteriorated by a considerable degree, its spirit shone like a sharpened blade that reflected glittering stars!

This hard-fought victory clearly pushed Captain Gheri and her Monster Slayer beyond their previous limits!

They had never been able to pull off a move as strong as the one that landed the fatal blow onto the Giant Stone Eater in the past.

It was only now when they challenged a mutated beast that was stronger and less easy to deal with than before that they had successfully figured out a better way to combine their strengths.

The burden of fulfilling a mission issued by the patriarch who observed this hunt from the start made Captain Gheri even more unwilling to back off during this fight.

She had made numerous dangerous gambles during this fight, and she had somehow managed to prevail.

If anything went wrong during the final minute, then there was a large chance that the Giant Stone Eater would have wrecked her mech with her inside of it as well.

There were too many uncertain moments where she could have failed.

The other mechs might have gotten caught by the devastating attacks of the Giant Stone Eater.

The empowered leap of the Monster Slayer may have fallen short of reaching the monster's back.

She could have botched her adapted extraordinary sword technique, causing her Monster Slayer's greatsword to fail in severing the spine of the powerful mutated beast!

Yet by concentrating her willpower further and combining it with the strength and sharpness of her partner mech, their intimate pairing managed to produce a result that was far greater than anything they had managed to unleash in their past hunts!

Everyone grew impressed by what the Swordmaiden captain had accomplished. Her feat was bound to become immortalized in the record of the Ocanon VI Branch of the Larkinson Clan.

Captain Gheri soon snapped out of her inexcusable moment of enlightenment.

Though she reveled in her substantial boost in combat power, she had hunted down enough mutated beasts to know that defeating them was anything but simple.

The annoying part about mutated beasts was that killing blows that worked for ordinary exobeasts might not have the same effect for their stronger counterparts.

Shattering the heart of a mutated beast would not kill it outright when it had evolved a redundant heart.

"Pay attention!" She barked over the communication channel. "Stay sharp and get ready to finish this beast off if it makes any move. Cut off its remaining legs just to be sure. I would rather ruin its corpse entirely than to risk an accident in a misguided attempt to preserve its value."

A less heavily damaged mutated beast carcass offered a lot more value to researchers and hunters who sought to absorb its power, but far too many hunters suffered accidents by misjudging the conditions of their supposed prey.

Her hunting team all consisted of highly experienced mech pilots, so none of them let down their guard. They all positioned their machines so that they could quickly inflict crippling damage if anything set off their triggers.

In the meantime, the mechs directed as much power to their sensor and scanning systems as possible.

They needed to ascertain the physical state of the paralyzed and heavily injured Giant Stone Eater in order to confirm that it had truly lost its ability to resist.

More importantly than that, the mechs also needed to be on the lookout for other powerful beasts that sought to ambush the hunting team just when it had completed an exhausting fight.

Even though extremely powerful mutated beasts generally worked hard to deter other powerful beasts from invading their territories, who knew whether there were other monsters lurking in the shadows.

A proper hunting team had to account for many what-ifs in order to survive on this planet in the long run.

Fortunately, the sensors and scanners did not pick any concerning readings.

The Sorara #390 Hunting Ground was sparse to begin with, and the Giant Stone Eater offered no attraction to the few power beasts in the vicinity.

As for the earth monster itself, the creature was constantly losing more and more strength. Its wounds were no longer regenerating as effectively as before. Liters of liters of precious lifeblood spilled out of its many sword and puncture wounds and spilled onto the jagged and uneven ground.

Even so, the vitality of this giant beast was so great that it was still far from dying.

There was a considerable risk that it might develop a mutation that enabled it to regain control over its crippled body.

This was why they needed to move quickly. The longer the delay, the greater the risk that the hunting team would get overturned!

The remaining Monster Slayers performed the heavy and tedious work of amputating the remaining legs of the beast.

It had way too many limbs, and each of them were difficult to separate because the Monster Slayers had to cut through a lot of tough bones.

Still, the damaged mechs made steady progress as the Giant Stone Eater appeared helpless to intervene due to its complete immobilization.

The Crystal Lords assisted in this work by surgically cutting off the thick and heavy forearms with their focused slicer beams.

In the meantime, the lone Huntmaster remained on guard and held its spear in preparation to stab it straight through the eye of the beast.

It was unnerving for the Flagrant Vandal pilot to stare through one of the giant reptilian eyeballs of the creature. The creature still possessed enough clarity to direct an intense degree of hostility towards the mech that stood right in front of its sizable head!

"Ma'am, I suggest we finish it off sooner rather than later. This beast is giving me the creeps. Just give me the order and I will drive my spear as deep into this monster's head as I can. You can also behead this beast if you want to keep your hunting trophy as whole as possible."

"I understand your concerns, but it is not time yet to land the killing blow." Captain Gheri replied. "Our patriarch has demanded that he be close at hand before we finish off our prey. Stay on guard and do not let the mech he is riding on come to any harm."

After the hunting team completely severed the Giant Stone Eater's limbs, a single auxiliary mech climbed over the edge of the crater and started to approach the collapsed beast.

The Hymenoptera strode with slow but steady steps befitting its mech type.

The closer it came to the beast, the more that Ves was able to feel the overflowing strength and savagery of this formidable beast.

It had come so close to reaching the threshold of a calamity beast, but the Giant Stone Eater ultimately fell short of transforming its very life essence.

Ves briefly felt a little guilty for cutting off its life trajectory, but quickly set his conflicting emotions aside.

Even if the Larkinson hunting team did not set out to hunt this beast, it would have perished eventually.

With the Hunting Association in control over the entire planet, there was no way a newly evolved calamity beast could ever pose a threat to red humanity!

At least Captain Gheri and her fellow mech pilots gave the Giant Stone Eater a worthy last stand.

As the Hymenoptera stopped a few steps away from the Huntmaster that stood poised to land the killing blow, Ves was able to ascertain the condition of the powerful beast much better than before.

Physically, the Giant Stone Eater was losing blood at a much more rapid rate than before. Its blood actually held a lot of value, but there was no easy way to preserve it unless a hunting team brought specialized containers to catch these precious fluids.

Spiritually, the mutated beast had become beset by pain, mindless fury and trauma. The Giant Stone Eater would like nothing more than to muster up its strength and lash out at the mechs that had brought its body down, but its crippled state inflicted so much pain that it had lost all of its control over the surrounding earth energies!

"The psychological state of this mutated beast is really poor." Ves frowned.

He sensed that the Giant Stone Eater harbored an overwhelming animosity towards the swordsman mechs and the Swordmaidens in particular.

The beast was just smart enough to discern that the giant metal machines were piloted by tiny humans.

If the Giant Stone Eater ever managed to recover, then it would never rest until it had completely crushed all of the Monster Slayers and mech pilots that had injured it to this extent!

This was not good news to Ves. An angry, vindictive and stubborn spirituality was much more difficult to tame. It was especially troublesome if the creature hated the Larkinson Clan in particular!

Ves knew better than to raise an obviously hostile spirituality.

At least Titania had been old, calm and rational enough to get over her own death and start a new life as a design spirit, though it helped a lot that its spirituality had lost a lot of components by the time that Ves salvaged it from the astral beast's corpse.

If Ves wanted to transform the Giant Stone Eater into a helpful design spirit, then he would have to damage it to the point of losing its original personality.

The only other way to make use of this valuable gain was to break it down into spiritual ingredients that could form the basis of an artificial design spirit.

Right now, Ves preferred the latter solution as he could exert a lot of control over the outcome.

"Prepare to kill the beast." He said as he remembered why he insisted on being here. "Make it as fast and clean as possible."

The mechs that retained their combat effectiveness all moved in the right positions.

In the meantime, Ves retrieved a special object that he had previously stashed in the corner of the cockpit.

Ves smiled as he patted the large and heavy alloy box. He opened it up and retrieve a rough piece of ore that would serve as the container of the Giant Stone Eater's spirituality.

"Let's see if you are up to the task."

This was one of the 'new' P-stones that he had managed to scrounge in one of the material markets of New Constantinople VIII.

It was not the same kind of hyper ore as the P-stones that he had originally gathered in the Milky Way, but its spiritual properties were similar enough to be used in the same way.

Once he confirmed that the new P-stone was up to the task, he issued the decisive order.

"Kill!"

Two of the Monster Slayers swung their glowing greatswords through the thick and heavy neck of the Giant Stone Eater. They needed to chop at the beast several times in order to get through all of the flesh and bones!

The Huntmaster struck faster and jabbed its spear straight through the eye, causing the organ to burst and release all kinds of disgusting liquids.

Ves grew sharper as he and Blinky got ready to harvest the powerful spirituality of this mutated beast.

#### Chapter 5492 A New Unity

Ves could slowly feel the powerful vitality contained within the massive body of the Giant Stone Eater draining at a rapid pace.

As a mech designer who possessed a strong affinity towards life, he could easily sense that the massive creature's body was not able to sustain itself any longer.

Though it would still take a long time for the enormous beast to suspend all of its biological process, its death had been sealed from the moment a pair of Monster Slayers cut off its head.

Several minutes passed by as Ves and Blinky carefully harvested the dying spirituality of the Giant Stone Eater and stuffed it into the P-stone.

This was a difficult and delicate process. While it was not that hard to harvest a few gains from the dying beast, the true challenge lay in preserving the integrity of the spirit as much as possible.

There were numerous times where Blinky had to act forcefully in order to separate the spirit from the body.

Soon enough, Ves grinned in satisfaction as his new P-stone contained the spirituality of a very angry, confused and disoriented mutated beast.

The additional trauma to its soul had caused it to lose its awareness and rationality. It would probably take a few weeks for it to recover its wits and understand the reality of its new life as an intangible entity.

Ves reminded himself that he or one of his spirits should keep an eye on this creature.

Ordinary spiritualities salvaged from dying organisms had lost their physical roots. Back during the Age of Mechs, that meant that they would slowly die and dissipate in a low energy environment.

This time was different. A medium energy environment might be able to provide enough support for the Giant Stone Eater to recover and live out an independent existence.

"I can't let you escape."

He needed to devise a better means to store his salvaged spiritualities. Though Ves recognized the value of the Giant Stone Eater in all kinds of earth and defense-based design applications, he was not able to use its spirituality to its full potential at this time.

Ves had yet to study the earth element on a deeper level. He only possessed a shallow understanding of this E energy attribute. He wanted to wait until he had made a lot more progress in comprehending the power of earth before he utilized his new spiritual ingredients in the best possible fashion.

"At least I don't have to wait in order to delve deeper into the earth element."

One of the ways he could take advantage of the spirituality of the Giant Stone Eater was to study it in its current form.

The mutated beast had developed numerous inherent applications of manipulating earth-attributed E energy on its own. It had become particularly strong in several sub-categories such as drawing power from the soil, reinforcing the body to make it tougher and physically manipulating rocks in order to form a thick layer of stone armor.

If Ves was able to decipher these concepts well enough, he could potentially bestow his landbound mechs with much greater strength than normal!

Even if he did not excel in defense, he could work together with a defensive specialist such as Sara Voiken and make their mechs a lot tougher and more resilient than usual!

Of course, none of this was easy to attain. Ves needed to put in a lot of work and utilize his new gains properly in order to produce superior results.

Once Ves carefully set aside the filled P-stone, he returned his attention to the hunting team.

The beast had just been slain, but that did not mean that everyone's work was over.

The Crystal Lords all remained vigilant and on guard. They had already split up so that they could surround the edge of the crater from three different positions.

They stood guard and watched out for any exobeast that threatened to come closer.

In the meantime, Captain Gheri's Monster Slayer along with another machine that was in reasonably good shape had begun to process the carcass.

The Giant Stone Eater was too large and heavy to drag out of the hunting ground in its entirety.

The best the hunting team could take from the corpse was the most remarkable organs and the hardest scales.

The two swordsman mechs engaged in old-fashioned butchery. They hacked and slashed through the body of the decapitated beast and dug out any organs that looked more special than others.

One of the Hymenopteras assisted this process by carefully unfolding numerous freezer containers and quickly placing the organs inside.

The other auxiliary mech had begun to conduct more thorough field repairs on the damaged and crippled mechs.

The Monster Slayer that fell first no longer had to support its weight on a thick and awkward metal brace.

It took quite a bit of time to remove the brace and install more suitable parts that restored partial control over the crippled limb.

The partially restored mech still hadn't regained its full mobility, but at least it would no longer slow everyone down as the hunting team made its way out of the hunting zone.

Ves watched with fascination as the mech pilot performed lots of simple and crude repairs in the field.

Despite the Heavensworder mech pilot's lack of expertise, this was not a hindrance as many repair jobs could be completed by relying on automatic tools and step-by-step manuals.

Sure, the quality of the restoration left anything to be desired, but it was fine so long as a mech regained functionality in the middle of a dangerous hunting zone.

Proper repairs could wait for later. The mechs still had to return to safety before they could be brought to a workshop.

Ves actually felt tempted to take charge of the field repairs, but he refrained from doing so. The hunters needed all of the practice that they could get, and the conditions were so poor that he would not be able to make much of a difference in a short amount of time.

He instead decided to pay more attention to the organ harvesting process. He found that even if none of the hunters systematically studied exobiology and anatomy, they still possessed keen judgment on which ones were more special and valuable than others.

This was the kind of fieldcraft that the mech pilots had acquired through repeated hunts. The Hunter's Association also taught a lot of helpful information that was easy for hunters to digest.

"Are you planning to eat or sacrifice the organs on the spot?" Ves respectfully asked.

"No and yes." Captain Gheri replied. "Eating the meat of our prey is an old Swordmaiden tradition. The Hunter's Association did not introduce this custom. Many hunters had already done so for a long time. Sometimes they do not even bother to wait until they can process and filter out the junk inside the meat. Hunting was originally about filling your stomach, you know."

"Eating exobeast meat can be dangerous." Ves frowned.

"That is true, but you can augment your stomach and digestion system to make it safer. Many of the avid hunters among the Swordmaidens had already done so. There is no greater pleasure than to eat the meat of the prey that you have hunted down with your own effort."

"Will you sacrifice the remainder of this carcass according to the rituals described by the Hunter's Code?"

"No." Captain Gheri issued a stern reply. "We have studied the Hunter's Code, but we do not entirely agree with everything. The Swordmaidens... are not hunters. We are warriors, swordswomen and soldiers. We would much rather fight the native aliens that are trying to destroy our clan than to hunt these beasts for the rest of our lives."

"I thought you Swordmaidens would have been more enthused about hunting."

"That is a misconception. While Venerable Dise and myself enjoy the hunt, we only love it for the occasional challenge it brings. We don't want to become stronger by obsessing ourselves over our diet and asking the Huntsman for handouts. Ketis told us that relying too much on this weird stuff will make it harder for people to become swordmasters and expert pilots."

"She is right, captain." Ves approvingly said. "Willpower can only grow if warriors insist on relying on their own strength to overcome their opponents."

"We do not despise hunters, but we would rather rely on our own means. We can exercise our swordsmanship and improve our skills much better than if we spend our time on conventional training. There are many lessons that we can only learn if we fight in the field. I could have never pulled off that last sword attack of mine if I did not push myself against such a powerful monster."

The mention of her sword attack reminded Ves of his interest in the new combat approach of the Swordmaidens.

"I couldn't help but notice that you and your Monster Slayer have managed to cooperate much better than other pairings. You even managed to produce a slight amount of resonance comparable to that of expert candidates."

"It is still a work in progress. Swordmaster Ketis has worked hard with other people to improve our swordsmanship. I am among the first Swordmaidens to have mastered her new methods and techniques to this point. It is not that complicated in theory, but..."

"You need to meet a lot of conditions in order to make it work, am I correct?"

"Yes. Ketis mainly wants to strengthen her fellow sisters, so her work is entirely made for us. She knows exactly what we are capable of. In order to become as powerful as me, a mech pilot must have strong willpower and pilot one of her swordsman mechs. The pilot needs to become good at controlling the mech. Only then can the pilot try to combine forces with the machine by using a powerful sword style as the means to bring them closer. This is the key to making it work. Mastering a special kind of swordsmanship and learning how to apply it with the body of a swordsman mech ties everything together."

"I don't understand. How can excellent swordsmanship allow you to blur the line between you and your machine?"

"You will have to ask Swordmaster Ketis if you want to know the specifics. I don't understand much of this complicated stuff."

"I have every intention of doing so, but that will have to wait until later. Has Ketis said anything more about her goals and ambitions in this new combat solution?"

"Well... I think she once called this new state the 'Unity of Sword and Machine'. She thinks that if she can develop it further, it will make any of our swordsman mechs strong by virtue of our skills."

Unity of Sword and Machine.

That was a bold description for a new form of synergy between a mech and a mech pilot.

Ves was not certain whether this approach only applied to traditional swordsmanship, but that was not important.



What mattered was that Ves had the sense that Ketis was reinventing the wheel.

The Progenitors of Mechs devised a powerful new cultivation method that allowed for mech pilots to evolve into god pilots step by step.

This highly effective and successful cultivation paradigm enabled the rise of transcendent warriors and soldiers who were perfectly adapted to a low energy environment!

What Ketis was doing was similar. She attempted to adapt traditional swordsmanship with mechs in a way that maximized their synergies in a medium energy environment.

That last part was the most important factor!

By taking advantage of the ability for living mechs to interact with E energy, Ketis was actively able to leverage the power of heaven to amplify any form of swordsmanship!

Ves suddenly widened his eyes.

He had made a huge realization!

"The power of heaven..."

He couldn't help but think back on his former student's cozy relationship with the Heavensword.

Ketis must have definitely become contaminated by the exceptionally powerful grand work in the brief time she wielded it in battle.

Perhaps this contact allowed her to get started in combining exotic radiation with traditional swordsmanship!

## Chapter 5493 Another Hunt

The hunting team spent a short time processing the most attractive pieces of meat.

Once a device had managed to extract all of the toxins and other dangerous traces from the flesh of the Giant Stone Eater, the mech pilots began to barbecue and eat their meals in shifts.

Though every mech pilot who took part in the hunt savored their hard-fought meals, they did not dare to waste too much time on this profound pleasure.

Once it was time for the hunting team to turn around and make their way out of the Sorara #390 Hunting Ground, Ves wondered what would happen to the rest of the massive beast carcass.

There was still a huge amount of value contained within the partially butchered corpse. Its mutated biology had adapted to earth energy so well that its tissue samples would definitely make a lot of biomech designers crazy!

The carcass of the Giant Stone Eater could provide so many research samples that any competent biotech researcher could devise a means to increase the toughness of a biomech.

"We are not throwing it away." Captain Gheri explained as she and her subordinates prepared to go back with the harvested body parts that they claimed for themselves. "We have already signed a contract with the Hunting Association to take care of the remainder of the beast body. They will gladly take it off our hands in exchange for money and other rewards. The workers who will swoop in and transport everything back to Tixe City will even deliver the skull to our doorstep."

The skull of the Giant Stone Eater was a bit too big and heavy to carry all the way back. The mechs might be able to carry it if the hunters really wanted to, but that would occupy too many of them, preventing them from responding to any fast-moving threats.

It was much better to give up a substantial share of the profits and rely on the convenience of the Hunting Association to bring back the heavy goods.

Ves couldn't help but applaud the Hunting Association for their profiteering ways. The new organization had inherited the penny-pinching ways of the mechers.

"I will be departing from your hunting team now that you have concluded your hunt." He announced to Captain Gheri and the rest.

"Our prey has fallen, but our journey has not yet ended, sir." The Swordmaiden officer corrected him. "A hunt is only truly complete when we manage to get back to civilization with our lives and mechs intact."

Ves shrugged his shoulders. "That may be the case, but I have made another arrangement with the Hunting Association. The shuttle that has been observing us from above will come down and pick me up so that it can bring me to another destination. You and your team will have to go back by yourselves. I believe this should be a considerable relief to you all as you are no longer responsible for protecting me against dangerous threats."

That took the mech officer aback. "That is highly unusual, sir. The Hunting Association usually does not break its own rules."

"Nothing is impossible, captain. Even the officials of the Hunting Association can be persuaded to bend their own customs so long as it is worth it. I just made sure to give them a concession that is far too attractive for them to refuse."

He did not elaborate any further.

Though the two actually had a good time together, Ves needed to pursue his own priorities. He had already learned plenty of lessons from the hunting team today.

Ves asked one more question before he left.

"I am truly impressed at your performance today. I think a lot of mech pilots would have been able to advance to the rank of expert candidate if they were thrust into the same situation. I do not mean to pry into your affairs, but... is there anything hindering you from advancing to expert candidate? Under the current circumstances, it should have become easier for you to break through."

Captain Gheri became impassive. She did not look angry, but it was clear that this was a sensitive topic to the Swordmaiden.

"...I am not ready. Let us leave it at that. You may be my patriarch, but I would like to retain my privacy."

"Very well." Ves respectfully replied. "Whatever is holding you back, I hope you can get past it and develop your potential as a mech pilot and a swordswoman. Our dwarf galaxy is becoming more dangerous every year. Our clan needs all of the powerful mech pilots it can get. While there are many talented people that will likely break through in droves over the next decade, we can never have enough high-ranking mech pilots. If you think that this can become your calling, then I hope

that you will step up and fight for our cause. You deserve to be more than a branch leader of a single second-class hunting preserve."

Gheri did not have much to say. The two bid goodbye to each other and went their separate ways.

Minutes later, Ves entered the shuttle. He calmly took his seat while his children eagerly crowded around him. They all welcomed his return!

"Hello again, cuties! Did you miss your father?"

"That was soooo cool, papa! The Arrow Gods are nothing compared to our Swordmaidens!" Andraste eagerly babbled as she climbed on top of his lap. "The swordsmanship of those Swordmaidens are on another level. Their skills are all honed in battle and their willpower must be really strong. Will all of the Swordmaidens become as strong as the ones in the hunting team?"

"I'm not sure. Ketis knows more about this. You should ask her instead."

"I thought you were in charge of the clan? How can you not know?"

"There is way too much stuff happening in the Larkinson Clan. It is impossible for a single person to keep track of what a million Larkinsons are doing all of the time. Ketis is a Journeyman Mech Designer, so she can already handle her own affairs. She doesn't need a nosy person like me watching over her shoulders all of the time."

"Where are we going now, papa?" Aurelia asked. "Are we returning to the city?"

"Not yet, my dear. I made a special with the Hunting Association last night. Did you know that I signed up for another hunt? I am not satisfied with taking down the Giant Stone Eater. I have set my sights on another powerful beast as well. Did you recall the Azure Tornado Dragon that we saw yesterday? I want to try and see if I can harvest it as well."

The shuttle had already begun to depart from the Sorara #390 Hunting Ground.

It had begun to make its way over the river delta that was part of the Mother Riva #405 Hunting Ground.

"Which hunting team will be doing the hunting this time? Is it another group of Swordmaidens, or did you hire another team?"

"There is no hunting team."

"Huh?"

"This hunt will be much more special than before. In fact, it is the main reason why the Hunting Association has agreed to give me an exception."

His meaning became clear when the shuttle finally arrived at the site where the Azure Tornado Dragon resided.

The shuttle still flew high enough in the air to avoid the notice of the powerful mutated beast.

Just like last time, the Azure Tornado Dragon leisurely kept its body half-submerged within one of the tributaries of the massive river of the Chasseur Continent.

No mechs were within sight. Many hunting teams that still had the courage to hunt in the Chasseur Continent generally avoided proto-calamity beasts like the plague!

This was not necessarily because they thought they were too weak to challenge a beast as powerful as the Azure Tornado Dragon.

They were afraid that their intelligence on such powerful beasts had already become outdated.

If the powerful creatures had succeeded in undergoing a major evolution, then it would only take a slight amount of effort for the newly emerged calamity beasts to demolish entire hunting teams!

In fact, no sane hunting team operating on Ocanon VI would dare to challenge the Azure Tornado Dragon. The risk that the creature had already evolved was too great.

Only Ves knew better. His powerful senses could easily discern the true state of the Azure Tornado Dragon, especially when its body was so big and massive.

Once he confirmed that the Azure Tornado Dragon had yet to undergo a qualitative promotion in life level, he became reassured.

He did not have enough confidence in pulling off his plan if the air and water-aspected beast had gained too much strength.

Ves stood up from his seat and walked towards the exit.

President Oscar Tarich of the Hunting Association already waited at the side.

"I see now why you have earned so much infamy as a mech designer." The older man spoke. "Only a madman such as you would insist on proceeding with this insane idea. Are you sure you wish to proceed? As confident as you may be in your ability to escape, we truly cannot afford to let a tier 3 galactic citizen fall on this planet."

"Relax. I am stronger than I look. This is an appropriate challenge for me. Even if my actions do not conform to your rules, my willingness to face the Azure Tornado Dragon by myself should fall in line with at least some of the spirit of your Hunting Association. Besides, you won't be able to evaluate how well a human phase lord can contend against a powerful mutated beast. I am providing you with an opportunity to collect a lot of precious data."

"That may be true, but it is doubtful whether many other human phase lords will emerge. Phasewater is too scarce to support too many of them. This makes them irrelevant to our Hunting Association."

Ves smiled back. He did not believe that at all. Besides, even if the Hunting Association held little interest in human phase lords, the Red Association was much different.

This arrangement couldn't have been made without the approval of the mechers!

The Bluejay Fleet had initially been aghast that Ves wanted to throw himself at the Azure Tornado Dragon!

It was only when Ves persuaded Jovy that this would be an excellent way to gather real combat data that he relented.

Ves did not intend to fight like a pure phase lord, though. The Azure Tornado Dragon was way too slippery and cunning to defeat through simple means.

He wanted to employ his full combat system, which meant that he needed to make use of his other advantages!

Once he felt he was ready, he stripped away his smart uniform, exposing the nanosuit that he wore underneath.

This was the same nanosuit he wore during his last test.

It was not only an excellent means to cover himself up when he unfolded his true body, but it also helped with gathering a huge amount of highly precise data for the mechs!

The nanosuit also possessed limited defensive properties that could keep him alive long enough for the Bluejay Fiet to come to the rescue.

He could feel the stealthed first-class multipurpose mechs hovering in multiple directions.

If anything went wrong, the mechs would swoop in and bail Ves out no matter what the Hunting Association thought!

With that thought in mind, Ves threw aside all of his concerns and jumped out of the shuttle.

As he quickly lost altitude, his body began to expand in size, causing his nanosuit to stretch but never to the point of breaking apart.

At the same time, his growing hand held a special artifact flute that miraculously kept up with the growth in scale!

Soon enough, Ves the human phase lord had made an appearance once again!

With his amazing new artifact in his hands, he surveyed the Azure Tornado Dragon and calculated his chances once again.

His lips gradually curled into a smile. "Do you feel it, Oceancaller? This will be my first tribute to you. Let us hunt down a dragon together!"

Chapter 5494 The King of Air and Water

Ves arguably made a very stupid decision.

He threw himself into a needless fight.

Why should he go through all of this trouble to fight the infamous Azure Tornado Dragon by himself?

He was a mech designer, not a soldier!

There was no need to prove his mettle in battle!

Even if he managed to become a phase lord by accident, that did not necessarily mean he should make use of this gift.

It was completely dispensable for him to develop his combat acumen when his primary job was to promote the growth of professional soldiers!

For example, Ves had become quite impressed by the previous hunting team. Captain Gheri and the rest of her top hunting team had developed their skills and capabilities as standard mech pilots to the extreme.

He was confident he could unlock or increase their potential in several different ways. From using the transcendence glow to force their breakthroughs to designing custom masterwork mechs, he could turn these seasoned but declining veterans into rising mainstays of the Larkinson Clan!

Yet instead of doing that, he donned the RA's nanosuit and fearlessly jumped outside his shuttle in order to confront the Azure Tornado Dragon in person!

It sounded absolutely crazy and he was pretty sure his wife would have done everything in her power to discourage him from going through with this plan.

Yet it was exactly because Gloriana happened to be elsewhere that Ves took the chance to let loose his restraint and follow his whims!

Ves had a side of himself that only reached its peak when he put himself in a difficult position.

His blood ran hot and his mind became more active than ever.

Many more ideas filled his head, a few of which could potentially lead to amazing new insights that could substantially enrich his work!

Ves decided to challenge the Azure Tornado Dragon not because he wanted to beat his chest or satisfy his ego, but because he wanted to gather more data to further his research!

His status as a phase lord was not the most important aspect about him in this fight.

While it was handy to possess a strong and powerful body that could endure a lot of attacks, his actual plan was to challenge the Azure Tornado Dragon as a qi cultivator and an artifact cultivator!

Ves wanted to compare his own ability to control the element of water with the powerful mutated beast's own inherent control of the same E energy attribute.

Compared to monotonously exploring and practicing the many facets of water on a boat, it was much better for him to spar against a powerful creature that had developed an amazing affinity and talent for this element!

The more the Azure Tornado Dragon demonstrated its mastery over the water element to Ves, the more he could experience the greater potential over its uses.

Each additional trick would add another clever application to his toolbox. This would enable him to utilize the water element a lot more thoroughly in his upcoming mech designs!

Besides, he was not just doing this for himself.

His large eyes turned towards the flute that had grown to match his current scale.

The replica of the Oceancaller expressed a growing desire to dominate the adversary. Killing was in its nature, and nothing made it happier than to be used for its original purpose!

Though Ves had made the decision to never let this artifact push him into behaving like the Mistress of the Oceans, he still had to take certain actions to manage his relationship with his flute.

It would be too much of a waste for him to bury the potential of this high-level artifact!

The best he could do was to satisfy the Oceancaller's every now and then. Ves vowed not to become its slave, but that did not mean he had to treat it as an object.

He was still interested in developing a mutually beneficial relationship with the artifact.

Just like how his mech pilots built a deep and intimate synergistic bond with their living mechs, Ves had hoped that he could turn the Oceancaller into a powerful companion and partner.

"ARE YOU EXCITED, OCEANCALLER?" He asked in his exaggaratingly loud voice that he still needed to modulate.

The Oceancaller's artifact spirit was not developed enough to produce a more sophisticated response, but the runes overlapping its metallic exterior started to grow brighter than before!

Ves' gigantic face smiled as he could feel that it became easier for him to access the Oceancaller's various powers.

Though he only mastered a tiny fraction of the application of its 360 runes, it was incredibly helpful for him to obtain additional support.

To be honest, he was not that confident that he could beat the Azure Tornado Dragon in its own game.

Ves was a mech designer whose domain largely comprised of life and mechs. He could not make thorough use of either of these strengths during this fight.

Despite these shortcomings, Ves was confident that his remaining abilities were enough to defeat this powerful beast!

Even if he was wrong, it ultimately did not matter if he ended up getting beaten up by the angry reptilian beast.

This was not a real hunt. One of the reasons why he possessed no fear was because the Bluejay Fleet guaranteed his survival!

The mechers might allow Ves to get beat up by the powerful mutated beast in order to teach him a painful lesson, but they would never allow a critical tier 3 galactic citizen to perish in such a stupid occasion!

Since this was the case, he might as well abuse this privilege and test his fighting capability against an opponent under a more controlled environment.

It was better to figure this out today than when his true enemies ambushed his troops and forced him to defend his life in a real life-and-death battle!

As his body kept plunging towards one the tributaries of the large river delta of the Chasseur Continent, the Azure Tornado Dragon suddenly whipped its massive head and gazed at the rapidly approaching giant humanoid figure.

The power of air and water grew thicker around the beast as it interpreted the humanoid figure's approach as an aggressive challenge.

The beast opened its toothed maw and uttered a powerful roar that instantly formed a small hurricane that blasted a lot of water into the air!

Soon enough, Ves' surroundings became murkier as the clear skies became filled with a torrent of violent water streams.

Ves instinctively activated his Kelsis organ and formed a full spatial barrier. The whipping water streams failed to strike his nanosuit-covered body, though the forces were too weak to inflict any significant damage to his body.

Splashing him with water was just the prelude to this fight. The real reason why the Azure Tornado Dragon summoned a hurricane was to take control over the environment!

As Ves continued to fall, he could see the glint of cunning in the wild beast's eyes.

The Azure Tornado Dragon's prior behavior suggested that it was one of the more intelligent and rational among the mutated beasts of this planet.

Ves couldn't help but agree with this assessment now that he confronted the powerful creature directly.

He stretched out his massive arm and pointed the artifact flute straight into the dragon's direction!

"I CHALLENGE YOU, BEAST! DEFEAT ME, OR DIE!"

There was no need for Ves to engage in any further discourse with a savage beast. As Ves was on the verge of crashing onto the marshy ground, he activated all of the phasewater that was coursing throughout his true body and concentrated at a very specific coordinate.

A loud pop sounded through the air as his massive body suddenly disappeared from its place.

An instant later, his gigantic body appeared just twenty or so meters on top of the Azure Tornado Dragon's lengthy body!

SPLASH-CRACK!

His feet plunged through the shallow water and struck the side of the mutated beast's slippery body!

The force of Ves' descent was so strong that several scales as well as a chunk of flesh got pulverized by one of his feet!

Though Ves had tried to inflict a more serious blow by striking the center of the mutated beast's body, the Azure Tornado Dragon reacted quickly enough to push most of its body out of the way.

As a beast with aquatic roots, it was most at home in a water environment. It had only evolved the ability to fly when it had mutated.

This meant that Ves had just entered the Azure Tornado Dragon's home turf!

This became clear pretty soon as the water resistance arrested his downward motion and caused him to touch the bottom of the river.

Suddenly, the water currents started to thicken and strengthen as the Azure Tornado Dragon took control over the surrounding area.

The water pressure rose, making it harder and more strenuous for Ves to move his body.

Ves had to overcome the increased water pressure in order to move around.

Though his true body was physically strong enough to push against the increased forces, he could forget about moving around quickly.

There was another problem with his current environment.



How the hell was he supposed to play the Oceancaller when there was only a thin pocket of air inside his spatial barrier?

He smirked. It would be a joke if a high-level artifact that commanded the power of water could not be played in an aquatic environment!

As the Azure Tornado Dragon swam in the distance and continually tried to make sense of its latest challenger, Ves calmly brought the flute to his lips and began to play it not by blowing the air with his mouth, but by directly channeling the air element!

Though Ves had only gotten started with understanding the air element, he learned just enough to play the flute no matter the environment!

His entire aura changed as the Oceancaller began to demonstrate its power.

The Azure Tornado Dragon exhibited obvious surprise as Ves usurped over the nearby water.

The mutated beast still commanded most of the surrounding river water, but this was the first time the dragon encountered an opponent who successfully deprived a measure of its control.

The creature momentarily looked surprised, but then became enraged.

Nobody was allowed to usurp its territory!

The Azure Tornado Dragon had long ago regarded itself as the sovereign of the rivers and skies.

It had defeated many waves of those strange metal machines that came to challenge his right to rule over its territory.

Each of them had either been beaten to the point where they could only run away in desperation or got torn apart by its powerful tornadoes!

The angry dragon surged forward and began to form a whirlpool that encompassed the weak sphere of water controlled by its humanoid adversary.

The whirlpool started out weak, but under the persistent effort of the Azure Tornado Dragon, it began to gain in speed and power.

Ves became more and more disoriented as he struggled to maintain his pocket of calm. It became increasingly more difficult to maintain his current water pocket when the surrounding currents constantly tried to make it spin around!

When Ves attempted to move around, he found that he had already become fixed in place. The forces exerted by the whirlpool effectively kept him trapped in a spinning water cage!

It also became a lot more difficult for him to observe the surrounding environment. The Azure Tornado Dragon inserted air into the whirlpool, causing its boundaries to become filled with blinding and disorienting bubbles.

Any other beast or mech that became trapped in this empowered whirlpool would have likely turned into a trapped and cornered prey for the Azure Tornado Dragon!

Though Ves knew he could teleport himself out of this difficult place, he wanted to try and see if he could get out by beating the dragon at its own game.

The question was how he could make that happen.

## Chapter 5495 Contesting the River

Ves underestimated the Azure Tornado Dragon.

Its demonstrated powers suggested that it was good in creating wide area destruction, but lacked the ability to channel its elemental powers in more focused attacks.

This gave Ves the impression that the Azure Tornado Dragon simply hadn't developed any effective solutions in defeating singular powerful foes.

After all, the vast majority of its challenges could only keep up with the Azure Tornado Dragon in the air or underwater, but not both!

According to the records of the Hunting Association, the Azure Tornado Dragon had spent much of its life as a rapidly growing mutated beast by cleverly making use of its advantages.

The creature was highly opportunistic and avoided direct confrontation when it could easily exploit the weaknesses of its adversaries.

Ves expected the Azure Tornado Dragon to leap out of the river and fly into the air in order to take advantage of lack of flight capabilities, but the dragon instead chose to remain in the water!

Just as how the Azure Tornado Dragon wanted to show its latest challenger that it was the undisputed master over water, Ves did not want to resort to his other means to escape the current trap!

While he would not hesitate to teleport away if he could not break this trap by controlling the elements, Ves still believed he had a chance of beating the Azure Tornado Dragon at its own game.

This was the main reason why he did not hesitate to challenge this powerful mutated beast, after all. The Oceancaller had a lot of potential that he had yet to tap. This was the best possible occasion for him to find out what else he could do with his new relic!

Ves began to play a tune that strangely penetrated through the water without any distortion or interruption.

He continually channeled the air element in a controlled fashion. All of the hours of practice over the past few weeks paid off as he was able to play a relatively simple melody under turbulent circumstances.

His concentration was excellent. He had worked under pressure and under threat many times in the past. A single overgrown reptile could not make his body shake!

This contrasted sharply with how Captain Gheri and her hunting team constantly feared the worst whenever they confronted the Giant Stone Eater and many other beasts.

It was in their nature to fear for their lives. They were all humans. They were too small and weak to defeat these powerful beasts by themselves.

Their mechs partially made up for the enormous disparity, but it was not quite enough to succeed in every hunt.

Any accident could ruin a hunt or lead to even worse consequences. Mechs might be able to give them the power to defeat a mutated beast, but victory never came easy.

The Hunting Association set up so many rules in order to encourage hunters to never hunt prey that were far below their station.

Danger was ever present in their lives so long as the hunting community continued to revere hunters that constantly pushed their limits!

Ves still had no way of estimating the true strength of the Azure Tornado Dragon, but he did not feel it was powerful enough to pose a massive threat to him. The creature was well within his tolerance range.

He began to change his melody, allowing him to play different notes that produced different effects on the water.

It was a challenge for him to play the right notes in a pattern that sounded pleasing to his ears.

During the weeks where he painstakingly experimented with the Oceancaller, he found that playing a real melody always produced better results than playing random notes!

The latter might allow him to activate different functions with much greater precision and direction, but he always had the sense that he was manually flipping individual switches.

The former weaved his notes together in a song that somehow tied all of the individual effects together in a more profound way.

Music itself held power. There was a real purpose turning the Oceancaller into a musical instrument.

Ves certainly did not expect that he would dedicate so much of his precious time into becoming a musician!

Though Ves was nowhere good enough as his oldest daughter, his frequent practice had advanced his understanding and appreciation of music by a considerable extent.

While he had yet to find or develop his own personal style, he at least gained enough confidence to play a tune correctly!

His fingers continued to press the right key pads at the right times. His massively enhanced learning speed enabled him to gain a level of fluency that would have taken his old self years to master!

Ves did not play a tune so that he could serenade the Azure Tornado Dragon.

Instead, he leveraged the power of the Oceancaller to weaken the mutated beast's control over the whirlpool.

He was starting to make a difference. Ves tried his best to cooperate with the artifact flute. A number of runes associated with currents, whirlpools and other related concepts started to glow a lot brighter.

The more these runes exerted their power, the easier it became for Ves to calm the spinning currents.

The Azure Tornado Dragon had to exert increasingly more power just to get the whirlpool to spin a little faster.

Ves was not as powerful as his adversary in his control over the water element, but his melody still enabled him to drastically reduce the power to the whirlpool to the point where he could move through it with considerable effort!

His suited true body continually pushed against the strengthened water resistance and forcibly broke through the side of the weakened whirlpool!

His sight became clearer. Ves grinned at the mutated beast that had moved a lot closer than before.

"TAKE THIS!"

Ves abruptly switched to a more aggressive tune. The air energy under his command flowed faster through the holes of his flute as he channeled his intent to inflict severe harm onto the beast!

One of the lessons that he had learned about the flute was that the songs had to match his intentions.

The tempo, emotions and other variables could all amplify or inhibit the final results.

These variables are such a big difference that Ves realized that the Oceancaller was not just centered around channeling the water element.

It was actually an artifact that fused the power of music with the power of water to produce amazing synergies!

Even though Ves did not mean to, he inadvertently learned that music held great power in terms of E energy manipulation.

On its own, music had the ability to influence or even mesmerize people. Only truly passionate and dedicated musicians could develop their powers to this extent. A part-timer like Ves simply did not have the time or interest to turn music into a weapon by itself.

He was much more interested in how well it could enhance his power over other E energy attributes!

For example, when he started to play an aggressive song, his control over the surrounding water energies increased by over 50 percent, and he knew that this was far from the limit!

If he became as good as a professional flutist, then it would not be out of the question for him to amplify his power by at least several times!

However, the current amplification was enough for him to shape a few pockets of water into sharp spears that launched themselves towards the Azure Tornado Dragon!

The spears blurred through the waters and struck the surprised beast's scales and did... almost nothing.

The scales dented a little bit, but they hadn't cracked or broken in the slightest.

Ves still needed to work on that. His ability to concentrate water and turn it into a sharp blade was too poor.

"THEN LET'S TRY THIS INSTEAD."

He no longer wasted his time on powers that he lacked practice with and instead began to play a simple tone that gradually became louder and more oppressive over time.

The Azure Tornado Dragon did not sit still. The powerful being taught Ves a lesson by channeling the same water spears and infusing them with water bubbles that propelled them forward like supercharged torpedoes!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

His spatial barrier shook multiple times as every water spear produced powerful physical impacts that also disturbed the surrounding water elements.

Yet Ves did not cease his current actions. He put his trust in his ability to withstand the creature's attacks while continually building up his control over the surrounding waters.

The flow of water in the river started to accelerate.

Ves was situated upstream in relation to the Azure Tornado Dragon. This had been a deliberate choice on his part. He was able to borrow the power of the existing current and amplify it so that it began to flow faster.

It made little difference at first. The mutated beast paid no attention to this small effect and began to pelt Ves with multiple different water attacks.

Though Ves found it difficult to maintain his spatial barrier while also making extensive use of his Oceancaller, it started to get easier as he built up more and more momentum.

Above the surface of the river, waves started to build up over time. They continually escalated in power and speed.

As the Azure Tornado Dragon started to sense that something was amiss, the persistent actions from Ves had already caused the river to flow a lot faster down the river!

Note after note pressed onto an invisible accelerator, causing the river to flow at such a rapid rate that the Azure Tornado Dragon actually started to get pushed back.

While the mutated beast utilized its own power to wrestle back control over the river water, the creature found it increasingly more difficult to counteract the growing momentum of the flow!

Though Ves' comprehension of water was not as good as that of his opponent, the epiphany he gained during his recent boat trip had substantially promoted his understanding of the concepts of waves and currents!

Similar to the powerful ancient phase whale known as the Tidecaller, Ves was able to apply his power in a way that enabled him to build up progressively more powerful forces.

Though this was not an entirely unfamiliar phenomenon to the Azure Tornado Dragon, he lacked the ability to stop the waves now that it had built up to this point!

As the raging river became so violent that the dragon found it difficult to maintain its position, Ves amped up the volume and aggression of his tune!

The water flowing around the dragon started to press into its body. It was as if a giant invisible water hand had gripped the Azure Tornado Dragon and started to squeeze!

Though Ves' control over the water element was not powerful enough to inflict actual damage onto the beast, the pressure of this enormous hand slowly started to escalate as the growing river current seemed to feed into its power!

It became harder and harder for Ves to maintain these processes. He was only able to keep this up because the Oceancaller was providing him with a considerably more powerful boost than in the past.

His actions had earned the approval of the young replica artifact!

This gave Ves a greater rush. The positive feedback from the Oceancaller encouraged him to leverage the water element even more!

However, the Azure Tornado Dragon did not let Ves push itself back with impunity!

The cunning beast changed its strategy and began to swim against the current!

It did not attempt to wrestle control over all of the water. The current, while annoying, inflicted no direct harm on the beast. It merely hindered its advance, but the Azure Tornado Dragon counteracted this by forming a water tornado that stuck close to its body.

Like an enormous turbine, the Azure Tornado Dragon utilized the rotating water to speed up its movements and arrive directly in front of Ves!

BANG!

The two entities collided against each other!

Both of them got pushed back. The collision interrupted Ves' performance, causing him to quickly lose control over the powerful water currents. His spatial barrier also took a hard hit.

However, the Azure Tornado Dragon did not feel so good at the moment. Its humanoid opponent was heavier and tougher than he looked, so its physical advantage was not as big as it appeared.

That did not stop the dragon from continuing its plan to attack Ves with its body!

The beast opened its powerful maw and released a wave of water and air that temporarily blinded Ves.

A split second later, the Azure Tornado Dragon darted forward and clamped its powerful jaws onto Ves!

The struggling spatial barrier barely managed to prevent the large beast from sinking its teeth into his flesh!

Chapter 5496 An Unfair Comparison

The fight between Ves and the Azure Tornado Dragon turned a lot more physical!

After the beast failed to bite Ves with its jaws, the larger creature continually utilized its enormous body to wear down his defenses!

Though Ves' Kelsis organ had to work overtime to prevent the dragon from sinking its teeth into his flesh, he did not just float in the water and allow himself to get hit for free.

The disruptive body slams and frightening bite attacks prevented him from playing his flute. His song ended and his control over the surrounding water element had been taken away by the furious beast.

The Azure Tornado Dragon might not understand the concept of music, but it clearly associated Ves' flute playing with his strong water manipulation abilities.

This was why the creature aggressively attacked Ves up close!

Ves personally discovered the weakness of relying on music to channel his powers.

There was no way he could leverage the power of the Oceancaller when he was being attacked like this! Perhaps a more competent music cultivator could continue to play a song under these difficult circumstances, but Ves did not excel in this aspect!

"FINE THEN! I WILL GET PHYSICAL AS WELL IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WANT!"

Ves changed the grip of his flute and held it like a baton.

He had already tested the durability of the Oceancaller many times and learned that it would take far more power to ever threaten its integrity.

When the Azure Tornado Dragon made another pass at Ves, he swung back his arm and slammed his flute against the Azure Tornado Dragon's snout!

The surrounding water shook from the painful roar released by the beast!

Ves got slammed back from the collision as his ability to move in the water was not good enough to evade the collision in time.

His spatial barrier flickered in a worrisome manner, but he knew he had to go on the offensive if he wanted to postpone its collapse.

Man and beast began to wrestle and circle around each other underwater!

Initially, the beast held the advantage. Its body was larger and its control over water was stronger.

As a true darling of water, the Azure Tornado Dragon's abilities did not weaken even when it was fully engaged in launching physical attacks.

The powerful beast did not believe that this strange organic humanoid possessed the ability to overpower his body!

However, Ves had his own strong points. He was admittedly unskilled in combat and completely made a fool of himself in his attempts to defend against the Azure Tornado Dragon.

His true body was smaller.

His ability to maneuver underwater was awful.

He was not a real qi cultivator, so his ability to control the surrounding water was too poor.

Swinging around his flute like a club only bruised the massive beast at most.

All of these disadvantages and more caused Ves to lose the initiative. He could only react and launch the occasional counterattack when the dragon swam close enough!

Though he occasionally managed to break or dislodge a few scales with the swing of his flute, the Azure Tornado Dragon did not lose any of its powerful momentum.

The creature firmly gained the upper hand!

This became evident when the Azure Tornado Dragon slammed against Ves like a crashing starship!

The collision was so powerful that Ves' Kelsis organ couldn't take it any more. The spatial barrier shattered apart, exposing his suited body to the elements!

The Azure Tornado Dragon clearly understood the significance of this change. Its beastly eyes conveyed an intense eagerness to pounce on Ves and tear his limbs to shreds!

"YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE ME?! THEN COME GET IT! I AM NOT AFRAID OF YOU, LIZARD!"

Though Ves believed he had solved the problem of developing an overinflated sense of confidence, he couldn't help but express his contempt at the powerful beast.

He still believed he could defeat the Azure Tornado Dragon!

As if the monster understood the message, the dragon furiously charged straight at Ves! It even sped up its approach by forming a water turbine that propelled it even faster!

Ves narrowed his eyes through the murky water.

When the Azure Tornado Dragon was just about to pounce, Ves commanded his flute to grow in size, making it as long and thick as a spear!

He quickly adjusted his grip until he directly pointed the Oceancaller's tip at the rapidly approaching the Azure Tornado Dragon!

The Azure Tornado Dragon's momentum was too great. It was impossible for the creature to halt or redirect his body in so little time.

The water above the surface splashed as a powerful collision took place underneath!

Two different kinds of blood mixed into the river water as both Ves and his beast opponent had managed to strike serious blows against each other!

Ves shook his head as he noticed the closing holes of his nanosuit.

The beast had not only bit through his suit, but also managed to break his skin!

Fortunately, the monster's teeth had been unable to penetrate too deeply, which was exactly what he expected.

Ves' body was akin to a hardy biomech. His flesh was not as easy to damage as it looked. The phasewater in his body had already reinforced his physique to a point where even mechs would find it challenging to wear down his defenses.

Still, repeated attacks of this nature could most certainly put his life under threat!

His ability to regenerate his body was not as good. An important factor that hindered his recovery was that he had lost a bit of blood, which happened to contain a bit of the phasewater that made him strong!

Ves focused on his adversary.

He had managed to deal a serious blow against the dragon. The mutated beast's maw leaked a copious amount of alien blood as the flute had managed to pierce a hole.

Though the wounds were far from fatal, the Azure Tornado Dragon became maddened by pain!



The creature quickly directed its growing aggression towards Ves yet again. The beast only needed to move a short distance before it was able to launch another attack!

The beast did not make any big moves this time. It simply utilized its long and heavy body to slam and bite against its enemy.

Ves struggled to fend off the attacks. Turning his artifact flute into a makeshift spear did not help enough. It did not possess a sharp edge, so he wasn't able to cut or stab into the creature as effectively as he wished.

He could only utilize it as a staff and inflict repeated blunt impacts against the Azure Tornado Dragon.

These staff swings only hurt the creature, but did not even make it bleed any further.

It did not help that Ves not only fought in an unfavorable environment, but also had no systematic combat training in fighting with melee weapons!

Let alone a sword, Ves did not know how to effectively utilize a staff as a weapon!

What he was doing was completely ineffective against this kind of beast.

Though he attempted to augment his attacks by leveraging water energy, the Azure Tornado Dragon's control over it was so much better that Ves was like a child trying to show off in front of an adult.

"SO THIS IS IT, HUH?"

Playtime was over.

Ves had tested his ability to utilize his flute in battle. He had also learned several new insights into whirlpools and other aspects of water by observing the Azure Tornado Dragon in action.

While he became disappointed that he was no longer able to prolong his studies into leveraging the water element, he needed to beat this overgrown lizard!

"COME!"

For whatever reason, the Azure Tornado Dragon sensed a much greater threat from its current adversary than before!

Even though Ves looked no different, the beast listened to its instincts and began to form a water corkscrew around itself that threatened to tear apart anything nearby!

The infusion of air energy caused the whirlpool to become more violent and disorienting, but this did not seem to hinder Ves that much.

Just as the furious beast attempted to bite the vulnerable body of its prey, Ves turned around and struck a powerful blow!

Surprisingly enough, Ves did not swing around his flute anymore, but simply lashed out with his fist!

Though the Azure Tornado Dragon initially thought little of this move, the creature reared back in pain as the large humanoid fist not only managed to penetrate its scales and flesh, but also unleashed a forceful explosion that exacerbated this wound!

The large beast had suffered its most serious injury yet as the strange fist had truly damaged a considerable chunk of its flesh!

Ves' eyes sharpened as he took advantage of this drastic turn.

Instead of clumsily swimming forward, he activated the phasewater in his body yet again, causing his body to disappear from sight only to instantly appear above the creature's body!

Ves tried a variation of his earlier attack and reached down with his hands in the form of a claw.

The creature thrashed yet again as Ves' fingers tore through its body like it was being raked!

Ves continued to pummel and ravage the beast with much greater effectiveness than before.

Each time he struck the Azure Tornado Dragon, the powerful Worclaw energy cycle inside his body depleted a little further.

Even though Ves felt a bit pained for expending this relatively scarce resource, he felt it was important to actively start making use of it. He had ignored its existence and potential for too long, and while he had good reason to do so in the past, the same circumstances no longer applied anymore!

While the Azure Tornado Dragon managed to hit Ves back a few times, he simply took the hits and continued to punch or kick the powerful beast even more!

There was a limit to how much the mutated beast could tolerate these blows.

The dragon's fury had not abated, but the fear of getting hurt even more caused it to regain enough clarity to utilize its brain.

The Azure Tornado Dragon abruptly backed off from the abnormal humanoid and swam straight towards the surface!

The mutated beast did not stop its ascend at all. Once its long and scaled body leapt into the air, it continued to rise until it flew well above the river!

The wings that previously stuck close to its body had unfolded and began to flap in order to turn it into a master of the skies.

Ves dove up to the surface as well, but he did not possess the ability to fly like his opponent.

The Azure Tornado Dragon was already beginning to shape its power over the elements to form his characteristic tornado.

The blend of so much wind and air energy caused this powerful weather manifestation to gain the power to shred mechs and exobeasts alike!

Ves did not know how long he could last against its powerful forces, but he had no intention of subjecting himself to this tornado for long!

"IT'S TIME TO FINISH THIS." He declared.

Ves began to accumulate several energies at once. A combination of Worclaw energy, E energy and spatial energy swirled around his body before he disappeared once more!

Though the dragon had been on guard against Ves' teleportation trick, that did not prevent him from appearing right above its body!

An empowered tornado quickly moved towards his location and threatened to toss him into the air, but it strangely weakened as soon as it got close to Ves!

"Mrow!"

Blinky made an appearance and devoured as many wind and air energies as possible!

All of those energies that previously fell under control of the Azure Tornado Dragon fell straight into the companion spirit's imaginary universe!

Even though Blinky's devouring rate had its limit, what he had done was already remarkable enough to cripple the Azure Tornado Dragon's signature ability!

Taken by surprise, the stupid monster was unable to do more than undulate its body in the air.

This was far from enough to prevent Ves from striking its body.

Though Ves did not possess any flight abilities, he was still able to maneuver in the air in a limited fashion by bending the fabric of space around his body with the help of his Maracos organ!

By forming an invisible slide, Ves managed to control his falling trajectory just enough for him to unleash a powerful punch straight onto the creature's back!

BOOM!

Ves had pumped more Worclaw energy into this attack than before, causing his fist to explode a significant chunk of the Azure Tornado Dragon's body!

The damage was a lot more serious this time as Ves had managed to break some of the creature's bones as its organs!

A painful roar spread escaped the injured creature's throat as it started to lose altitude!

Though Ves had exerted himself quite a bit, he did not intend to give the dragon a chance to recover and teleported yet again to give the dragon another Worclaw energy-empowered punch!

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

Though Ves' Worclaw energy reserves dropped at an alarming rate, each attack blew another chunk of flesh and bone from the creature's body!

With Blinky continually breaking and absorbing any nearby energies harnessed by the Azure Tornado Dragon, the poor beast could not rely on its superior E energy manipulation abilities to beat Ves back!

By the time the creature's massive body crashed on the ground, the entire length of its body had become a broken and beaten mess.

Ves felt rather mixed as he teleported on top of the heavily injured monster's head.

If he had a choice, he would have preferred to defeat the Azure Tornado Dragon at its own game.

Alas, that was not possible this time.

Ves ultimately felt that he had cheated by utilizing his vastly superior capabilities.

"IT IS NO WONDER THAT PHASE LORDS ARE SO REVERED IN THIS DWARF GALAXY."

The fight probably would have been a lot more even if the Azure Tornado Dragon had evolved into a calamity beast, but alas it fell one step short of this goal.

Ves had ultimately gained a much better understanding of his direct combat power.

While ordinary mechs and mech pilots had good reason to fear mutated beasts, Ves had already grown past the point where he needed to take them seriously.

He hadn't even taken advantage of the fact that he could borrow the power of his design spirits!

The human phase lord looked down at his enormous body.

"HAVE I GROWN THIS STRONG ALREADY?"

#### Chapter 5497 Self-Evaluation

Regardless of how he accomplished his victory, it became an established fact that he had defeated a powerful mutated beast by relying on 'himself'.

The only external tool he made use of was the Oceancaller, and it hadn't even been necessary to employ it in the first place. If not for the fact that he wanted to test and exercise his water energy manipulation abilities, he could have ended the fight a lot sooner by powering up his attacks with Worclaw energy right from the start!

Ves gained a much better understanding of his personal combat system from this actual fight.

He lifted his fist and recalled the overflowing strength that he previously displayed.

The various powers and abilities he employed were already powerful by themselves.

The endowments of a phase lord boosted his defenses and mobility to a ridiculous height. Ves could directly compete against many mechs in this aspect.

His defenses were as good as a quasi-first-class mech, though they were still short of matching the performance of a genuine first-class multipurpose mech. He had been lucky that the Azure Tornado Dragon grew up on a planet without significant deposits of phasewater. If the mutated beast was able to make use of transphasic attack methods, then Ves would have suffered a lot more injuries during this fight!

His short-range mobility was incredibly good due to his ability to quickly and precisely teleport across modest distances. However, he was still unable to traverse longer distances unless he equipped himself with a modular flight system or other external tool. He knew that he would eventually be able to mitigate this problem as long as he advanced his phase lord cultivation and implanted a specialized organic warp drive organ in his true body.

His offensive means were a mess to be honest.

His water manipulation capabilities with the Oceancaller was not great when employed against a single powerhouse. Ves lacked enough practice and comprehension to launch pressurized jets at his opponents. However, he was much more confident in wiping out swarms of weaker opponents. The artifact flute excelled at building up massive waves of destruction as long as he was allowed to build up his attack.

Ves was not satisfied with his armed and unarmed combat techniques. He knew that any serious mech pilot or infantry soldier probably regarded him as a clown for fighting like an untrained amateur!

While Ves had spent enough time among all kinds of soldiers to roughly gauge how skilled they were, he lacked the training to execute all of those powerful and efficient moves himself!

Blinky actually helped quite a lot in this fight. Though he was just about to complete the second stage of his Imaginary Universe Method, his internal universe could accommodate a huge amount of E energy, far more than the Azure Tornado Dragon was able to harness in a whole day!

One of the reasons why Ves originally added energy devouring capabilities to his crucial companion spirit was because he wanted to turn the Star Cat into a nemesis of all qi cultivators!

How great would it be to confront a powerful qi cultivator in battle, only for Blinky to step forward and suck away all of the fancy spells and techniques employed by the enemy?

The fight against the Azure Tornado Dragon had been an opportunity for him to test this concept.

While the mutated beast could technically be classified as a natural cultivator, its ability to manipulate water energy had become sophisticated enough to turn this into a good representation of an actual fight against a qi cultivator.

Unfortunately, Ves was not satisfied with Blinky's performance.

The capacity of the Blinkyverse was expanding with every second that passed. Ves could stuff so much messy energies inside of it without needing to worry about causing it to burst for a very long time.

The real issue was that the throughput was too low!

"It's like trying to empty the fuel tanks of a battleship with a tiny straw."

The size of that 'straw' had not grown as quickly as everything else!

What was the point of developing a huge internal universe that could potentially become as large as the physical universe when the channel connecting the two only amounted to a small gate?

If Ves wanted to turn Blinky into a much more useful asset, then he had to find a way to massively boost the companion spirit's throughput!

"THIS IS A SHORTCOMING OF HIS CURRENT CULTIVATION METHOD." Ves concluded.

When he originally devised the Imaginary Universe Method, he paid far more attention to the properties of the Blinkyverse itself. This came at the cost of neglecting the importance of increasing Blinky's energy absorption speed!

He wondered whether his mother already noticed this flaw, but deliberately left it unaddressed in order to teach him a lesson when she improved his cultivation method.

"THAT IS DEFINITELY THE CASE!"

He needed to fix this problem one way or another. Though Blinky's devouring rate had grown at a slow and steady rate as the companion spirit continued to age, this pattern was far too slow for his liking!

Blinky's devouring rate had to be at least 10 times higher in order to deprive the Azure Tornado Dragon of its powers!

Ves had been hoping to rely on Blinky to rob the mutated beast of all of its air energy. This would cause the dragon to lose the ability to amplify its lift force when it flapped its wings. There was no way the creature could remain aloft under those circumstances!

At least Ves became aware of this shortcoming early enough. There was plenty of time for him to remedy this issue.

In the end, Ves had to fall back on his Worclaw energy to finish this fight.

Though Ves had only channeled this special energy type for less than a minute, he had depleted a huge amount of it. This was evident from how extensively the Worclaw energy cycle inside his body had shrunk from his previous expenditures!

The cycle maintained by his oversized Jutland organ became a lot more lethargic. Ves even had the suspicion that it would have collapsed entirely if he continued to drain this high-end energy for another minute.

Ves carefully inspected the state of his Jutland organ. It was already working hard to replenish the lost Worclaw energy, but try as it might, its production rate was incredibly low!

It took a bit of time for Ves to quantify the state of his Worclaw energy reserves. He needed to develop a specialized meter in order to record this stuff properly, but that was far too low on the priority list for him to work on anytime soon.

If his judgment was correct, his Worclaw energy reserves had dipped to around 38 percent. He estimated that his Jutland organ could restore around 9 percent of his total capacity per standard week.

"GREAT. IT WILL TAKE 7 WEEKS BEFORE I AM FULL AGAIN."

That was a huge amount of time!

Ves could not escape the reality that he needed to treat his Worclaw energy as a trump card. It was not feasible for him to make use of its power on a continuous basis.

He furrowed his brows. His Jutland organ had improved by a huge extent since he became a phase lord. It had sublimated along with the rest of his body when he endured the lightning baptisms, but it had not gone through any qualitative transformations.

That was another obvious shortcoming.

Ves always had the suspicion that Worclaw energy had incredible potential. The reason why he never explored it in depth was because it was too unfamiliar to him. It had too little in common with E energy and other phenomena that he was familiar with. This left him in a helpless position.

The only way he could think of that could help him understand the properties of Worclaw energy was to borrow the knowledge from people who encountered it in the past.

There were only a handful of notable groups in the Red Ocean who seriously fought against the mighty Alshyr race that wielded this powerful energy.

Ves needed to conduct a serious trade with the Red Two or the first-rate colonial superstates in order to get his hands on this precious knowledge!

From what he had learned so far, the study of Worclaw energy was so high-level that it was impossible to obtain it by paying a lot of money or MTA merits.

Ves had to be prepared to make serious concessions in order to learn the truth about Worclaw energy!

He did not know whether it was worthwhile for him to do so at the moment. Though he did not dispute its power, Ves still remained in a position where it was not necessary for him to beat his opponents in person.

So long as the Bluejay Fleet and the forces of the Larkinson Clan remained at his disposal, there was no need for him to take action in person.

He had rarely made use of his Worclaw energy in all of the years it had circulated in his body.

Only in rare cases was he forced to tap into it, but his clan had grown so strong that it was unlikely that there shouldn't be any pressing need for him to employ this trump card in the future.

He decided to set aside this matter for later. He still had to finish this fight.

Ves' formidable true body stood in front of the heavily injured body of the Azure Tornado Dragon.

The previously majestic winged lizard looked incredibly beat up at the moment. Multiple powerful Worclaw energy-infused attacks had pulverized or torn away huge chunks of the creature's flesh and bone.

Unlike the Giant Stone Eater, the Azure Tornado Dragon did not excel at defense. Its body only gained a modest boost in resilience when the mutated beast reinforced its body with water energy.

In fact, the Azure Tornado Dragon had deliberately focused much of its mutation efforts into mastering the power of air!

The stupid dragon became so obsessed with flying that it had tried to lighten its body and make it more flight worthy!

Ves actually did not think this was a bad idea, but it was a pity that the Azure Tornado Dragon lived on a planet that had already been conquered by red humanity.

He didn't know whether the creature was smart enough to understand its own mistakes. It looked awfully pained to the point where it released ugly noises from its mangled throat.

Ves gently stepped forward and placed his palm onto the creature's head. "YOU FOUGHT WELL, DRAGON. I AM SORRY FOR WHAT I AM ABOUT TO DO, BUT MY OCEANCALLER HUNGERS FOR YOUR SOUL."

It had been shaking in his hand the entire time. The artifact flute showed much more liveliness than before. Its urge to absorb the Azure Tornado Dragon became so strong that Ves had the illusion that it would fly from his grip if he continued to prolong this moment!

Ves did not dare to waste any further. He quickly studied the fallen dragon and decided to kill it by crushing its heart. One of his previous attacks had opened a gap that exposed this important organ.

It would be a waste to kill the mutated beast by breaking open its skull. Ves wanted to preserve its head and turn it into a trophy if possible.

Ves employed a considerable amount of force to stab his oversized artifact flute through the heart and a few other important-looking organs before the Azure Tornado Dragon lost its vitality at a rapid rate.

He quickly moved back to the head and pressed the Oceancaller against the creature's skull.

Soon enough, the flute produced a powerful suction force. The entire spirituality of the Azure Tornado Dragon quickly left its original body and disappeared inside the artifact in an instant!

The Oceancaller started to heat it. Several runes associated with the concepts that the Azure Tornado Dragon happened to be familiar with started to glow brighter than the other ones!

#### Chapter 5498 Instant Feedback

The feedback from the Oceancaller was clear and obvious.

The artifact flute not only exuded greater strength and activity when it absorbed the spirituality of the Azure Tornado Dragon, but also began to show greater activity in a handful of its runes.

The ones associated with currents, bubbles, whirlpools, pressure and a couple of other concepts lit up as if Ves had just 'leveled them up' in a manner of speaking.

Ves was quite impressed at how the high-level artifact conveyed the benefits of absorbing the mutated beast's spirituality in a direct and transparent manner.

He had been afraid that such an archaic and outdated relic would deliberately act mysteriously and play games with him. That was not the case as the Oceancaller clearly conveyed the outcome of this absorption.

Of course, that also caused Ves to become a little more concerned about the implications.

The Oceancaller presented a clear reward scheme to Ves. The more water-based spiritualities he sacrificed to the artifact flute, the more he would unlock its latent power!

Ves could not imagine how powerful the Oceancaller could become if he fed 100 spirits to the flute!

However, there were probably diminishing returns to this process. Ves would have to pursue stronger and more dangerous water-based spirits in order to keep up with the growing demands of his artifact.

This seemed like a trap. If Ves continued to obsess over powering up his artifact, he would make lots of enemies, just to boost the growth of an external object!

Though Ves did not think it was a big deal to satisfy the Oceancaller's cravings every now and then, there was no pressing need to speed up its growth. His comprehension of the water element was not advanced enough to demand an expansion of his artifact.

The flute slowly settled down after it had absorbed the Azure Tornado Dragon's soul.

The extraction had been total. The giant beast's massive corpse had been completely drained of anything spiritual. This completely denied Ves the option to harvest any useful spiritual ingredients from this kill.



"A PITY."

Ves wondered if he should have carved out a spiritual fragment from the Azure Tornado Dragon before he let his artifact flute have its way.

That might not have been a good idea. The Oceancaller would definitely notice and grow upset that Ves had compromised its first 'meal'.

Now that the fight was over, Ves folded up his true body. His enormous body visibly shrunk in size. The Oceancaller did likewise and became smaller as well.

Though his nanosuit had suffered considerable damage during the fight, there were still plenty of intact nanites left to retain its functionality. Nothing glitched out as the suit perfectly matched Ves' change in scale.

By the time Ves had returned to his 'human' size, the shuttle that had previously observed the eye-opening battle from above had descended from the skies and landed a short distance away.

Once the hatch opened up, the children and the cats eagerly ran across the marshy ground and embraced their father!

Andraste expressed her enthusiasm first, just as expected!

"You were so awesome, papa! Why didn't you tell me you could do all of that?! You fought like a mech! Did you become a phase lord? Teach me how to become one as well!"

Ves grinned and ruffled his daughter's hair. "This is a rather complicated topic. There is no need for you to get involved in messy stuff like this. Becoming a mech pilot or a swordmaster are better ways to pursue strength. Have you not forgotten how those ancient phase whales completely got beat up by a bunch of god mechs?"

"Oh... you are right..."

"Are you hurt, papa?" Aurelia asked in a more concerned tone as she and Mana both inspected Ves in different ways. "When we watched your duel against this dragon, we saw that it managed to inflict multiple wounds on you. Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"I am okay, dear. These are just flesh wounds. Phase lords are particularly good at recovering from them. So long as my enemies are unable to damage my internal organs, I will be fine. The only thing I am concerned about is whether I need to replenish the phasewater that has spilled out of my body."

According to his own senses, the concentration of phasewater in his body had dropped. While he was able to replenish his lost blood cells, the same did not apply to the small amount of phasewater in his bloodstream.

Ves did not possess his own phasewater production system, so it made sense that he could not rely on his body to regenerate this substance.

The lightning tribulations manipulated by the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean might have given him a few freebies, but he could not rely on it to replenish his shortfall.

This was not a big deal at the moment. His true body was not that large compared to more developed phase lords.

He loosely estimated that he had lost 20 to 40 liters of blood during the brief fight.

Only 1.4 percent of that consisted of phasewater, so he could just draw a cup of phasewater from the Vault of Eternity to bring him back up to capacity.

What he was concerned about was how much more phasewater he would have to use to replenish his depleted blood in the future.

For example, if he ever grew as big as a destroyer or a cruiser, the quantity of blood running through his veins could fill many swimming pools!

If just a fraction of that blood spilled out of his body, Ves would still have to absorb a hundred liters of phasewater or more to make up for the massive loss!

This was an incredibly uneconomical consequence and deterred Ves from thinking about abusing his phase lord cultivation anytime soon.

Phasewater was too scarce for him to waste on frivolous fights!

While his daughters expressed a lot of concern towards their father, his son became more fascinated by the giant beast corpse.

The bloodied and mangled carcass was anything but pleasant to see up close. Its huge size still exerted a degree of coercion that was difficult for tiny humans to bear. Its many injuries along with other factors caused the massive body to release an awful smell.

If not for the fact that the breathing masks filtered out much of these stinky particles, Marvaine would never have the guts to step closer to the dead creature.

"Wow... it used to be so powerful, but now it is dead..."

"Meow meow."

Lucky flew in front of Marvaine and gently pushed the boy back. Just because the Azure Tornado Dragon was dead did not mean that it had become harmless!

As Ves continued to satisfy the curiosity of his children, President Oscar Tarich slowly approached with a concerned expression.

"What is the matter, Oscar? Did my performance let you down?"

The highly experienced hunting veteran twitched his lips. "You fought as well as you could as a non-combatant. It is unfair for us to apply the same standards that we use to judge professionals. It is still a good idea for you to complete a beginner's course on unarmed fighting techniques. Your punches... are terrible. A professional fighter would have been able to split this mutated beast in half if he wielded the same powers as you. Proper technique can make an enormous difference."

"I will consider it." Ves replied in a non-committal tone. "I am eager to return to civilization, or whatever semblance this planet can offer. Can I rely on your organization to chop off its head and convert it into a hunting trophy? I think I deserve at least that much."

While this 'hunt' did not comply with the rules of the Hunting Association, President Tarich gained so much from observing Ves in action that he responded with a simple nod.

"Granted. You will have your trophy, though I must mention that our Association will not register it as proof of a valid hunt."

"That is fair."

Ves had grown past the point where he needed to embellish his reputation with hunting trophies. It did not matter at all that he was unable to add another accomplishment to his record.

He just wanted to preserve the head of the Azure Tornado Dragon in order to decorate his office.

"Would you like to preserve the appearance of the head in its healthy form, or are you satisfied with receiving a naked skull?"

"Keep the meat on the bones if possible. I think it will look more ferocious and lifelike that way."

"Normally, we charge a large sum of money to provide you with this extra service, but we shall waive it for you. The process will take time to complete. We can ship it to a destination of your choosing once it is done. I can promise you that you will be satisfied with the quality of our work."

Ves and the branch president continued to discuss various issues as they returned to the shuttle.

Once the vehicle flew back to Tixe City, he and his excited kids enjoyed a big meal before they returned to their hotel suite.

The fight had drained Ves in multiple ways, so he was not in the mood to go on any further tours.

The kids did not mind this at all. They eagerly rewatched the footage of the various fights and commented on them with great enthusiasm.

They especially grew impressed by seeing their own father fight a ferocious dragon-like beast! How many children could boast of having a parent as strong as Ves?!

Time passed by. Nothing noteworthy happened during the remainder of the vacation.

Though Ves took his children on another hunt in the Melrose Continent, the novelty of this activity started to wear off. His children had already been desensitized to an extent.

It was only during the final day of their stay that had greater significance.

Fireworks blasted in the skies of Tixe City as the hunters and visitors spontaneously celebrated a new 'holiday'!

"It has been a year since the blasted phase whales teleported us next to Messier 87."

"That is another year that I have spent away from my wife back in my old galaxy. I truly miss her. Is she still waiting for the chance that I can return?"

"If you ask me, I am glad we got rid of the old galaxy. There were too many old fossils over there who kept humanity locked in the past. Now that we have entered a new place, we have changed far beyond my wildest dreams. This is paradise as far as I am concerned!"

A lot of people wandered the streets while sharing their opinions about the event that had profoundly altered the course of their lives.

Ves understood many of their arguments. He shared all of their sentiments, and that made him feel conflicted. The Great Severing had done him a lot of good, but it had also endangered the red humans who suddenly became outnumbered and isolated.

"Do you miss the old galaxy, papa?" Aurelia asked as she saw that her father was not as happy as the rest.

"I don't miss it." Ves quickly replied as he bent down to kiss his daughter's cheek. "I already have everyone I need over here. I have you, your siblings, my wife, my clan and many wonderful friends. So long as each of you are here, I would never dream of going back. The Red Ocean is our home now. It might not be perfect, but it is the only place we have now. So long as you are happy, I am happy."

"I love you, papa."

"I love you too, Aurelia."

To be honest, the real reason why Ves did not yearn to go back to the Milky Way was because he hadn't fully left old haunt.

With Veronica lurking in the Nyxian Gap, Ves would always retain a connection to his home galaxy.

#### Chapter 5499 Nice Head

His vacation finally came to an end after the impromptu celebration.

Ves knew he would miss this planet. Its large variety of exobeasts and mutated beasts held a lot of use to him. Whether he wanted to harvest their powerful biotissue or collect their valuable spiritualities, he could advance many different projects if he wanted!

Though Ves had numerous reasons to extend his stay on Ocanon VI, his duties beckoned him to leave.

It was with more than a bit of reluctance that Ves, his children and his cats bid farewell to President Oscar Tarich and the clansmen assigned to the local branch of the Larkinson Clan.

Soon enough, Ves and his group teleported back to the Tarrasque. The Bluejay Fleet promptly resumed its trek to the Bortele System that was situated in the Torald Middle Zone.

The journey should not take long. Soon enough, Ves would enter a busy port system, and one that had militarized to an astonishing degree over the last year.

Ves was bound to get surrounded by a lot of people again. He could say goodbye to the tranquility that he managed to enjoy during his vacation.

"Welcome back, Ves." Jovy greeted as Ves entered the design lab. "You have been much more active than we expected during your stay on Ocanon VI."

Jovy had access to an excellent design lab. It held a lot of high-end lab equipment that performed functions that Ves could barely figure out. Several of them were active and in the process of conducting automated experiments and examinations on quantum particles.

Ves little idea how Jovy's design philosophy worked, but it most definitely had a strong relationship with quantum mechanics.

Perhaps one day he would understand more. That would be a time where he could fully collaborate with Jovy on a first-class multipurpose mech design. Ves still needed to earn his qualifications before he could embark on such an ambitious project.

"Did you enjoy the show from up here?" Ves casually asked as he leaned against a desk and crossed his arms.

"The footage and data of your battle has been... enlightening." Jovy frankly admitted as he set aside his current mech design. "Regrettably, this fight primarily highlights how much of an anomaly you are. We have not learned all that much on how more typical human phase lords are able to handle themselves in an actual battle. Not only do you lack proper combat training to make good use of your powerful physical gifts, you have employed too many other abilities to give us a straightforward impression of how human phase lords are able to fight by themselves."

Ves rolled his eyes. "Do you think I can subdue the Azure Tornado Dragon by relying on my phase lord gifts alone? Keep dreaming. Besides, I bet that most of the candidates who will eventually become a phase lord will consist of old mech designers and other geezers who are appreciated for their brains rather than their brawn. Teaching them how to wrestle a phase whale in battle should be the least of their concerns."

His mecher friend did not respond to that wild guess.

"Regardless, I hope you are satisfied with your stunt. The mechs of our fleet had been close to intervening at several points during your fight. You can make our jobs much easier if you refrain from putting your life on the line. Even if the mutated beast was not strong enough to pose a serious threat to you, there is always the possibility that other enemies may be lurking in the vicinity. It is the threats that we are not aware of that truly merits our concern. We have recently received an intelligence brief that your bounty has increased."

"What bounty?"

"The native aliens have increased the price on your head." Jovy explained. "Due to the treacherous actions of the Cosmopolitan Movement, the Red Cabal along with many other powerful alien groups have developed a better understanding of our society. They are able to interpret our language, understand our origin, become familiar with our culture and master many of our own technologies. One of the many lessons that the aliens have learned about us is that each high-tier galactic citizen is of immense strategic value to our civilization."

"So they have begun to target our exclusive club, is that what you are saying? This was bound to happen sooner or later, Jovy."

"That is true, but your risk is greater than that of others, Ves. Every other tier 3 galactic citizen aside from you are either centuries-old Master Mech Designers that belong to established organizations, strong senior ace pilots who can defeat most alien warfleets by themselves, highly influential statesmen who live in the well-protected centers of power of various states and so on. They rarely have a need to require the protection of our escort forces because they are more than capable of handling this issue themselves."

Ves grimaced a bit. "And I am different because I grew too quickly. My clan hasn't caught up to my own rapid rise."

"There is no reason for you to be afraid that you will be beset by assassinations as soon as you step outside of the Tarrasque. Our Bluejay Fleet is well-equipped to deter or contain most threats. Combined with the fact that you are hundreds of times harder to kill than you appear, we truly do not think that the alien bounty poses an acute threat to your life."

"I can hear a 'but' coming..."

Jovy leaned forward and stared at Ves with concern. "No one is invincible. Your protection detail may be considerable, but as long as you are reasonably within reach of the aliens, it becomes tempting for the native aliens to form a huge incursion fleet and force their way through in an attempt to bombard your coordinates with dozens of transphasic weapons of mass destruction. No matter whether you are a phase lord or not, even you cannot survive a direct hit from the main cannon of a native alien battleship."

That was very much true. Ves needed to advance his phase lord cultivation a lot more if he wanted to have any hope of surviving such a hit!

What he needed to do instead was to teleport away from the danger zone as quickly as possible. It was much more sensible for him to avoid a powerful killing strike than to stupidly rely on his own defenses.

Ves picked up Jovy's underlying message. The closer he traveled to the frontlines, the easier it became for the native aliens to dispatch a secret strike force and sneak into his location!

Both the Bortele System and the New Constantinople System were situated fairly close to the border. The former was a little closer and more vulnerable to alien incursions. This also turned it into an excellent staging point and a logistical center for all of the would-be New Elites who sought to earn war merits in the middle zone.

"I would think that if the Red Association knows that I have become a much more tempting target to the native aliens, you would reinforce my protection detail."

Jovy smiled. "I have good news on that front. You will indeed receive additional protection. The Bortele System already hosts a sizable garrison of our Association. We can redirect them from their regular duties to function as your exclusive guards during your stay over there. No matter whether the native aliens choose to attack you covertly or launch a surprise invasion that is intended to break through all obstacles by force, our forces will not let the aliens succeed."

While that sounded reassuring, Ves knew better than to believe the mechers could never do wrong.

He reminded himself that he should set up his own security arrangements. He could not leave everything to the mechers and assume that they would account for every possibility.

"Thank you for the extra help."

"It is no problem. You are one of us, Ves. We would never abandon you. That said, you can significantly decrease our stress levels if you choose to relocate to a complete secure star system such as Vulit or Bridgehead One. I think it is particularly useful if you visit the latter. Ever since work on transforming the greater beyonder gate has started, a large number of research institutions and industrial companies have flocked to it. It has become the greatest paradise of mech design and many fields of research in human-occupied space."

That certainly sounded interesting to Ves.

"Once my product reveal is over, I intend to return to New Constantinople VIII and settle for a time. I will think about going on a holiday to Bridgehead One if it has become such an excellent place, but it might take a year before I am ready to do so. Right now, I do not think I am able to conduct too many exchanges with the professionals over there. I need to build up my warchest first."

"Understandable. Your relocation is not too urgent at the moment. I will inform you if the situation changes."

That would only happen if the native aliens launched a surprise offensive that caused the current frontlines to collapse or get pushed back.

Nothing of the sort had happened so far. The native aliens were still as slow as ever with mobilizing their greater warmaking potential.

"By the way. You said that the Red Cabal put a bounty on my head. How much is it? Am I valuable?"

Jovy's expression remained serious. "The Red Cabal has set a general valuation of bounties based on tiers of galactic citizenship. It can be redeemed by both humans and aliens so long as they can prove they have done the deed."

"What?!" Ves straightened his back a bit. "Are humans actually able to get a reward despite belonging on the enemy side?"

"You heard that right. The Red Cabal has gone through great lengths to reassure that humans will be treated with utmost respect if they come and claim a bounty. The aliens even promise that they will maintain full anonymity, though I seriously doubt this claim. I am sure you can imagine how much more dangerous our society has become when the aliens have instituted this new bounty program."

Although it seemed unlikely, there was a chance that greedy humans would actually become tempted enough to assassinate key human leaders in order to earn a treat from the aliens they were supposed to fight!

"So how much, Jovy?"

"I am getting there, Ves. The head of an average tier 5 galactic citizen is worth 228 kilograms of phasewater. The head of an average tier 4 galactic citizen is worth 865 kilograms of phasewater. The rewards become much more interesting at this point."

"How so?" Ves asked.

"This is because the Red Cabal directly promises to turn a person into a phase lord. The phase whales over there even claim that they can do so perfectly, which means that the risk of death is zero. We have many reasons to question this boast, but I am afraid that many other people will just believe this at face value. Aside from that, the Red Cabal has also promised to bring the lucky traitor under the wings of one of its many respected phase whales in order to learn the tricks of the trade."

"That... that is outrageous! The Red Cabal practically wants to kill off our best people while poaching anyone that has proven their killing ability!"

If the new bounty program truly picked up steam, then red humanity's society would undoubtedly undergo a lot more upheaval!

At the very least, the upper echelon would never be able to cooperate as closely with each other than before!

What an effective conspiracy! The mistrust it generated was far more powerful than the actual assassinations that would occur!

"You haven't mentioned the remaining prices yet, Jovy."

"Ah, yes. Well, the head of any tier 3 galactic citizen is worth one guaranteed transformation into a lesser phase lord. The head of any tier 2 galactic citizen is worth one guaranteed transformation into a senior phase lord. The head of any tier 1 galactic citizen is worth a guaranteed transformation into an ancient phase lord."

"...So I am just worth an opportunity to become a garbage phase lord in the eyes of others, am I correct?"

"That is not the case." Jovy shook his head. "The bounties are not uniform. The Red Cabal has set special prices for notable human individuals that merit special attention. The native aliens have actually increased your bounty by a full tier. Your head is worth as much as a tier 2 galactic citizen. It appears that even the phase whales recognize that your value to our civilization is greater than your current status."

"Oh. That is... inconvenient, to say the least."

## Chapter 5500 Arrival At Bortele

The Bluejay Fleet arrived in the Bortele System without incident.

Unlike before, the Tarrasque and her armed escorts did not appear conspicuous in this particular port system.

This was because it had turned into a stronghold of the Red Two!

In order to prop up the frontlines and prevent the native aliens from compressing human space too quickly, the Red Association and the Red Fleet had joined forces to bolster the war infrastructure of the most affected regions.

The Torald Middle Zone had long shed its previous image as a wild frontier that only recently opened up to mass immigration and colonization.

Now, there were a lot of scared people who would rather abandon their investments and flee to the rear of human-occupied space as much as possible!

Though a lot of people had indeed chosen to pack their bags and board the first available starship that could take them away, others stayed behind. The latter remained in place because they had no choice or because they were lured by the huge incentives offered by the Red Two.

In fact, more and more people started to pour into the Bortele System because business was booming!

With the Red Two throwing lots of money and merits around, Bortele transitioned into a haven for would-be warlords, highly ambitious soldiers and profiteers who sought to take advantage of the booming war economy.

The star system was roughly divided into two different segments. The first segment consisted of the forces and the infrastructure of the Red Two.

The mechers and fleters all built numerous space stations, defensive installations and shipyards in various parts of the star system.



The Red Association also took charge of Bortele VII. It used to be a small cold rock floating in the outer reaches of the star system, but it had transformed into a notable collection of bases and other important infrastructure. The mechers hadn't even bothered to terraform it, causing it to retain its inhospitable image.

Bortele III was where the general public converged in order to do business and prepare for upcoming deployments.

Although the Red Two still maintained a visible presence on the planet, the mechers and the fleters mostly allowed the space peasants to go about their business so long as they abided by the regulations.

"What a lively star system." Ves remarked as he observed the plot that revealed all of the fleets and starships that had gathered in the port system. "There are over 50 private fleets and many more individual starships."

The 306th Bluejay Fleet belonged to the Red Association, so its warships easily established a connection with the system-wide commandnet.

The quantity of fleets and starships in private hands were great. There was no warship among them, the majority of vessels were carriers that held a lot of mechs.

None of these mechs were pushovers!

Although the vast majority of them consisted of lastgen mechs that had already become outdated, their overall performance was not weak in the first place.

A part of the forces who decided to park in this port system even did so in order to upgrade their old machines into hyper mechs.

A whole industry around this process had risen up on Bortele III!

So many mech designers and mech technicians had become proficient at converting lastgen mechs into hyper mechs that their expertise and efficiency had reached an impressive level.

There were hardly any other places in the Red Ocean where organizations could convert their old mechs into more effective combat assets!

This was one of the reasons why business was booming in Bortele III.

Of course, another reason why the planet had become so attractive was that it also became home to a large number of mech companies, recruitment agencies, recycling companies and more.

Each of them contributed to the war effort in their own ways.

Both frontline soldiers and support personnel banded together to help their race and civilization win the conflict that increasingly became known as the Red War!

Jovy, who stood next to Ves, gazed at the projected plot that depicted a lot of activity.

"From a security standpoint, a lively star system is not necessarily a safe star system." The RA Senior spoke up. "Remember what I told you a few days ago. Your head is worth as much as a guaranteed ascension into a greater phase lord. That is enough to tempt many powerful people. Busy star systems and congested areas are the best places for them to make their attempts."

Ves frowned after being reminded by this unpleasant business.

"I can hardly imagine anyone stupid enough to abandon their family, their friends and their entire powerbase just to get a huge body. How can they live with themselves knowing that they will have to spend the rest of their lives as isolated lackeys of the aliens who would love nothing more than to wipe out their former race?"

"Oh, do not sound so naive, Ves. I am sure that you are already aware that there are many people who are more than willing to betray everything in order to extend their lifespans and potentially live for hundreds of thousands of years. The illusion of immortality is so seductive that it is a certainty that people will try and make the attempt."

"Doesn't that mean that it is virtually guaranteed that I will suffer an assassination attempt once I reach the surface of Bortele III?"

Jovy did not deny this possibility. "All of our calculations say so. You can rest assured that we take your security extremely seriously. The attempt or attempts will fail. The ultimate masterminds will get exposed and suffer the consequences of betraying red humanity. Harming you is no less than harming the cause of human survival, so we will not only punish the people responsible for the deed, but we will also dismantle their entire organizations and redistribute their assets to more deserving candidates."

"Isn't that a form of collective punishment? The subordinates of the culprits are likely not at fault."

"This is already the gentlest outcome that we can tolerate." Jovy replied in a stern voice. "We need to send a message that such actions cannot be tolerated. We want to preclude the possibility that certain powerful families seek to hedge their bets in the Red War by doing everything they can to turn one of their descendants into a phase lord. Do not underestimate the shamelessness of these old families. To them, the survival of their bloodline and heritage is more important than the survival of our collective race."

That sounded considerably worse than Ves thought. It truly appeared that far too many people only saw their civilization as a means to an end.

Back when humanity was strong, everyone was proud to be a part of the dominant race in the Milky Way.

Now that red humanity got cut off from their home galaxy, a lot of people suddenly found it a lot less attractive to be a part of the side that was heavily outnumbered and short on so many resources.

Should it be any surprise that those scared and desperate humans actually wanted to defect to what they perceived as the winning side?

Ves pressed his palm against his face. "The Red Cabal is truly clever for using such a means to sow more division within our society. The aliens are deliberately exploiting our lack of unity and our propensity for infighting."

"It is not as bad as it sounds." Jovy reached out and patted his friend on the shoulder. "First, any assassination that targets you is doomed to fail for obvious reasons. While you have exposed your strength as a human phase lord just recently, we have made sure that word of it has not spread to wider public. Only a small number of people of the Hunting Association are aware of your true combat potential. Even if the assassins are so well-informed that they know that your physique is abnormally strong, they will likely be caught off-guard at how difficult it is to harm your life."

"I see."

"Besides, the most powerful humans who possess the means to take your life are already high-tier galactic citizens themselves. They are far more embedded in the existing power structure of our civilization. They have more to lose than anyone else, and are far more attached to the society that they have helped to build over the course of many generations. The higher their tier, the more unthinkable it is for them to betray our collective cause. This means that the only ones who are likely to take action are outcasts and other disaffected parties who are not doing so well."

That caused Ves to feel a little more relieved.

Though it was not pleasant for him to know that he had become a high-value target, he at least did not have to be afraid of top figures such as General Axelar Streon or Master Laila Rebecca Devos.

They were all on the same boat!

Ves only had to be on the lookout for crazies who weren't too competent but were desperate enough to go crazy and inflict a large amount of destruction.

Though Ves did not fear for his life, he had serious concerns about the safety of his clan and particularly his children.

"There is no profit to targeting your clan in order to get to you." Jovy said. "Such an action will only expose them to our investigators. As long as they reveal the slightest flaw, we can immediately trace the connections between the agents and their ultimate masters. The culprits will lose everything without ever touching you directly."

Ves never imagined that he would feel so grateful that the Red Association was so damn good at spying.

The mechers secretly monitored virtually every part of human-occupied space. While they gathered far more observation data than they could ever analyze, all of those archival recordings could still be used to piece together clues of a lot of misdeeds!

No one could remain anonymous under the constant surveillance of the mechers. They were the true masters of human society, and they were not afraid to show everyone why they were in charge.

"As for the chance that your wife and children may come to harm, we are already taking care of this issue." Jovy replied. "Our higher-ups have already approved our application to increase your protection detail. You won't be able to see much of the changes, but you can be assured that your immediate family are in good hands. You effectively enjoy the protection that is granted to tier 2 galactic citizens. Part of that is that we take great measures to guard your loved ones. The less you are concerned about their safety, the more you will feel at ease. That will put you in a better state to continue your effort to continue your contributions to society."

The cost and effort needed to protect the family of a high-tier galactic citizen was great, but it was all worth it so long as a tier 2 galactic citizen continued to do his job without worries!

Though Ves was not entirely sure about these promises, he knew that he could not allow his fears to stop him from pursuing his ambitions.

Ves ultimately believed that he could protect his family and clan much better if he advanced to the rank of Star Designer as soon as possible!

"Alright, Jovy. I hope you guys know what you are doing. Hopefully these crazy and desperate opportunists will target other tier 3 galactic citizens first."

"I am afraid that is not the case, Ves. You are officially recognized as a tier 3 galactic citizen, but your head is worth a full tier higher. What is also important is that you are far younger than your fellow citizens and that you are a second-rater with no notable background worth mentioning. That means that you are by far the more vulnerable high-value target in the eyes of others. You are most likely the first to suffer from an attack motivated by the Red Cabal's bounty program."

"...Great. What does your Eye of Providence say? I know you can read my future, Jovy. Tell me your prediction."

"If you are hoping to obtain a clear answer, then I am afraid that I cannot oblige you, Ves. Your future is clouded in darkness. There are too many powerful forces at work that my companion spirit cannot see through. Just be careful."

How helpful.