

Mech 2981

Chapter 2981: Low Yield

When Ves returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, he knew he didn't have much time left before he had to devote himself to his work.

He wanted to spend what little time he had left on knowing what Blinky was capable of and how all of the changes affected his mech design capabilities.

While it was interesting to learn more about how Blinky could manipulate or harness the Worclaw energy in his body, Ves was not a swordsman or commando. He had no pressing need to turn himself into a miniature version of an Alshyr alien, and he doubted that he could even replicate their powers.

The human body was simply too different from that of the giant aliens!

As his shuttle docked in the hangar bay, Ves left the vehicle and returned to his grand stateroom.

"Lucky? Where are you? I hope you haven't sneaked off somewhere."

Ves quickly managed to track his gem cat down in his personal office. The cat comfortably lied on a pillow placed on the desk.

"Meoooww...?"

"You look a bit better now. That's good. I hope it won't take long before you recover."

"Meow meow..."

"Anyway, I didn't come to inquire about your health. I want you to meet a new addition to our family. Please say hello to Blinky!"

At his signal, Blinky left his mind and half-materialized into existence. The purple cat floated closer to Lucky while lifting his paw in a friendly greeting.

Mrow.

Unfortunately, Lucky was not that happy to see a new cat appear out of nowhere.

"Meow...!"

Lucky acted as if he was facing another threat. The mechanical cat hissed and uttered challenging growls as he lifted himself off the desk.

Mrow mrow?

Blinky acted rather confused. Why was Lucky so unfriendly?

The inevitable finally happened. Lucky jumped on Blinky and tried to suppress the new cat!

For a moment, the two cats wrestled against each other. Though they refrained from using their claws or other lethal weapons, they had become fully invested in establishing dominance over each other!

Ves palmed his face. He felt a bit exasperated at Lucky's inability to accept the new cat right away. He also felt a bit ashamed at the fact that another part of him couldn't help but get caught up in this silly struggle.

The two cats fought increasingly harder against each other. Though Lucky possessed a killer instinct along with an abundant amount of experience, Blinky was not that much worse off. His spiritual body was very substantial for his very young age and he did not back off from the challenge.

Unfortunately, Blinky was still too young and rarely managed to keep the upper hand. He was still strong enough to prevent Lucky from winning the bout entirely so his performance was not that bad.

Ves even thought that Blinky might excel in battle as he matured. Of course, the nature of his existence meant that he was only able to fight against spiritual threats, but the story might be different if he was able to harness Worclaw energy.

In fact, one of the motivations for Ves to create companion spirits was because he wanted to equip himself and others with spiritual guardians.

While Ves lacked the time and opportunity to explore his imaginary mech concept, he believed that companion spirits were able to fulfill this role to an extent.

Having one was better than having none to most people as they did not possess any active defenses against spiritual threats.

Ves even hoped that everyone who possessed one would be better equipped to fight against oppressive enemies similar to dark gods! Aside from ancient spiritual entities, there were other scary existences among humanity.

He could never forget about the threat posed by the Five Scrolls Compact. That temple protector from the galactic center was so powerful that he could probably eat the dark gods for breakfast!

Though it was unlikely that Ves would ever be able to bump into a similar threatening figure, that was no reason for him to sit back and assume that the danger was over. He managed to bump into the cultists and their many off-shoots in several locations in a relatively remote region of the galaxy.

If the Compact was able to spread its tentacles in the Faris Star Region, the Kinner Tribe and the Nyxian Gap, then they should also be present in every other region of human space!

In short, Ves did not think it was redundant for his companion spirit to be able to fight on his behalf. With all of the universal life energy that he pumped into Blinky, his new spiritual pet ought to be able to take care of all manner of spiritual threats!

He was still too young though. As the brawl between the two cats went on, Lucky slowly managed to limit Blinky's ability to resist.

"Meow! Meow!"

Mrow more mrow!

Ves couldn't stand the idea of seeing a part of himself lose this silly bout, so he eventually decided to intervene.

"Alright, that's enough! The two of you are part of the same family now, so don't try to fight all the time."

"Meow!" Lucky responded with a resentful expression.

Mrow! Blinky looked aggrieved.

"Lucky, you're not being replaced. You are still my first pet. Blinky is simply... different. He can't produce gems or travel too far away from me, but he is an augment that I have brought to life. He will be able to assist me in different ways. He'll also be able to protect me, which should make your life easier."

No matter what he said, Lucky did lower his hostility to the new cat, so Ves quickly gave up. He knew what his first cat was like and figured that he would slowly get accustomed to Blinky.

After all, as his companion spirit, Blinky would always be present around Ves.

"Meow."

Lucky retreated to a cabinet but remained vigilant towards Blinky.

Ves didn't care too much and sat down behind his desk before studying his latest companion.

"What can you do, Blinky?"

Mrow?

The young cat innocently blinked and pressed his paw against his chest.

"I created you with the intention that you would be able to help me in my endeavors. You were born with powers and your accelerated growth should have expanded their effects. Let's begin with your primary function. I've already witnessed the Unending One using your stomach to digest and convert energy. Let's see if you can harness it just as well as the original source of this ability."

Ves borrowed a bit of spiritual energy from one of his design spirits and fed it to Blinky.

He could sense some activity taking place in his companion spirit's stomach. It only took a few seconds to digest this small quantity. Soon enough, Blinky released a smaller quantity of processed spiritual energy that was virtually indistinguishable from Ves' own spiritual energy!

"Yes! You can do it! Good job, Blinky!" Ves affectionately rubbed his new cat's head.

Mrow~

From this brief attempt, Ves confirmed that Blinky had not lost control over his spiritual energy digestion system. He was also able to ascertain that there was nothing with it despite temporarily getting hijacked by the Unending One before experiencing rapid growth.

Generating spiritual energy compatible with Ves was Blinky's primary purpose. It would have been a considerable problem if Ves did not gain an additional supply of energy despite making use of so many valuable ingredients!

Ves began to borrow spirit energy from different design spirits and fed them all to Blinky. He noted the differences between input and output and methodically documented the most important parameters.

"Well, it looks like you are quite a capable boy. I am pleasantly surprised by your speed, though your efficiency could still use a lot of work."

Mrow.

It was rather insane how quickly Blinky was able to digest heterogenous energy. This was his greatest advance. Even if Ves shoveled a lot of spiritual energy inside Blinky,

his companion spirit only needed a couple of minutes at most to break it all down and reconstitute it into a form that Ves could directly take over.

In this regard, its potential output was far higher than that of the Grand Dynamo!

Though the fantastic spiritual engineering product did not require any input from Ves, its output was too stable and fixed. There was no way for Ves to quickly supplement his spiritual energy. This forced him to inject a constant amount of spiritual energy inside his P-stones to steadily build up a reserve in the case of accidents or emergencies.

"I don't have to bother with that now." Ves grinned. "I can just ask my wealthier design spirits to dump a lot of their excess spiritual energy into you so that you can fill up all of my P-stones at once."

In fact, it wasn't strictly necessary anymore for Ves to build up so many spiritual energy savings. With how fast Blinky was able to digest different kinds of spiritual energy, Ves could just make use of this capability on the spot whenever he was working on a demanding project!

The only downside was that Blinky's yield was quite awful. Though Ves somewhat expected it, he still felt a bit distressed by how much energy was ultimately wasted.

The exact yield depended on how closely the input resembled the output.

For example, Goldie's spiritual energy only had to undergo a moderate degree of processing before it turned into energy that was completely compatible with Ves.

It was multiple times worse when Blinky processed spiritual energy that was very foreign. While Ves was happy that he at least had a way to convert less desirable forms of spiritual energy into a much more desirable one, he still wanted to improve this yield so that Blinky could do more with less.

"You still have a lot more room for growth." Ves stated as he gently rubbed Blinky's back. "You should continuously try your best to improve your yield. An average of just 20 percent is just too wasteful."

Mrow mrow.

Ves proceeded to explore other possibilities. For example, he tried to see if Blinky could produce different kinds of spiritual energy.

"Do you recall my wife's spiritual fragment? Try and replicate the spiritual energy you have sensed. Let's see if you can produce different attributes."

Mrow.

It turned out that Blinky did not have as much versatility as Ves hoped. The companion spirit was only able to produce one kind of spiritual energy and nothing else.

This meant that Ves wouldn't be able to use Blinky to spare Gloriana from exhausting herself whenever she worked on special projects.

Mrow...

"It's okay. There is still a possibility that you can acquire this ability. You just have to work towards it. As long as you keep growing, there is always a possibility that you will be able to develop a new solution!"

Though Blinky couldn't do as much as he hoped, Ves was already happy with what he got. He couldn't ask for more and the cat's current capability truly solved a serious problem.

"Well, this will doubtlessly be helpful in some design applications, but that is not enough. Let's see what else you can do. I did not put so many different ingredients in you for nothing."

Ves continued to explore what Blinky could do. For example, he ordered Blinky to move as far away as possible.

Blinky was only able to move around a couple of compartments away from Ves before bumping into a limit. This was actually the same distance limit of his remote spiritual projections and constructs.

"Damn. I can't send you far away and have you perform errands on my behalf like Lucky."

"Meow." Lucky grew smug.

Ves was not too disappointed. What Blinky could do was already helpful. He could completely replace the functioning of his spiritual ear and spiritual eye. It took quite a lot of effort as well as conscious control in order to be able to make use of these simple spiritual augments.

It was too bad that Blinky wasn't able to affect touch solid when he was out and about. Perhaps this was another capability that Blinky could acquire through his growth.

Chapter 2982: Shameless Pet

Ves became fascinated with exploring what Blinky was capable of. He knew his own design well enough to know that Blinky could do more than what he had already discovered.

"I spent weeks refining a complex design and used up seven different spiritual ingredients to establish your existence. I don't expect too much from you, but you are definitely not as one-dimensional as Sharpie!"

Compared to Sharpie, Blinky's nature was a lot more complex and multifaceted. While this should theoretically bestow the latter with more abilities, the downside was that they probably weren't too strong.

Sometimes, simplicity wasn't a bad result. Sharpie was quite one-dimensional, but that caused it to become exceptionally good at its only function. It also managed to grow and develop new capabilities that fully suited Ketis.

Yet due to Sharpie's limited spiritual attributes, it was highly unlikely for it to develop any new abilities unrelated to swords.

This was not what Ves sought. While he primarily created Blinky in order to solve his spiritual energy needs, companion spirits possessed a lot more potential than that. Their growth potential was limitless, and Ves felt it was too wasteful if the living spiritual construct that would accompany him for the rest of his life only possessed a single specialty.

After another hour of exploration, Ves discovered a couple more useful abilities.

Blinky was able to possess and inhabit an object. When Ves pulled out a figurine of his Desolate Soldier and modified its control systems to accept unconventional input, Blinky was able to control it like it was his own body!

"Remarkable!"

Since Sharpie was able to enter a sword, Blinky ought to be able to inhabit objects as well.

There wasn't much benefit to doing so, though. Unlike Sharpie, Blinky's existence didn't alter his personality or distort reality around him due to lacking a force of will.

Ves failed to come up with a practical reason to make use of this capability. It was fun to see Blinky control all sorts of mech figurines, but they were just toys.

It wasn't possible for Blinky to take over other objects unless they incorporated a special control system that was specific to spiritual entities. This meant that Ves wouldn't be able to use Blinky to hijack someone's weapon, combat armor or other equipment. It also ruled out taking over larger machines such as mechs or starship systems.

"However... what if I prepare all of these products myself?"

He could theoretically modify one of his mechs with a special control system to enable Blinky to pilot it. Since Ves was able to take direct control of Blinky at any time, this theoretically implied that he could use this roundabout way to pilot a mech!

He firmly shook his head. "This is a silly idea!"

There were a number of practical problems.

The most fundamental one was that Ves lacked the right genetic aptitude, so he wouldn't be able to accept and process the flood of data.

Even if he was able to offload this to Blinky, the second problem was that the special control system was barely functional. It was extremely difficult for a spiritual entity to transmit a lot of precise data to an electronic device, so the amount of control that Ves could exert through this ragged connection was very poor.

The third problem was that Ves simply wouldn't be good at it. Perhaps he would have grasped at any possible opportunity to pilot a mech when he was younger, but now that he built up a career as a mech designer, he felt no need to waste his time on a different profession.

"This is a parlor trick, nothing more."

The only interesting application he could think of was to fabricate a high-quality mechanical battle construct. This way, Blinky would be able to overcome his inability to interact with the material realm and be able to fight with the help of a combat avatar designed especially to accommodate the companion spirit.

Ves could make this avatar as large as a tiger or as small as a housecat. Though he preferred the latter, it was hard to stuff too many powerful components inside a tiny machine.

"If I have any free time, I'll just cobble something together so that you can contribute in battle in a different way. Is that okay?"

Mrow.

He failed to find out any further significant abilities, though Ves still speculated that there was more to Blinky.

He didn't have the time to explore what Blinky could do with his ability to harness Worclaw energy, but it should definitely not be trivial.

Ves also didn't forget about adding a portion of Aisling Curver's design seed into his companion spirit. Combined with the fact that Ves integrated a considerable amount of

his own spiritual energy into Blinky, the spiritual cat ought to be able to provide assistance whenever he designed a mech!

It was difficult to figure out what Blinky could do in this regard if Ves wasn't actually designing a mech.

"Oh well. I'll leave this for later. I'll return to work very soon, so you'll definitely be able to show how you can help. I designed you with this capability in mind."

Mrow.

"For now, you can play with Goldie or get Lucky to accept you. I have to take care of some administrative work."

He proceeded to handle the paperwork that had piled up in the last few weeks while allowing Blinky to fool around.

Ves was able to maintain at least some focus on his companion spirit, which meant he knew exactly what Blinky was doing and what he was thinking.

Blinky behaved like any young cat, though he was not as helpless as a kitten. Seeing that Lucky still looked wary towards him, the Star Cat circled around and tried to play with the gem cat.

"Meow meow!"

Mrow. Mrow.

"MEOW!"

Sadly, Lucky acted as if he was Gloriana who just found out that Ves got a new girlfriend behind her back.

It didn't take long before the two cats began to wrestle against each other again!

This time, Blinky tried to leverage more strength.

Mrow mrow!

Nyaaaaa?

The Golden Cat materialized close by and observed the fight with a curious expression.

Mrow!

Nyaaa.

Goldie donated a splash of spiritual energy to Blinky. This soon allowed the latter to exert greater strength in his fight.

"Meow!"

Nyaaa!

The antics of Blinky and the others became increasingly more nonsensical to Ves. A part of him couldn't believe that an extension of himself had become this stupid and irrational. He was picking fights against a stronger cat and even cheated during an honorable bout between two tomcats!

"What a shameless pet." Ves shook his head in exasperation.

Eventually, Lucky and Blinky lost interest in continuing the fight.

Lucky's spirituality was not as strong as that of the spiritual cats, but all of the minerals and exotics he ate over the years translated into a lot of growth. In addition, all of the battles he participated in turned him into quite a tenacious gem cat!

As for Blinky, damage translated differently to spiritual entities and Lucky wasn't very good at harming these kinds of opponents. It didn't help that the shameless companion spirit begged Goldie for a little boost whenever he was losing momentum.

In the end, Lucky and Blinky acknowledged each other's strength, but that was it. Perhaps they would grow used to each other's presence this way, but it would definitely take a bit of time before they became bosom friends.

Eventually, Gloriana returned home after a long day of work at the design lab. When Ves met up with her during dinner, he contemplated whether it was a good idea for him to reveal his new companion spirit.

Since he wanted to try and see whether Blinky could help him when he worked, he decided it was best to inform his wife beforehand.

She would find out soon enough, and there was no way to make this easier if he delayed.

"Honey?"

"What is it?" She asked as she directed an annoyed glance at Ves.

She harbored quite a bit of resentment towards him for delaying their projects and staying away from the design lab for so long.

"I... was working on something else during this time. I did not spend all of my time on sorting out the issues of my clan."

His wife snorted. "That's pretty obvious. You have been holing up in your 'mancave' for weeks. The only reason you spend time over there is when you want to make something on your own. I guess this is the part where you justify your absence, is that right?"

She knew him too well. Even though he dreaded her response, he continued to go through with his decision.

"Uhm, I guess so. I succeeded, though!"

"Then tell me what you were up to these days. What made you spend so much time off your schedule?"

"Well, it's like this. When Ketis returned to our fleet after becoming both a Journeyman and a swordmaster, I..."

He quickly explained the backstory behind his experiment, but glossed out some facts about companion spirits.

If he told her that he possessed a companion spirit while she did not, she might grow jealous and blow up in front of his face.

He was not ready to grant her a companion spirit of her own. There wasn't enough time to design a proper seed and he still hadn't verified whether Blinky functioned correctly over the long term.

Right now, Ves considered Blinky to be a beta version of a companion spirit. Sure, he was more powerful and complex than what should be the norm, but it remained to be seen whether everything was fine.

Ves had to observe Blinky over the long term in order to verify whether there were any serious problems with him. It might be possible that companion spirits imposed burdens in people's mind. They might also be draining the spiritualities of the people they were attached to in order to sustain their existences.

Ves did not feel concerned about these possible problems because he could easily solve them once he found out anything amiss.

This would not be the case for Gloriana, who was not only bad at spiritual perception, but could not consciously solve any issues in her mind.

A part of Ves knew that he would only be making it worse for him if he postponed the threat. If Gloriana found out the truth about companion spirits a year from now after they

completed all of their expert mech designs, she would probably be livid that Ves denied her the opportunity to leverage a powerful advantage to make their designs even better!

The only ways to mitigate this disastrous explosion was to find a good excuse or design a great companion spirit!

Well, those were problems for later. Right now, Ves lied about Blinky's actual state and simply presented his companion spirit as a solitary spiritual entity.

"So your new cat is similar to Goldie, right? He's a proto-god."

"Something like that. Blinky's role is much more specific."

"Well then. Show him to me. I'm quite curious to see whether you have the skill to design a good cat. You should have come to me. I could have helped you refine your design and prevent you from making the mistake of creating another male proto-god. Female ones are vastly superior!"

Ves coughed but didn't reply. Instead, he mentally signalled Blinky to stop dozing off in his mind and come out to introduce himself to Gloriana.

Mrow mrow.

Blinky appeared in front of Ves' face. His purple, lustrous form along with his starry light pattern made an instant impression to Gloriana.

His wife stopped eating as Blinky slowly flew closer. When the cat came close, he raised his paw in greeting.

Mrow.

"You're so cute! You're handsome as well. Come here, little fellow. You're called Blinky, right?"

Gloriana's eyes turned into stars as she beheld the pretty cat. She reached out to grab Blinky, only for her limbs to go right through.

She recalled that Blinky was a proto-god that was similar Goldie, so she could not embrace the young cat with her limbs.

She already knew how to handle this situation, though. She concentrated her mind and applied a trick that Cynthia Larkinson had taught to her and channeled her spiritual energy through her limbs.

Though this was very strenuous to her, she didn't care and successfully embraced Blinky against her chest.

"Oh, you're so warm and fuzzy! I already love you so much. You're such a good boy."

Mrow! Mrow!

Blinky was already showing signs of distress!

Chapter 2983: Third Round of Mech Design Projects

The excitement surrounding Blinky died down. Since Gloriana accepted the Star Cat into her family, not even Lucky could shoo away the new addition anymore!

After a good night's rest, Ves and Gloriana freshened up and strode into the main design lab with much more weight in their steps. Their pets quietly followed after them, aware that this was a special day for the Larkinson Clan.

Ves no longer paid too much attention to Blinky. Now that he had gotten what he wanted without any further repercussions, he could fully focus on the next major priority of the Design Department.

As for Gloriana, she strode forward as if she was on a mission. She had waited so long for this day. After several delays, she could embark on the projects that she had dreamed about for a long time.

Four Journeyman Mech Designers stood together and faced the crowd of assistant mech designers.

Ves had been absent from the design lab lately, so he had to reacquaint himself with the familiar faces.

He first noted the presence of Dr. Perris. She stood out from the rest because she was primarily a biomech designer. While she possessed sufficient knowledge to work on conventional mech designs, she obviously wouldn't be as passionate.

He briefly swept through notable Apprentice Mech Designers such as Miles Tovar, Oscar DiMartin, Dukan French, Moltar Ringer and Catherine Evenson and tried to gauge their progress by studying their spiritualities.

None of them particularly stood out. Now that Ketis had left the ranks of assistants, Miles Tovar was the closest to becoming a Journeyman, but it was hard to say whether the former scion of the Tovar Family could advance within a couple of years.

From what Ves recalled of the man, Miles and the rest of his Tovar relatives were steady, thoughtful mech designers. They possessed more solid foundations and were quite good at learning and applying knowledge.

Yet this measured approach also caused them to lack the fire and passion of more emotional mech designers like Ketis. This was good for an assistant, but Journeymen weren't meant to be lackeys. If someone wanted to cross the gap and become a mech designer that was fully qualified to lead projects on their own, they had to develop a bolder and more proactive mindset!

Ves briefly glanced at his fellow Journeymen, each of whom exuded a different presence that unquestionably made them stand out from low-ranking mech designers.

"I already have enough Journeymen for now. I'm not in a hurry to welcome more to the fold."

Ves was not inclined to pay as much attention to his assistants anymore now that he assembled a sufficient core of lead designers. He would just let the Apprentices struggle without giving them any special attention. If someone still managed to become a Journeyman under these circumstances, then they deserved true respect.

Before Gloriana began the meeting, Ves briefly met with an assistant mech designer and received some updates on one of the side projects he started.

He hadn't forgotten about his goal of repurposing the Sanctuary from a pure battle mech to a more treatment-oriented version. The design teams that worked on his project performed a lot of research and came up with numerous possible proposals on how to develop a more ornamental variant that didn't have to be maintained so meticulously.

"Good work." Ves nodded in satisfaction as he briefly studied the different design proposals. "I can do the rest from here."

He did not choose to delegate the entire design process to his assistants. If he wanted his new Sanctuary variants to possess potent glows, then he had to get hands-on and make all of the final design choices himself.

Of course, that didn't mean he had to do all of the research and prep work himself. He received lots of relevant materials that could save him a lot of detours and design with a firm goal in mind.

"Hopefully I can squeeze some time in the next month so that I can finish this little side project." He whispered to himself.

Soon enough, Gloriana made her announcement.

"Everyone, our time has finally come." She smiled at the little minions who would soon be working as hard as slaves under her command. "After a long period of planning and preparation, we can finally commence our next round of mech design projects!"

Every assistant turned solemn when they heard this. They already knew that this moment was coming, but now that they finally heard these words, they felt as if it was a bit surreal.

Ordinary Apprentices could never get involved in expert mech design projects! Not only were they crazily high-end, but their designs were usually riddled with military secrets.

Fortunately, the Design Department wasn't a part of a state-affiliated military organisation. Neither the Mech Corps nor the Hex Army had any jurisdiction over the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

The problem was that Gloriana made a decision that imposed some limits on the Design Department.

"Now, before we begin, you need to read and sign some new confidentiality forms." Gloriana said as she waved her hand. A projected document appeared in front of everyone's faces. "After a lot of contemplation, I have decided that it is best for us to make use of Hexer-developed components to piece together our upcoming expert mech designs. The Hexer mech industry has built an entire infrastructure around developing expert mechs and specialized component developers have designed a wide range of high-end mech parts. As you all know, our clan is lacking in this department, so it is best for us to look for external partners to address this shortcoming."

While it was technically possible for them to license high-quality components from the MTA, they were expensive and not quite suitable.

One of the biggest issues was the lack of tech support. These exclusive components were of a different breed from other parts. Their finicky nature, extremely tight tolerances and other complications made it very difficult to adapt and adjust them to an individual expert mech design.

The companies that developed these components knew their products the best. Ves and Gloriana would be able to save a lot of time and increase the integration of these high-end parts if they could directly consult the developers.

This was why Ves ultimately agreed with Gloriana's choice. The relationship between the Hexers and the Larkinsons had already grown close enough that the former didn't mind lending a hand to the latter.

It didn't matter if those high-end components were originally designed for female Hexer expert mechs. He only cared if they were powerful, efficient and practical enough to fit his expert mech designs.

Once they got this formality out of the way, Gloriana proceeded to present her overall vision for the six projects. She waved her hand, causing six vague projections of their possible future work to appear.

Though the expert mech designs she sketched lack a lot of details, their overall shapes and contours already provided every knowledgeable mech designer with a good impression of what Gloriana had in store.

The woman at the center of these projects grinned. "In the coming months or maybe year, I want you to give your all into realizing these expert mech designs. It is an extremely rare privilege for any mech designer to be able to work on the vessels of demigods. You will be challenged. You will have to study a lot of new knowledge. You will be tasked with a lot of tedious assignments. Yet all of this is worth it as long as you are able to complete your assignments. The lessons you are about to learn and the experience you stand to gain will become invaluable to your future development as mech designers. When you have become involved with designing the best mechs, normal mech design projects won't seem as challenging anymore."

This caused a lot of Apprentices to look even more forward to working on the expert mech design projects. Ves was quite relieved to see that his wife paid enough attention to their design teams. Motivating them was very important because the workload on expert mech designs was far higher than usual due to all of the powerful parts and systems running through their frames.

Gloriana eyed the projected expert mech designs with increasing passion.

"Before I detail the proposed expert mech design projects one by one, let me explain their overall philosophy and direction. First, let me remind you of what our Larkinson Clan needs. Ves, how many regular mech pilots do we have at the moment?"

"20,000, though only a fraction are assigned to dedicated mechs."

"Is that a lot?"

"It's a lot." Ves smirked. "We have more than enough mech pilots to defend our fleet. As long as we fabricate enough Bright Warriors and other Larkinson mechs, our comprehensive military might will soar!"

Gloriana turned to face the audience again. "Do you hear that? Our mech forces are not lacking mech pilots anymore. They can fully hold their own against other opponents, even if they have military roots. Yet that is not enough to round us out. The Battle of Reckoning has clearly shown how lopsided battles can become when expert mechs join the fray."

The assistants here hardly needed to be reminded of that bloody battle. Each member of the Golden Skull Alliance lost a lot to take down the enemy expert mechs.

"I don't think that anyone in our clan wants to see a repeat of that tragic battle. Even if we are able to outnumber an opponent by ten-to-one, as long as we face a handful of expert mechs, our mech forces are guaranteed to suffer painful losses. Expert mechs

are so powerful that every attack they inflict can easily tear through the armor of ordinary mechs and butcher the mech pilots inside. If these expert mechs are allowed to continue their killing spree without getting blocked, then our clan will suffer at least a hundred mech pilots if not more to take any of them down!"

This was not the only downside to lacking expert mechs. Expert pilots and their powerful machines were able to exert drastic changes in morale. They were such notable presences that their appearance on the battlefield could even swing the outcome of massive battles between mech divisions!

"I believe you can understand what I am conveying to you." Gloriana continued. "Our second-class expert mechs must excel in dueling and fighting against other expert mechs. They need to demolish the heroes and pillars of the enemy as quickly as possible in order to decrease the pressure on our men and push our enemies to their breaking points. In concrete terms, this means that our expert mech designs will incorporate more powerful weapons that excel at penetrating high-quality armor. This means there is less room left to integrate weapons that are geared towards inflicting destruction on a wider scale."

There were always tradeoffs, and Gloriana had already made her first one. Ves fully agreed with her decision to design expert mechs that were expressly designed to fight against equal opponents. This was the standard choice for anyone who was about to design an expert mech, and neither Ves nor Gloriana saw any reason to buck conventional wisdom.

It was still easy enough for this kind of expert mech to destroy lots of regular mechs. Their efficiency wouldn't be as high, though.

Gloriana also announced another global design choice. "In pursuit of maximum power, we must also sacrifice the endurance and running time of our expert mechs. The nature of our fleet and the battles we tend to fight leads me to conclude it is not critical for us to design expert mechs that can last twelve or twenty-four hours straight onto a battlefield. While this decision makes sense for the military, we tend to get caught up in pitched battles most of the time. It is more important for us to solve the most critical elements quickly than to wear down our opponents over time."

This was another decision that made sense. While Ves couldn't rule out the possibility that his clan would participate in a longer battle, for now he felt it was best to allow his expert pilots to burst out all of their strength at once.

Chapter 2984: The Chimera Project

Gloriana made their goals clear. The mech designers had to design expert mechs that were entirely geared towards defeating other expert mechs.

Even if the Larkinson expert mechs lacked the power to finish off a powerful opponent, then they at least had to pose enough of a threat to entangle powerful enemy elements.

With the considerable advantages built up by the Larkinson Clan's mech forces, they did not fear a fight against any second-class opponents. Even if the Friday Coalition launched another ambush by dispatching a couple of mech divisions, the Avatars, Penitent Sisters, Swordmaidens and so on possessed more than enough confidence to fend off elite military mech units!

Yet this scenario became a lot trickier if those enemy mech divisions also brought their resident expert pilots. The inclusion of these powerful elements introduced a lot of variables on the battlefield and made it much harder for the Larkinsons to limit the damage they incurred.

What was most concerning about facing enemy expert mechs was that their extremely high individual power granted them a lot of possibilities to swing the battle in their favor!

From assassinating officer mechs to charging into the fray to disrupt a solid formation, expert mechs were able to act as powerful force multipliers. They could even form a commando team and fly all the way to an enemy flagship or headquarters in order to execute a decapitation strike!

The disproportionate power possessed by these great machines meant that no one could ignore their presence. Even if the Larkinson Clan was able to field ten times the amount of mechs, this situation still wouldn't change all that much!

"Expert mechs are best handled by other expert mechs." Gloriana stated. "While it is possible for us to design additional configurations that allow our expert mechs more flexibility, we cannot compromise on their main purpose. We have many different solutions to defeat weaker opponents, but we don't have many answers against powerful foes. We can either sacrifice a lot of lives or design the strongest expert mechs we can. I think we all prefer to settle on the latter."

Their work had real and profound consequences. Each powerful expert mech was a game changer to the Larkinsons. Ves had long admired the powerful expert mechs of the Cross Clan. Though the martial culture of the Crossers caused them to place a lot more emphasis on them, there was no denying that Lord Reginald Cross and his fellow expert pilots were utterly domineering in battle!

Ves wanted the Larkinson Clan to acquire the same kind of strength. As long as he could solve this final shortcoming of his mech forces, he was confident that his clan would become a lot more prepared to face the perils of the Red Ocean!

After Gloriana explained her thoughts on this subject, she moved to the final common element.

"Each of our expert mechs will also become prime mechs." She stated. "I've already discussed the feasibility of this with my husband. According to him, it is possible to transfer the same powers of a prime mech to an expert mech as long as we incorporate Unending alloy in their designs. Considering that it is not possible for us to apply better armor systems to our projects, I do not see a reason to refuse. Our prime mechs have already showcased the superior defensive properties of their armor plating."

This didn't mean that Ves and the rest were about to tear down the prime mechs that had served the Larkinsons well. The expert pilots would still be able to pilot them for quite some time until the Design Department was finally ready to fabricate their real battle machines.

Aside from the Shield of Samar, Ves did not plan to retain any other prime mech. The Valkyrie Prime, the Piranha Prime, Bright Sword Prime, the Bright Spear Prime and the Bright Beam Prime did not deserve to end their service so soon, but Ves didn't really have another choice.

To make the expert mechs of his dreams, he had to kill the mechs that he sometimes regarded as his own children. This was the woe of every mech designer and something that was never an easy decision to make.

Gloriana did not spend too much time on explaining the more esoteric properties of their upcoming expert mech designs. This was not her specialty and the assistants wouldn't understand the finer details anyway.

Before she moved on to explain her projects on an individual basis, she made a final announcement.

"It is no secret that we have managed to secure the services of Master Moira Willix of the Mech Trade Association as an external contributor and consultant to our projects." Gloriana beamed with happiness. "Think about what that means. A Master Mech Designer that is superior to any other Master that we know of will be spending her precious time to observe our work and provide guidance to us. I hope you do not waste her time and shame us all by slacking off and putting anything less than your best efforts in your assignments. If you cannot fulfill this demand, then I will kick you out of the Design Department myself!"

Every assistant winced. Joining the Design Department was a dream opportunity for many of these individuals, and getting fired was one of the worst outcomes that could happen to them! The mech designs they got in touch with became progressively better and more impressive. They even reached the point where they received the honor of being able to work on expert mech design projects, so who would ever be stupid enough to screw this precious chance?

Though Gloriana's warning sounded a bit ominous, it had the desired effect on the assistants. From the way they were vigilantly looking at others, it became clear that they

intended to step in and intervene themselves if anyone in their ranks did not do their part.

"Hmph." Gloriana nodded in satisfaction at the diligence shown by the Apprentices. "Now that I have made all of that clear, let us dive into the individual projects. Let us begin by examining the project outline for Venerable Joshua's expert mech."

Prior to this moment, Gloriana already performed extensive prep work. This included quizzing the expert pilots of what they sought in their expert mechs and making many observations and measurements in order to ensure that their future machines fit them like a glove.

When all but one projection faded, the expert mech outline that remained grew larger until it dominated the main lab compartment.

The sketch did not display too many distinctive characteristics, but there were a number of elements that stood out. The most obvious one was that the medium mech frame carried both a rifle and a sword.

"Venerable Joshua Larkinson is a rare multi-disciplinary and multi-talented expert pilot who is comfortable with fighting both at range and up close. While he has primarily piloted melee mechs in recent battles, that is primarily because we are unable to meet all of his demands. This is a suboptimal situation and one that we must urgently address in order to enable Venerable Joshua to make use of his full strength and capabilities."

The outline of Joshua's expert mech did not seem to possess any pronounced strengths. It actually shared a number of similarities to the Bright Warrior product line.

"This expert mech design project is characterized by one codeword. Chimera." Gloriana stated. "This is a mech that is designed with flexibility, versatility and adaptation in mind. Just like Venerable Joshua himself, his first expert mech should be able to perform well from afar, at midrange or in the thick of a clash. It should be able to snipe priority targets at range and outduel enemy mechs up close. It must have enough mobility to catch up to every other medium expert mech but boast enough toughness to survive destructive charges."

It went without saying that these were very ambitious aspirations. It was extremely difficult to design a mech that could perform well in many different situations and still make sure that all of their specs remained high.

Some of the assistants already began to look doubtful, but Gloriana did not take their doubts seriously.

"The Chimera Project is not about designing the fastest mech, the toughest mech or the strongest mech. It is about designing a mech that can perform well no matter the circumstances and would always remain useful. In the expert mech lineup of our

Larkinson Clan, we need this stable anchor. To that end, Ves has also agreed to implement a variable glow to this design!"

Ves had already demonstrated the capability to swap the design spirits of his products during his last design duel. Since it made sense to apply it to Venerable Joshua's expert mech, it became a core feature from the ground up. The Chimera Project was an attempt to make the most out of this unusual feature!

Once Gloriana finished her brief presentation on this project, Miles Tovar cautiously raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"You have been quite clear on the overall design direction of the Chimera Project, ma'am, but we have yet to hear about the most distinctive feature of this expert mech. What are its planned resonance abilities?"

"It is too soon to talk about this. I am still discussing this issue with Master Willix. In the last two months, we have already researched and collected a number of resonating exotics that are compatible with our expert pilots. Our clan are still experiencing some difficulties in procuring usable quantities of rarer resonating exotics. We have identified some very juicy ones, but they are so rare that not even Master Willix can readily supply them. If we are unable to buy them soon enough, then we will have to cut back our options."

Gloriana sounded rather helpless towards this reality. Humanity discovered many different resonating exotics, but their supply was very scattered and inconsistent. States that were able to mine them usually didn't dump them in the open market. Instead, they treated these goods as strategic materials and hoarded them for their own expert mechs.

While it was still possible to buy lower grades of resonating exotics in one market or another, the more potent ones were too difficult to obtain for the Larkinsons. The main reason for this was because they got used within months after they were excavated!

This was one of the fundamental reasons why the power of a state was necessary to accumulate a lineup of quality expert mechs. Without the advantages of territory and all of the powers that it bestowed, it was too hard to obtain many necessary goods.

Fortunately, Master Willix was willing to lend a hand according to their prior agreement, but even she couldn't completely ignore the rules established by the MTA.

As long as the Larkinson Clan was able to acquire enough quality resonating exotics, the Design Department did not have to start off with developing low-tier expert mechs but could start with designing mid-tier expert mechs straight away!

Even though they were much harder for beginner expert pilots to control, this was not a big deal as there were several ways to temporarily suppress the more powerful functions.

The only relief they had was that Master Willix was willing to provide a little assistance, but she still expected the Larkinsons to source the bulk of the resonating exotics they intended to use. Collecting these valuable materials was a challenge that everyone who intended to develop an expert mech had to solve!

Ves already had some ideas in mind that might help. Though he was not willing to exchange his MTA merits to procure these rare exotics, he was confident he could trade something else in order to acquire higher-quality resonating exotics.

"Will this hero mech come in multiple configurations like the Bright Warrior?"

"It shouldn't be necessary, at least at first." Gloriana shook her head. "Let us not get ahead of ourselves. I have worked on expert mech designs in the past. The scope and difficulty of these projects are far greater. We must set simple goals at first and do our best to meet them. It is not necessarily the case that we will put down our work once we complete a project. Expert mechs traditionally remain in active development for a long time. We can slowly implement changes and upgrades to our proudest work so that they can become better over time."

This was the advantage to working on custom mechs as opposed to mass market models. It was very important for the production-ready version of a mech design to remain consistent and up to date for a long span of time. This is not necessarily the case for expert mechs. The importance of making them as strong as possible meant that their developers should frequently go back to their finished works and examine their prior performance. If actual battles showcased a new shortcoming, then the developers would definitely do their best to plug the gap before it turned into a fatal vulnerability!

Chapter 2985: Keywords

Once Gloriana was happy that everyone understood her intentions towards the Chimera Project, she moved on to the second expert mech on the list.

The projection of Venerable Joshua's hero expert mech made way for a much thicker and beefier outline.

Hardly anyone failed to recognize the distinctive contours and color scheme of the Shield of Samar.

Compared to the current prime mech version of this defensive mech, the expert mech revision took over many of the elements of the Shield of Samar and somehow made them bigger, heavier and more imposing!

Ves felt like palming his face. His earlier attempt to persuade Venerable Jannzi to move away from a near-immobile mech fell on deaf ears. Jannzi had doubled down instead and Gloriana was happy to indulge the stubborn expert pilot's desires.

"Our second expert mech design project centers around a simple keyword: bulwark. In contrast to all of the other projects, the expert space knight that we are designing for Venerable Jannzi is heavily based on an existing mech. Her demands are very clear. The Bulwark Project must not work towards developing a new mech, but instead aim to upgrade an existing mech. It is difficult for us to explain what this exactly means, but all you need to know is that we will try to retain as many elements from the current Shield of Samar as possible."

"Can that be done?" Someone asked.

"Why certainly." Gloriana smiled. "It's been done before. The only complication is that the requirements we have to meet and the approach we have to adopt is a little cumbersome. Our goal is not to design an expert mech that is similar to the Shield of Samar. We must sincerely take the current prime mech version of the mech and implement a wide range of modifications to elevate its capabilities."

"The space knight you've projected is larger and thicker than the Aurora Titan design. Are we increasing the Shield of Samar's weight class?"

"That is correct. The Aurora Titan that the Shield of Samar was originally based upon was supposed to be a commercial model for the third-class mech market. Since heavy mechs were not commercially viable in my husband's former state, he chose to design a mech that is only a half-hearted version of a proper heavy mech."

Ves quietly shook his head. The main reason why he settled on a super-medium space knight was because it took way too much capacity to integrate a polarizing module in the design. It was an inelegant solution to a very difficult problem.

His wife soon proceeded to elaborate on what she had in mind for the upcoming iteration Shield of Samar.

"Defense. Defense. Defense. Everything about this mech is geared towards defense." Gloriana stated as she sent a brief glance towards Ves. "Now, I am aware of the limitations of designing heavy melee mechs, but we must respect the wishes of the mech pilots we serve. There are several possible solutions that we can implement in order to mitigate the obvious shortcomings of this expert mech design, but I cannot share anything more about this since I am still trying to acquire the resonating exotics needed to realize my vision."

Aside from this complication, the remaining details of the Bulwark Project did not sound that complicated. Defensive mechs were some of the simplest and easiest mechs to design. They just had to make every component thicker and tougher than usual.

The greatest challenge to designing good defensive mechs was to make sure that their other parameters weren't too poor. The mech designers also had to make sure that their internal architecture was robust enough to withstand heavy shocks and other forms of indirect damage.

Project Bulwark's unrelenting focus on defense over every other priority limited the complexity of this project and ensured that everyone working on it remained focused. While Ves was happy that Gloriana was sober enough to exercise restraint, he was also a bit dissatisfied that she was not contemplating enough upgrades.

Gloriana didn't care about his feelings. She had a strong idea of what the expert mech version of the Shield of Samar should look like. It didn't matter if the mech was originally his own work and that Gloriana hadn't been involved with the design of the Aurora Titan.

"Now, let's move on to a mech that is very much the opposite to the Shield of Samar."

The projection of a considerably smaller and slimmer expert mech appeared into view.

"Venerable Tusa is our only expert light mech specialist. His needs are fairly simple and obvious. He wishes to pilot a light mech that is fast but more importantly elusive. The expert mech that we will develop for him must possess the best mobility out of all of the projects we will be working on for this round."

The outline of the expert light skirmisher that Gloriana prepared resembled the Ferocious Piranha product line. Ves already knew that Venerable Tusa had become quite a fan of the Piranha Prime's properties.

The only issue was that the Piranha Prime was still a bit too sluggish for Tusa's tastes. The base model was designed to be an offensive mech that leveraged its debilitating glow to wipe out weakened opponents with great efficiency. It was not designed to fight against unaffected enemies that could put up a good fight.

In order to provide Venerable Tusa with the capability to duel other expert mechs, Gloriana had to implement some targeted adjustments.

"I have established an overall direction for this expert mech design after comprehending Venerable Tusa's piloting profile and listening to his own requirements. The keyword for this project is disruption. The light skirmisher he wishes to pilot has to be able to exert a great degree of pressure towards his opponents due to all of the possible ways he can disrupt their critical arrangements and spoil their master plans. While his expert mech is not meant to be a stealth mech, it should still be able to rely on its superior mobility to travel behind enemy lines and perform critical disruption missions."

Venerable Tusa's expert mech had to be able to fend for itself. It had to be tough enough withstand saturation bombardment, fast enough to outrun enemy pursuit and

strong enough to complete its sabotage or assassination tasks without excessive delays.

Gloriana pointed at the flight system of the proposed expert mech. "If you look closely enough, then you might have noticed that the flight system and other mobility systems of the mech aren't geared towards straight-line acceleration. It is much more important for this expert mech to be nimble than to become the fastest sprinter. It has to be able to weave between a tight formation of enemy mechs and navigate through clouds of debris without slowing down too much. The superior evasion ability of the Disruptor Project also has to be high enough to evade enemy expert mech attacks in the heat of battle."

The expert light skirmisher therefore incorporated many miniaturized boosters that were pointed in many different directions.

A mech that aimed to maximize its forward acceleration at all cost would have featured a lot of boosters oriented towards the rear. The Disruptor Project instead placed these boosters to the sides or even the front of the mech. This allowed Venerable Tusa's upcoming expert mech to quickly dash back or to the side with not that much effort.

"Will Venerable Tusa's expert mech possess the same glow as the Piranha Prime, ma'am?" Moltar Ringer asked.

Gloriana pinned the little assistant with a glare. "Did you forget what I told you? What is the primary purpose of our expert mechs?"

"Uhhmm... to fight against other expert mechs?"

"Correct. Now think about how glows work. They affect the minds of mech pilots, completely bypassing any mech or barrier that stands in the way. This means that the effectiveness of a suppressive glow can vary depending on the mental strength of the enemies subjected to it. How do you think an enemy expert pilot will fare when subjected to the Ferocious Piranha's glow?"

The answer was obvious. Moltar lowered his head. "The expert pilot will easily be able to shrug off the effects."

Gloriana snorted. "Took you long enough. Everyone else, don't make the same mistake. While we do not exclude our expert mechs from being used against cannon fodder opponents, they must not sacrifice their ability to fight against equal opponents. It is a waste of a glow to apply a suppressive glow to the Disruptor Project. It is much better to make use of a supportive glow that aligns with Venerable Tusa's piloting tendencies because there is much less resistance that way."

She made a good point. Expert pilots could easily block the influence of glows they didn't like, but they could embrace them as well if they saw no problem with it. This allowed Venerable Jannzi to draw strength from Qilanxo's glow.

"What are the armaments of this expert light skirmisher, ma'am? Equipping it with two short knives or daggers sounds underwhelming. An expert mech should definitely be able to carry a larger weapon loadout."

One of the reasons why light skirmishers always appeared comically underpowered was because every gram counted. Their mass had to be as low as possible and carrying heavier weapons only needlessly weighed them down.

This didn't mean that the daggers they wielded were flimsy. They were actually made out of higher-quality materials that allowed them to penetrate armor without incurring too much damage in the process. Their small volumes caused these weapons to be quite cheap despite being made out of better materials.

"We are still considering this issue. Venerable Tusa is accustomed to the traditional light skirmisher fighting style so he does not have a great need to carry other weapons."

That didn't mean that they ruled out this option. Perhaps Gloriana would agree to add a pistol or carbine to the expert mech's loadout.

"For the next project, I believe it is better to give the word to our latest Journeyman Mech Designer."

Ketis smiled at Gloriana and stepped forward.

Though the relations between the two had worsened a bit after Ketis became the latest lead designer of the Design Department, that did not affect their professionalism.

Ketis confidently faced the crowd she used to be a part of. "I will be in charge of Venerable Dise's expert mech design project. As a Swordmaiden, swordmaster and a fellow compatriot of hers, I am the most appropriate mech designer to make all of the design choices. While I may not have as much design experience as my colleagues, this is my specialty."

She did not intend to give ground to anyone when it came to this project. She was fortunate that Gloriana agreed to take a step back.

The projection of the expert swordsman mech looked a little rougher, but it still conveyed some very clear ideas.

"The projects that Gloriana exhibited so far are all good at something, but they are still lacking something." Ketis explained. "The Disruptor Project is the most offense-oriented that I have heard so far, but even then its meager strength and arsenal limit the amount of damage it can inflict. Sometimes, we have to face an opponent that is too tough to damage with a couple of tiny knives. Sometimes, the only way to defeat an enemy expert mech is to apply a judicious amount of leverage. This is where Venerable Dise's expert mech comes into play."

Just like any other Swordmaiden mech, the most prominent feature of the projected design was its prominent greatsword.

"Since Gloriana likes to label these expert mech designs with keywords so much, here is the one for this expert mech project: decapitator. Venerable Dise likes to decapitate formidable opponents and the expert mech that we will provide to her will give her the strength to do so. It is not a machine that is designed to bully the weak. It is a machine that is meant to vanquish the powerful."

Ketis did not aim low, that was for sure.

"The Decapitator Project is the strongest duelist among the six expert mech designs and our best champion against the most formidable expert mechs we might encounter. If we ever get confronted by a hostile high-tier expert mech such as the Erin Tear or the Bolvos Rage, then we have no choice but to put at least one of our own champions forward. Even if the matchup looks uneven, there is no fairness on the battlefield. We can only do our best to enable Venerable Dise as much as possible. No matter what powerful foe she faces, none of them can survive if Venerable Dise can drive her sword through their weak point!"

Chapter 2986: Different Roles

Though Gloriana had the final say on the expert mech designs projects this time, she did not intend to spread herself too thin. There were some projects which interested her more than others. It was already strenuous for a single Journeyman to devote his or her time on one expert mech design, let alone six or seven at once.

For this reason, she adopted the same project management model that Ves liked to use. While she still grasped the highest authority on the projects, she did not intend to meddle too much in the projects she assigned to other Journeymen.

Though Ketis was still too new of a Journeyman to be trusted with a major responsibility, her passion and her emotional connection towards the Decapitator Project was clear to all. Gloriana made the right choice to put Ketis in charge of it. There was no way that the swordmaster would screw up something so pivotal to the Swordmaidens!

In order to achieve the best possible results, Gloriana even put down her jealous and competitive streak. Every mech designer in the Design Department was an asset and the only way to fulfill her ambitions on these projects was to leverage their specialties to the fullest!

Ves was watching her carefully all the while. If she showed no management ability or let her biases overrule common sense, then he had no qualms about seizing back control even if she was his wife.

He was happy that he did not have to resort to this ugly option. No matter whether it was the right choice, the bad blood that would form between them would be enough to douse their enthusiasm and prevent them from putting their all in their expert mech designs.

The Design Department may be his kingdom, but it was not good if there were no good leaders aside from him. Every lead designer possessed enough design ability to be able to lead a major project on their own, and Ves intended to bestow them more autonomy in the future as the amount of mech designers working for the LMC expanded.

After Ketis outlined her overall intentions towards the Decapitator Project, Gloriana took over again and introduced the fifth project.

The projection changed to show the outline of a spearman mech.

"Venerable Orfan is an expert pilot that has not been as prominent as the others lately, but she is still a powerful presence on the battlefield in her own right." Gloriana introduced. "She is just as avid of a duelist as Venerable Dise, and she longs to pit herself in battle against other formidable expert pilots. However, her fighting style is different from that of our Swordmaiden expert pilot, and her expert mech reflects her choices."

Compared to the previous expert mech design, the one on display right now was bulkier and looked as if it was much more ready to absorb enemy attacks.

"The Vanguard Project centers around a mech that can lead the charge and advance boldly against the enemy." Gloriana explained her vision for this project. "While this expert mech is not a true lancer mech, it can function as one with its potent straight-line acceleration afforded by its robust flight system. When it is finally locked into a brawl, its lateral mobility might not be able to catch up with more nimble expert mechs, but its multi-layered armor system which includes Unending alloy will provide it with enough of a buffer to launch unrelenting attacks without risking immediate defeat!"

Unending alloy might be incredibly tough, but it was not an omnipotent material. It could still be heated up to insane temperatures if it was continually hit by energy attacks. This was why Gloriana chose to thicken and add multiple layers to Venerable Orfan's expert mech.

While this would inevitably increase its bulk and reduce its agility, it could withstand the most punishment out of all of the expert mechs aside from the Bulwark Project!

The Vanguard Project was an all-out assault mech that eschewed flanking and clever maneuvering in favor of enhancing its breakthrough potential. The Larkinsons desperately needed this kind of mech to punch through prepared lines and overcome the defenses of prepared enemy expert mechs.

Rina Orion raised her hand. "Won't this expert spearman mech become too sluggish to duel against other melee expert mechs?"

"It is not meant to fight like the Decapitator Project. Instead of relying on agility, timing and skill to outduel an opponent, the Vanguard Project is explicitly designed to trade blow for blow and force enemy expert mechs into brutal clashes that will hurt both sides. With the Unending alloy layer applied to Venerable Orfan's expert mech, we have great confidence that it will come out on top against any second-class opponent!"

This was not an indictment against Venerable Orfan's skill. The Vandal expert pilot would probably lose out in a duel against Venerable Dise, but she was no slouch when it came to her spearmanship.

There were nonetheless situations where the Decapitator Project was less suitable in certain matchups. If it faced a powerful expert pilot that matched or exceeded Venerable Dise's skill, then the duel might get dragged out for a long time.

This was not what the clan wanted to see. Its mech doctrines were all geared towards explosive action and crushing the enemy as quickly as possible. As the Battle of Reckoning had already shown, the Larkinson mech pilots were prone to losing steam when they weren't able to beat their opponents quickly.

The Vanguard Project was called this way because Gloriana believed that Venerable Orfan could break these kinds of stalemates in the direct and arguably the stupidest way possible.

"Even stupid solutions have their place." Ves whispered. "This is the best possible role for a shortsighted expert pilot like Venerable Orfan."

The best way to solve the Gordian knot was to cut it in half!

Gloriana evidently agreed with this direction, so her plan for the Vanguard Project was to load it with plenty of defenses and damage mitigation modules. It was an expert mech that emphasized toughness over finesse.

Once she finished explaining the Vanguard Project, she moved on to the last expert mech design project.

The projection of an expert spearman mech design made way for a more slender and fragile expert mech.

Every expert mech shown so far did not excel at ranged combat. Though Venerable Joshua was able to fulfill this role due to his flexibility, he did not excel at it like those who lived and breathed marksmanship like Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Brutus.

The lack of dedicated Larkinson expert pilots caused a lot of consternation among the military leadership of the Larkinson Clan. Until expert candidates such as Taon Melin were able to overcome their next hurdle, the only dedicated ranged expert pilot that the Larkinson Clan could command was Venerable Davia Stark.

Though Ves felt annoyed at Venerable Davia's lack of interest in joining the Larkinson Clan, Gloriana did not seem to mind that much.

"Venerable Davia Stark is different from the other expert pilots we have discussed so far." The Hexer expert pilot began with a respectful tone. "While she is not a Larkinson, her life experiences and defeats she suffered have tempered her forbearance and wisdom. As the oldest expert pilot in our service, she may lack the brashness of her peers, but that makes her suitable to go on overwatch over our entire fleet."

The expert mech on display might not resemble the Bright Beam Prime anymore, but many of its principles were the same.

It was a purely offense-oriented mech. Just like Venerable Stark's prime mech, it lacked an Unending alloy armor system due to scarcity and only concentrated a relatively modest quantity on the main weapon.

It couldn't be helped. There was not enough Unending alloy to cover all of the expert mechs. Ves even felt tempted to return to the Nyxian Gap in order to hunt other statues of the dark gods, but that was a bad idea for multiple reasons.

Until he could find a substitute material that was both tough and spiritually reactive, there was no way the Larkinsons could outfit their subsequent expert mechs with prime mech capabilities.

"I am sure you have noticed the clear direction of this mech design. The Sentry Project is equipped with a powerful modified dual-type energy rifle that is based on a model that has served many Hexer expert pilots well. It can fire positron beams that are notable for their high penetration and single-shot power when empowered by resonance. It can also fire more efficient and rapid laser beams that can also be split to intercept multiple incoming projectiles."

This was a typical setup for energy-based rifleman mechs. Ves found it curious that Gloriana and Venerable Stark opted to leave out a kinetic option. Some opponents were much more vulnerable against physical damage than pure energy damage. While it was possible to equip the Sentry Project with a specialized gauss rifle, the entire design of the ranged expert mech was optimized towards maximizing its energy weapon capabilities.

Perhaps Gloriana was banking on the hope that future expert pilots would be able to fill this hole in the Larkinson Clan's expert mech lineup. Ves agreed with her strategy. It

was better to do one job well than multiple roles poorly. In any case, they could still rely on Venerable Joshua and the Chimera Project to take care of this when necessary.

His wife waved her hand, causing a projection of the Bulwark Project to reappear.

"During the Battle of Reckoning, we fought against the Corundian Giants, an elite Coalition Reserve Corps mech regiment that has adopted an unusual tactic of merging their ranged and defensive mechs together. During that same battle, the Shield of Samar and the Bright Beam Prime managed to utilize the same tactic, though their mechs weren't designed to mate with each other. Though there are many shortcomings to this tactic, the synergy it produces between two different mechs is quite great, so I intend to accommodate this mode of combat from the ground up this time. This will ensure the Shield of Samar will always be able to play a useful role if nothing else."

No one was ashamed at the fact that the Larkinsons intended to steal the gimmick of one of their defeated opponents. It was incredibly effective against opponents that did not possess overwhelming firepower and were not capable of closing in on the Larkinson mechs quickly.

While some might be able to argue that it was more effective to rely on bunkers or defensive ships to provide cover to ranged mechs, that came with its own downsides. Starships were big and valuable and no one liked to put them in harm's way.

The best use of this tactic was to deploy the combination mechs away from the main fleet so that they could shoot at advancing enemies from an angle.

This was also how Ves envisioned the Bulwark Project and the Sentry Project in battle. The different firing angle along with their isolated position could make it a lot harder for an enemy commander to choose how to approach and attack the Larkinson fleet.

Gloriana spent a bit of time on how to facilitate the integration between the two expert mechs. Despite the large flight system mounted on the rear of the Shield of Samar, Venerable Stark's expert mech should still be able to take position due to some targeted modifications.

Once the two powerful machines merged, the combination of the two would produce wonderful results!

Not only would the Shield of Samar provide extremely powerful protection to the fragile ranged expert mech, but it could also lend its entire energy reserve.

In turn, the defensive mech was able to absorb a lot of heat due to its enormous mass and bulk. This allowed the Sentry Project to fire its potent rifle at a much higher rate without worrying about overheating.

The only complication was that Neither Ves nor Gloriana had a good idea of how the resonances of the two expert mechs affected each other. They might cancel each other out to some extent, which would result in weaker overall performance. This was something that only Master Willix could solve.

Gloriana finally ended her presentation. She clapped her hands and caused the projections to disappear.

"Well, that's it for our six projects. Do you have any questions? If not, I will announce which projects you will be working upon and issue your first assignments. Since we still don't know for certain which resonating exotics we will be working with, we will not be able to complete our mech concepts quickly. In the first couple of weeks, you will mainly be doing research in order to explore our options. Expert mechs don't follow the same rules as ordinary mechs. We can pack far more features in them so don't hesitate to suggest new ideas. Let us make our expert mechs bloom!"

Chapter 2987: Limited Access

The Design Department hadn't gone through any expansions lately, so there were only around fifty assistant mech designers.

That was way too few. Expert mech design projects were only geared towards individual mech pilots, but their complexity vastly exceeded that of regular mech design projects.

While the burden on the lead and contributing designers was far greater, they still required the support of a large amount of assistants. The integration of many powerful miniaturized components in a compact mech frame resulted in a lot of mutual interference and unintended interactions. Many of these problems were difficult to predict and could only be discovered by performing endless simulations or prototype testing.

Still, it was still workable, just not ideal. Ves was already thinking about recruiting a couple of hundred low-ranking mech designers in the next big stop of his expeditionary fleet.

Though his fleet had just picked up a lot of talents from the Life Research Association, most of them were too accustomed to working with biomechs to fit in well with the Design Department.

The only reason why Ves agreed to add Dr. Perris to a design team was to keep an eye on her. She was in possession of a lot of secrets. He was not relieved with letting her stay with her fellow compatriots aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. Who knew what sort of information she might spill.

Once the little assistants all knew which expert mech designs they would be working upon for the next months, Gloriana gathered her fellow Journeymen together.

"I can't spread my attention on all six projects at a time, so I will be focusing most of my efforts on two of them. The three of you can supervise the rest, though this does not mean you can do what you want without going by me first. Have I made myself clear?"

Ves shrugged. "You're in charge this time, Gloriana. We trust in your vision."

"Good husband." She grinned and leaned in to peck his cheek. "I won't betray your trust. I have waited so long for this. Even if we aren't technically qualified to design expert mechs, I am sure we can make something we can be proud of at the end of this journey."

The enthusiasm flowed from Gloriana's body. It was clear that she was ready to give it her all as soon as she handled all of the leadership and administrative issues.

She quickly gathered herself and faced the other Journeymen. "Considering our specialties, inclinations and design experience, I have allocated you to projects that I think you'll be able to help the most. That doesn't mean that you should work exclusively on your assigned projects as your specialties are useful for other mechs as well. It just means that I am relying on you to keep the projects on schedule and make sure that our design teams are not spending their time fruitlessly."

"We understand."

It was the same as how Ves handled the projects, so the Journeymen knew how they should act.

"Very well, then. I'll start with myself. I am quite interested in designing the defensive schemes of the Bulwark and Vanguard Projects. The expert mech designs of both projects demand a lot of expertise in metallurgy, materials science, battle mechatronics, armor systems and so on. Since none of you specialize in defensive systems, I'll take on this responsibility."

Her logic was sound. In truth, the Design Department was lacking in multiple departments now that its scope had grown. Ves could really use Journeymen who specialized in ranged weapons and armor systems.

"Ves."

"Yes, honey?"

"I know you can't wait to devote your time to the Chimera Project, but I'm also handing responsibility of the Sentry Project over to you. It's not that technically complex though it is very challenging to design an expert-grade energy rifle that can be fully harnessed by Venerable Stark. You seem to have a love for laser weapons, so you can try and tinker with the rifle and see if you can integrate your special crystals or something."

Obviously, she didn't think Ves could succeed in integrating luminar crystals in high-end laser weapons. The luminar crystal tech that Ves managed to secure from the MTA was too basic to keep up with battles at this level.

That didn't mean that Ves intended to give up on it. He recently discovered that luminar crystals were actually spiritually reactive. If he found a way to leverage this property, he might be able to give his wife a big surprise.

"I will make sure to treat each project equally, though that doesn't mean I will spend the same time on them both." Ves promised. "The Chimera Project is much more technically complex than a simple expert rifleman mech."

Both of them understood this, so they did not speak any further about this topic.

Gloriana turned to Juliet Stameris. The Penitent Sister mech designer had kept a low profile recently, but that was merely because Ves and Ketis attracted way too much attention lately. The pair got into trouble way too often compared to other Journeymen!

"Juliet, aside from helping us maximize the mobility of all of our projects, I hope you can devote as much effort as you can spare to completing the Disruptor Project. Your expertise on flight systems is critical to maximizing the greatest strength of Venerable Tusa's expert light skirmisher. Will you be able to tolerate working on a male machine?"

The Penitent Sister frowned. "I am a Larkinson. I know how to follow orders. I do not have any problems with cooperating with Venerable Tusa on this project."

"Good. Ketis already knows her assignment, so I don't need to elaborate on this. Is everyone clear on what they have to do during this phase?"

Juliet raised her hands. "Your presentation did not delve into the role of resonating exotics. When will we know what kind of powerful resonance abilities we can integrate into our expert mech designs?"

"I already told you that I cannot make any definite statements on that yet." Gloriana impatiently frowned. "I don't want to design expert mechs that are too shabby, but in order to work on something better, we need to acquire higher-quality resonating exotics. Master Willix can help us find matching ones for each expert pilot, but she can't procure the best ones for us without getting hindered by the rules. The easiest way to obtain them without any fuss is to exchange them with MTA merits, but that is not an option."

The clan required a lot of merits to reach the Red Ocean, so it was stupid to spend it on something that was much less important to its overall future. Ves was willing to sacrifice the upper potential of his first batch of expert mechs if it meant securing passage.

"Doesn't Master Willix have a lot of merits?"

"It won't work." Gloriana shook her head. "The rules and the principles she abides by won't allow her to subsidize our work to this extent. You have to realize that she is already providing us trillions of hex credits worth of value by putting her expertise at our disposal. She also warned me that her rivals within the Association are paying much closer attention to her actions as of late. She ruffled a lot of feathers and is paying the price for that. We can't let her get into any deeper trouble because we are too greedy."

Ves hadn't been speaking with Master Willix as of late so he was not aware of these new developments.

"Does that mean we have to rely on our own efforts to procure the resonating exotics we need?"

"For the most part, yes." His wife sighed. "It's infuriating to contact a representative of a state and get cut off as soon as I make my request. States are way too stingy with their strategic materials. Why can't they just sell a batch of them to us at a good price? We have plenty to spare!"

Ves and the other two Journeymen looked awkward.

"Uhm, this isn't a problem that you can solve by throwing money at it. We need to raise our status and engage in long negotiations in order to get them to open their strategic reserves. This is a task that is better suited to a diplomat. At least leave the talking to someone else."

"Fine." She replied with a glum expression. "We can discuss this problem in detail later. I will have my resonating exotics, one way or another."

The Design Department soon turned into a hive of activity as various mech designers went to work. Since they were still in the early stages of the project, they were mostly performing research on what kind of modules they could add to their expert mech designs and what kind of quality materials they should make use of to maximize the potential of the expert mechs.

The Design Department had plenty of money to splurge on expensive goodies. This was because each project came with a staggering budget of 200 billion hex credits each!

That meant that the total of all six projects cost as much as a decent capital ship!

A typical Hexer expert mech for low-tier expert pilots only cost around 10 to 30 billion hex credits to develop and maintain over the years.

While the Hexadric Hegemony could afford to spend more, the amount of expert pilots in the state was quite staggering. It was not economical to provide each of them with high-quality expert mechs.

The Larkinson Clan's situation was different. Even though the Larkinsons were still saving up a lot of money to fund future capital ships, Ves did not feel too burdened with spending more than a trillion hex credits on just six expert mech designs.

Of course, spending so much on each project was not as impressive as it sounded.

"Expert mech development teams employed by states usually enjoy a lot of conveniences." Gloriana explained to Ves. "They don't have to pay licensing costs and they can draw resonating exotics from the Hegemony's strategic reserves by expending their quotas instead of actual cash. All of the actual costs are borne by the government."

"And we're different."

"Yes. We're different. We haven't built up a large library of high-end component designs. We don't have an expansive reserve of resonating and non-resonating exotics. We need outside help to address these needs. While I managed to solve the component problem easily enough, it is not practical for the Hegemony to ship exotics to us, not when the Hexers need them more to win the Komodo War."

That outcome was looking less and less likely by the day, but Ves didn't want to start an argument over that. He briefly thought about how they could increase the chances of obtaining the exotics they wanted.

"I'll try and see if our route passes through any friendly states that might be interested in trading with us. We can produce some specialty goods that might offer a lot of value to interested parties."

"Like what? Our second-class mechs?" She frowned. "I don't think you want to give away our advantages so easily. Also, unless you sell them in greater quantities, no government institution will be interested. There is always a chance that the 'exclusive' products we trade to them will suddenly become obsolete when you begin publishing commercial second-class mech designs. By the way, when do you intend to do that? Our demand for funding grows every day but the LMC's growth in third-class mech sales has plateaued."

Ves shook his head. "We don't have to resort to that option yet. I still have a couple of alternative ideas that might solve both of those problems. In any case, it doesn't matter if most states don't value what we can offer yet. As long as we find one receptive state, we can get what we want."

The question was whether they would be able to bump into such a state at all along their journey. The Larkinson Clan simply didn't possess enough strength and prestige to get their foot in the door.

Gloriana's eyes brightened for a moment. "Hey, what about that dwarf state you are interested in visiting? Do you have any friends over there? Maybe you can persuade them to give us access to their strategic reserves!"

"Uhm, I don't think that will work, honey! I'm not exactly... friends... with dwarves."

Chapter 2988: The Seventh Project

The difficulty in acquiring higher-end resonating exotics was not a problem that the Larkinsons could solve in a short amount of time.

Perhaps it would have worked if the expeditionary fleet was still in the vicinity of the Hexadric Hegemony, but now that they were in Majestic Teal and moving even further away, Ves could forget about this option.

This forced Ves to set his sights on other states. Due to the fact that the expeditionary fleet was trying to reach the lesser beyonder gate a few star clusters away, the Larkinsons wouldn't be staying in any state along the way long enough to forge new friendships.

Since relationships were important in this kind of business, Ves felt very constrained by this situation. Slowing down the fleet might allow them to develop a relationship with a state along their route, but it was unacceptable for him to delay his journey to the Red Ocean any further.

Ves wanted his expert mech designs to start off on a stronger footing. While it was not impossible to swap low-grade resonating exotics with more expensive ones in the future, that would basically entail tearing entire expert mechs open as resonating exotics were often applied to their core parts.

Still, it was technically possible to overhaul an existing expert mech, so Ves did not find this an unacceptable option.

The real problem was that Ves would have to beg a Senior or Master to integrate the resonating exotics in an expert mech. If he tried to do it himself, then the resonating exotics simply wouldn't generate any resonating abilities under the prompting of expert pilots.

This was one of the big secrets that Journeymen didn't have access to. Ves felt very frustrated by this, but he supposed the MTA had a good reason to withhold it from everyone. Besides, it was truly wasteful to let Journeymen design expert mechs when there were plenty of Seniors and Masters who were willing to take on this job.

As the first days of preliminary work passed by, Ves met frequently with Gloriana in order to keep each other up to date on what they were working on. Good communication was essential to keep everything on track.

During a brief break time, the pair cuddled together in a lounge near the design labs. The two pressed up against each other while their cats played around.

"Meow."

Lucky looked annoyed as Blinky patted his tail.

Mrow.

The companion spirit acted as if he didn't do anything wrong.

"Miaow." Clixie turned her head as if she wanted to request something to her daughter.

Nyaaa.

Goldie flew forward and gently pressed Blinky away from Lucky.

The two spiritual cats had become closer to each other as of late. Due to their spiritual forms, it was not easy for material existences such as Clixie to touch them directly. Both brother and sister enjoyed each other's company because they could do all of the cat things they liked without worrying about phasing through each other's bodies.

Mrow mrow.

The Star Cat attempted to jump onto the Golden Cat, only to get kicked away by the latter.

Nyaaaaaaa!

The two spiritual cats started to wrestle, which caused both Lucky and Clixie to look exasperated.

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

"Hihihi." Gloriana giggled as she rested her head on Ves' uniformed chest. "They're getting cuter and cuter. You've got another cat, right? Why not summon him as well."

"Are you talking about Bygul?" Ves frowned. "He's an AI avatar. He's not a true sentient cat."

"Bring him out anyway. I'm interested to see what Blinky thinks of our electronic cat."

"Very well."

He called out Bygul, who projected his avatar body into view.

[Mew.]

Mrow?!

Blinky stopped chasing after Goldie and looked warily at the new cat. The young spiritual companion started to hiss aggressively at Bygul. It seemed that the spiritual cat really didn't like his electronic counterpart for some reason!

[Mew mew.] Bygul steadily communicated.

The electronic cat had come a long way since his initial jerky movements and actions. After so much deep learning, Bygul's behavior had become practically indistinguishable from real cats!

Since he was an infrequent sight lately, the other cats had to reacquaint themselves with Bygul's anomalous existence. He stood out way too much and failed to integrate with the cat family.

[Mew mew mew!]

"Meow!"

Lucky clawed through Bygul's body, causing the physical projection to pop and disappear.

[Mew.....]

It didn't matter as Bygul reappeared seconds later.

As the Miracle Couple observed the antics of their pets, they slowly discussed some other issues.

"I've heard you've been working on a seventh mech design project in your spare time." Ves stated.

"Didn't I tell you about that? My brother needs a new expert mech as well. I'm adopting a different approach for his machine since it isn't a part of Master Willix's deal. I'm already cooperating with a couple of Hexer mech designers so you don't need to worry about that. I only need you to contribute your specialty."

"I'll need to get involved for that, Gloriana. Do we have the time to spare on an extra project?"

Gloriana reached out and tilted his head so that he looked straight into her eyes. "You will make time for me. Don't refuse. This is a good opportunity to get some extra practice on participating in an expert mech design project. The Hexer partners I've agreed to work with will bear a greater burden and contribute more extensively than Master Willix, so this is a good opportunity to learn how professionals design expert mechs."

He wasn't sure whether these Hexer mech designers would be receptive to Ves, especially since the war was growing poorer and poorer for the Hexadric Hegemony.

In truth, Ves and Gloriana should have been working on their last batch of Hexer mech designs, but neither of them had a good idea on how to change the strategic outlook of the Hexers with their work.

The Hexers had no problem defeating the regular mech pilots of the Friday Coalition. It was the large number of Coalition-aligned expert pilots and expert mechs that truly caused the Hexers to falter as of late.

Though Ves wasn't very interested in adding another burden to his already-busy schedule, he did not deny his wife's arguments. As a mech designer, he possessed a lot of fascination for expert mechs, and this might be a rare opportunity to see how they were designed by those who possessed a lot of experience in this field.

As for the fact that Gloriana's partners were Hexers, that didn't play much of a factor in his decision. He knew his status among the Hexers had already become special since his mech designs made such a profound impact on the Komodo War.

"You're the ultimate good boy." Gloriana summed up with a smile.

Soon enough, they finished their break and went back to work. Aside from supervising his design teams, he also fleshed out his draft designs for the Chimera Project and the Sentry Project.

The latter was simpler and easier to design, so Ves started with it first. Just like Gloriana, he copied over many of the design principles of the Bright Beam Prime.

There were two fundamental differences, though.

First, the Bright Beam Prime was based on the Bright Warrior IB, which was not a specialized ranged mech design.

Since there was no pressing need for Venerable Stark to fight against powerful opponents up close, Ves and Gloriana preferred to start from scratch and design an expert mech that completely specialized in ranged combat.

Gloriana wanted no compromises in this regard and Ves was of the same mind.

"Well, just because it is weak in this area doesn't mean it's defenseless. It would be rather silly if a single ordinary melee mech can defeat an expert mech."

There were plenty of ways to prevent such a shameful outcome. If the situation was truly desperate, then the expert rifleman mech could always activate a bayonet on its rifle and stab enemies with it. If the expert mech lost its rifle for some reason, it could pull out a backup knife or better yet a foldable sword to fend off annoying light skirmishers or something.

The limitations that caused many mech designers to restrain the amount of modules they put into their regular mech designs no longer applied here.

When Ves started to browse the library of high-end expert mech components, he became amazed at how small they were. By relying on superior technology, manufacturing procedures and most important high-grade exotics, the Hexer parts reserved for expert mechs were considerably more powerful while taking up surprisingly little space!

"The most direct comparison is armor."

The mech industry paid a lot of attention to the toughness of expert mechs. This was an extremely well-developed field. As long as someone was willing to pay the price, an expert mech could easily be clad with a thin layer of armor that was nonetheless able to withstand at least ten times as much damage as an equivalent normal mech!

What was even more intriguing was that the efficiency of expert mech-grade armor systems rose drastically when they got thicker. This was the greatest reason why heavy expert mechs had the courage to resist attacks launched by offensive expert mechs.

This didn't even factor in how many useful resonating exotics could directly amplify the performance of the armor system or specific modules!

It took a lot of effort and expertise to make these modifications work, though. This was why Gloriana was so eager to secure the help of component developers.

"It's too bad the Sentry Project doesn't have that much capacity compared to other expert mechs." He sighed.

He was able to stuff all kinds of goodies in Venerable Stark's expert mech design, but it was quite limited compared to what he could put into other expert mech designs.

The biggest weakness of the Sentry Project was its relative lack of armor. No matter what expensive armor system he chose to apply to this rifleman mech, its defense would always be subpar compared to other mechs at this height.

"It's enough to make the Sentry Project a nightmare against regular mechs, but once it gets hit by a resonate-empowered attack, I doubt it will fare well!"

This was also why Gloriana insisted on allowing the Sentry Project to merge with the Bulwark Project. Ves had to make a lot of adjustments to the front half of the expert rifleman mech in order to enable the mating process.

In other words, the Sentry Project revolved around a cover-based machine. Unlike Star Dancer Mark II that his wife intended to design for her brother, Venerable Stark wouldn't be able to dance and weave in open space without putting her expert mech at great risk.

Though Ves wanted to make sure that the Sentry Project was still mobile enough to reposition itself in battle, it was not designed to be a dogfighter.

"It's a sniper, pretty much."

This meant that Ves had to prioritize precision, power and other offensive traits over defense and mobility.

The payoff would be very great. During the Battle of Reckoning, Venerable Stark didn't fire too many times, but each time she did, her impact was enormous.

"Since she can do it once, she can do it again."

Ves actually loved to design extreme mechs that completely focused on maximizing a single aspect. The problem was that he would always regret it later. The deficient mobility of the Aurora Titan and the Shield of Samar was a good example.

He shrugged. "Oh well. I'll just focus on the fun for now and leave the suffering for later."

A ranged expert mech that excelled at long-ranged combat was a valuable addition to the Larkinson Clan. No matter how poor it was in defending itself, it could always rely on cover to mitigate this shortcoming. Whether it took shelter behind the shield of Samar or the Graveyard, the Larkinsons offered plenty of shelter!

Chapter 2989: Add-ons

Ves missed the process of designing a mech.

Mech design was his chosen vocation, so he should be engaging in it as much as possible. It was just that recent events caused him to get distracted by all kinds of priorities.

Now that he was able to return to the job his life revolved around, he felt as if he had finally come home.

Every other priority faded from existence. The integration of the new Swordmaidens and the former Lifers, the upcoming establishment of an Ylvainan mech force, the crewing problems of the recently-acquired Graveyard and the Dragon's Den, the troublesome financing and order placement of the Larkinson Clan's next flagship, the preparation of the new treatment variants of the Sanctuary, the search for more MTA merits, the acquisition of mutated beasts, the continuation of his experiments and so on no longer mattered as much to him anymore.

That was not to say that he forgot about those priorities, but Ves recognized he possessed something of a one-track mind. He was bad at juggling multiple different priorities due to his tendency of becoming fully invested in a given project or activity.

It was just how he worked. As a passionate mech designer, he performed at his peak when he became fully engaged in a mech design or experiment. If he had to do both of them at the same time, then his mind would easily become jumbled, thereby scattering his attention.

The expert mech design projects were still in their preliminary phases. Everyone was tasked with examining and researching different possibilities to include in an expert mech design. The Hexer catalog of high-end components offered quite a lot of choice, so it was important to mix and match together the right modules in order to fulfill a coherent vision.

On the day he decided to devote attention to the Chimera Project, he invited Ketis and Venerable Joshua over to his little corner in the design lab.

"Meow."

Mrow.

Lucky and Blinky perched on opposite sides of a desk while staring at each other. The two cats still hadn't gotten along yet, though they were able to tolerate each other's presence without coming to blows.

"Heya Lucky. Heya Blinky." Ketis grinned at them as she strode closer to scratch both of them beneath their chins. As someone who possessed a companion spirit herself, the Star Cat's intangibility didn't hinder her at all. "Do any of you want some snacks?"

"Meow!"

Mrow!

"Hehe. You guys are as hungry as ever."

She pulled out a chunk of mineral from her pocket uniform and threw it over Lucky's head. The gem cat eagerly tracked the passage of the mineral and jumped straight into the air when it flew above his head.

After a quick chomp, he floated down to the desk with a satisfied expression on his face.

"Meow~"

Blinky didn't eat normal food, but Ketis had a solution for that as well. She pulled out a pocket knife from her toolbelt and lazily slashed in the companion spirit's direction.

A small sharp sword energy wave slowly propagated towards the spiritual cat. Though the energy it contained was enough to cut through the desk material, Blinky did not take it seriously.

As soon as the crescent-shaped wave came close, the Star Cat opened his maw and formed a suction force that quickly shrank and devoured the incoming sword energy attack.

It didn't matter if the attack he absorbed was sharp and damaging. As long as it was made out of spiritual energy, it instantly turned into his food!

Mrow~

Ves looked up from his desk terminal and eyed his companion spirit with a thoughtful look.

They only discovered this interaction relatively recently. He supposed it was a holdover from the Unending One. Since the dark god was able to devour all sorts of energy, it made sense that he could swallow up dangerous and damaging energy as well.

Though Blinky was only a fraction as strong as the Unending One in his peak, he could still digest weaker energy attacks without any strain to his digestion system. Perhaps he might even be able to devour stronger energy in the future, though Ves wasn't willing to find out his current upper limit for fear of damaging a spirit that was less than a month old.

A floating greatsword came close to Blinky and started to sway back and forth. If not for the fact that it was sheathed, Ves would have been a lot more nervous about the fact that a self-moving sword was swinging so vigorously.

Swish swish.

Mrow mrow.

Since Sharpie and Blinky were the same kind of existences, they had struck an immediate friendship. The two were already swapping ideas about how to fulfill their jobs better and how much they liked their respective partners.

Venerable Joshua looked envious at what was going on. "Can I have one of these pets as well? They're really cool and I think it might be handy to have something around that I can carry in my head."

"Patience." Ves waved his hand at him. "This product is still in development. The ones you see before you are still experimental. I have to do my due diligence and monitor them in the long term in order to verify they are safe. Once I am done with that, I might be open to bestowing these new mind pets to people who contributed a lot to our clan."

"I can't wait." Joshua replied in an excited tone.

Of course he was excited. He was Ves' biggest fan. Not only that, but he also possessed a great sensitivity towards life. Gifting him with a living companion that he could bring everywhere, even into battle, would likely do wonders for his mood!

In fact, Ves just came up with an idea on how he might tie a companion spirit to mechs. If he was able to flesh out this idea, he might be able to empower Joshua even further and give him one more tool that could help him achieve victory!

Today was not about creating new companion spirits though, so Ves quickly set this idea aside.

Once Joshua and Ketis sat down next to each other, Ves activated a projection of a vague sketch of the Chimera Project.

"I'm sure that both of you know the overall direction for this expert mech design project." Ves began. "The simplest way to put it is that it takes the concept of the Bright Warrior but takes it a step further on account of incorporating superior materials, better technology and a much more ambitious outlook. While Gloriana has already explained what you want to see in your expert mech, now that we are fleshing out the details, we have bumped into some additional junctions that require your input."

Venerable Joshua grew confused. He turned to his girlfriend. "What is he saying?"

"He means you get to make more choices!" Ketis slapped his arm. "It's your expert mech, so you have to be the one to tell us what you use to implement. While mech designers like us can make many smaller decisions on your behalf, there are plenty of details that will have a profound effect on your battle performance. We can't assume responsibility over them, so that is why you are here."

"I see. I understand. Then ask away."

Ves began to introduce the most pressing question.

"As I have said earlier, the Chimera Project is multi-functional, just like the Bright Warrior. The difference is that the former is currently set up as a hero mech while the latter is a modular mech platform. What this means is that mechs such as the Quint can only fulfill one role at a time. In order to turn it from a swordsman mech into a rifleman mech, it has to spend at least half an hour if not more under the care of a maintenance crew in order to swap out the modular mech parts. Do you want to go through this trouble when you move on to piloting your expert mech?"

Venerable Joshua looked thoughtful. "When I piloted the Quint, there were many situations where I would have liked to wield a rifle while I was wielding a lance. When I wielded a lance, I sometimes wanted to wield a sturdy shield as well. I could have done a lot more in battle if I had access to multiple tools on the battlefield."

"I understand your desire, but it is simply not practical for the Bright Warriors." Ves sighed. "The modular mech platforms are already marked by a lot of compromises, but if I try to turn them into hybrid mechs that try to fulfill every role at the same time, it will turn into a bloated mess that can only deliver mediocre performance. There is virtue in specialization. The Valkyrie Prime that you are currently piloting is much stronger because it is designed to be good in its chosen role."

"I... understand all of that. There are lots of mech pilots in the LMC who are looking forward to moving on from the Bright Warriors. What does this have to do with my expert mech, though?"

Ves smiled. "We have already decided that you should adopt a flexible expert mech, but there are further choices you can make. The central question which I am trying to present to you is whether you wish to pilot a multipurpose mech or a modular mech?"

"A multipurpose mech is like a hero mech but with several more options. A modular mech is like a Bright Warrior where you can swap out components to change its strengths." Ketis quickly explained.

The pros and cons of both approaches should already be clear to Venerable Joshua. The problem was that he couldn't make a choice.

Even though he piloted mechs for a living, he simply did not possess enough comprehension to make informed decisions on complicated technical matters.

Ves decided to offer him a tip. "Don't think about what goes on inside the frames of the mechs. That is a job for mech designers. Think about what will serve you better in battle. Do you want to have lots of choices when you are deployed in battle or are you willing to sacrifice this convenience in order to gain greater performance in the configuration that you have chosen?"

The expert pilot looked genuinely torn. He could imagine plenty of scenarios where he would rather have one or the other.

"What do you recommend, sir?"

Well, Ves expected this question. Venerable Joshua was not yet accustomed to having so much choice. Prior to this moment, he piloted whatever mechs his superiors assigned to him. He never had much choice whether he was assigned to the Bright Warrior IC, the Quint or the Valkyrie Redeemer.

One of his most notable strengths was that he was able to adapt to many different mechs, particularly if they were designed Ves. There was never a case where a mech would be adapted from the beginning of the design phase.

"Let me tell you what I think." Ves said. "The Chimera Project can go both ways, but I believe that too much choice and too many compromises is not a good thing. The reason why the base form of this project is a hero mech is because you can already do a lot with just two weapons. There may be cases where you can play a greater role if your expert mech turns into a lancer mech or a cannoneer mech or something, but in general you can already perform similar jobs by sticking to a hero mech type."

"So are you saying I should settle for a simple expert mech?"

"Not quite." Ves shook his head. "I know a thing or two about hero mechs. They seem a bit more confining to you. The idea I have in mind is to combine the two aforementioned choices by enabling your expert mech to mount sizable add-ons that can be shed at any time in battle. Think of the base form of your expert mech as a core and the add-ons that we can mount on it as temporary external accessories. While this is an expensive option, it is not a big deal for us to finance it as long as you can make the most of it. Are you interested in trying out this concept?"

Silence reigned. Neither Joshua nor Ketis knew what to think about this bold proposal.

Chapter 2990: Mounted Wargear

Just after Ves presented his bold proposal, Blinky directed his shining eyes at Joshua and Ketis.

Mrow?

The couple looked quite confused. They never expected that Ves would propose a third option, and one that sounded a lot different from what they were accustomed to. They didn't have a good idea of what this proposal entailed.

Ves only just came up with this plan, but he already became invested in it. The more he thought about it, the more he felt this was a great way to design a powerful expert mech!

Of course, there were a number of issues as well, but he was confident he could deal with them. His goal was to turn the Chimera Project into an expert mech that was capable of achieving greater impact at the start of any major engagement. He did so by moving beyond the traditional framework of mechs.

Seeing that the two lovers failed to follow his train of thought, he activated a design suite and began to sketch extra modules around the projection of Venerable Joshua's possible expert mech.

The expert mech still retained its hero mech configuration, but it looked like it just took on a half-suit of heavy combat armor.

In order to illustrate his point in the clearest terms possible, he chose to make a dramatic adaptation by mounting artillery cannons on the sides and rear of the hero mech.

The entire ensemble looked so different from that of a normal medium mech that it shared a closer resemblance to a heavy artillery mech like the Transcendent Punisher!

"What is this?" Joshua asked in a befuddling tone. "You can do this?"

"Yes." Ves smiled. "It's technically feasible, though it entails a lot of work. The reason why you don't see this kind of solution in the galactic rim is because it's not efficient. The general approach to serving expert pilots is to identify their greatest strengths and design a single powerful expert mech that accommodates them as best as possible. This model works well for specialists such as Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa, but you're not a part of them. You're simply good at everything, though there are still gaps when we compare your performance to the expert pilots I've just mentioned."

This was something that troubled Ves quite a lot when he started to think on how to approach the Chimera Project. Venerable Joshua was his favorite expert pilot and he wanted to do something more for him. From the current direction of this project, Ves didn't feel as if he would be doing him any justice.

He needed to turn Venerable Joshua into the most defining hero of the Larkinson Clan. This would not only inspire his clansmen, but also make other parties pause whenever they felt tempted to attack the expeditionary fleet.

How could he grant more power to Venerable Joshua without muddling up his expert mech design?

How could he turn Venerable Joshua and his expert mech into the centerpiece of the Larkinson Clan's mech forces?

It was very hard for bland and balanced mechs to attract attention. Ves had always been an advocate of the idea that it was better to go for extremes than to do your best to shore up your weaknesses.

Typical machines such as rifleman mechs and knight mechs possessed very clear strengths and weaknesses. They were good at some aspects and horrible at other aspects. Humanity found a way to cope with the latter while making the best of the former. Mixing and matching different mech types was the best way to draw out the strength of specialized mechs.

This is why he came up with the concept of add-ons.

Ves became inspired to adopt this solution after recalling his experiences back on Prosperous Hill VI.

The most memorable event was witnessing the biojuggernaut's rampage. The way Uranus devastated an entire city and slaughtered thousands of mechs, including instantly killing several expert mechs, was an incredibly dreadful sight.

It was an inspiring one as well. As a mech designer, Ves was able to appreciate the rogue biomonster's combat effectiveness at a much greater level.

Though a single squad of MTA mechs finally managed to take Uranus down, that was mostly because the tech disparity was too big.

The fundamental lesson that Ves drew from this incredibly impactful event was that size mattered a lot. A bigger mech could carry more stuff that allowed it to wield greater power.

However, there were good reasons why mechs never got too big. It was more economical and efficient to adopt the standard sizes that the mech community had settled with after hundreds of years of continuous development.

Yet did that mean it was useless to deviate from these norms? No. It was just a lot more wasteful to go off the beaten path.

It just so happened that Ves didn't care too much about the cost. He wanted to do Venerable Joshua justice and he felt that making stuff bigger was a good idea.

It was not practical to design a larger expert mech. That would turn it into a heavy mech or beyond, and that entailed a critical reduction in mobility. In expert mech duels, this could become a critical weakness that could lead to Venerable Joshua's doom.

Instead, Ves chose to retain the regular hero mech form, but decided to mount temporary add-ons to it. When he researched this topic prior to his meeting with Joshua and Ketis, he found out that it was already an approach that existed for a long time, though it was not that common in the galactic rim.

"I understand now." Ketis said with appreciation in her tone. "Ves wants to do something special for you. I highly suggest you take it. As long as this works out, your expert mech will be able to achieve a far greater impact in battle than our other expert mechs!"

Joshua scratched his head. "I still don't understand. I get what you're trying to do. It's like the mech version of donning a suit of combat armor with integrated armaments. I am just trying to figure out what the point of this is and whether it will actually help me in battle. All of this sounds so outside of what passes off as normal in mechs that I'm afraid I won't find my groove. I would rather pilot a hero mech and be done with it if that is better."

"You're right that this feature can be a burden, but it is not as complicated as you think. The Larkinson Clan needs greater strength than what an ordinary expert mech can provide, and I think this is a viable if a bit extravagant solution for that. The goal of providing your expert mech with powerful mounted wargear is to increase the power of our clan in a dramatic fashion. Every survivor from Prosperous Hill VI can tell you that a bigger mech is a lot scarier than a smaller mech. The sight of your expert mech equipped with add-ons that increase its bulk by two to three times is so eye-catching that the morale of our own troops will soar while the morale of the enemy will sink."

In other words, this solution fell in line with the psychological warfare doctrine of the Larkinson Clan. Some decisions that didn't make sense on the surface became a lot more understandable when taking other factors into account.

After a bit of explanation, Venerable Joshua reluctantly bought on to this ambitious idea. "I can work with this, I think. If our clan can really benefit from it, then I'm willing to try it out. What kind of configurations are you thinking about making, though?"

Ves smiled. Now that he managed to convince Joshua to embrace the idea, the rest was simpler.

"Let's start with just a couple. We can add more mounted wargear loadouts as time goes on, but we don't have the time to design that many." He tapped the projection that he currently projected. "Take this artillery wargear for example. I may have gone overboard with exaggerating its size and cannon loadout, but this is actually a decent choice. When I look at the expert mech lineup of our clan and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance, I see a distinct advantage in melee machines. We don't have that many solutions that work at range."

Especially at the top-end. In the near future, they could rely on just three expert pilots to provide ranged support. Venerable Joshua, Venerable Brutus and Venerable Stark

were the only ones who could help, and only the latter two were truly capable of matching against other expert pilots who excelled in ranged combat.

As much as Ves believed in Venerable Joshua's strength, his hero mech along with his broad specialties meant that he was at a significant disadvantage in this situation.

So when Ves thought of a solution to this problem, he became inspired by Uranus. Just make everything bigger. Size conveyed greater power, which meant that adding more bulk onto Joshua's expert mech translated to greater strength, though not in any aspects.

"If you mount this... wargear... Onto Joshua's machine, then it changes everything." Ketis noted with some concern. "He won't be able to dogfight or maneuver quickly anymore. With how few extra boosters are added to this wargear, he won't be able to fend off any enemy expert mech that comes close."

"It's not an issue, Ketis. As long as no enemy comes close, Joshua will enjoy an absolute advantage in ranged combat. An expert artillery mech is a scary opponent to face. Just its existence is enough to cause a lot of dread in any powerful opponent."

She wasn't satisfied, though. "Will it be effective enough? What about the cost? More importantly, in order to make this additional gear worthwhile, it has to incorporate resonating exotics. I'm already hearing about supply problems. It will become even harder for us to obtain all of the necessary materials if you go through with this plan. How will you solve this problem?"

Ves raised his hand to stave off her barrage of questions.

"It's not as troublesome as you think. Let me begin by stating that this external wargear is meant to be expendable. That doesn't mean that Joshua should dump it into space as soon as it is spent. I would still like to get it back at the end of the battle. It is just not as important as the core mech itself."

He fiddled with the design interface in order to make his point clear. He drew up a very simple battle where the Chimera Project deployed with its artillery loadout.

In the first ten or so minutes, it fired its cannons with abandon. The integrated heat sinks and power supply meant that the mounted wargear was able to output a lot of damage without draining the core mech.

Once a battle progressed and the wargear reached its limits, Joshua merely had to issue a single command to purge the spent equipment.

Now that it was freed from this burden, the mostly-fresh expert hero mech was able to join the fray and continue to fight by relying on its base form.

"The best part about designing and fabricating the mounted wargear loadouts is that they don't have to be too expensive and difficult to make." Ves explained. "The core mech is clad with Unending alloy and I doubt that any material that we can get in the short term will come anywhere close to its durability. So I see no point in trying to catch up to that. Instead, we can rely on cheaper materials but simply apply greater quantities so that the size and bulk of the wargear is responsible for conveying power. This is also a good way to squeeze greater power out of low-grade resonating exotics!"

It was not as simple as that, but Ves didn't feel the need to explain all of the details.

What mattered was getting Venerable Joshua onboard this new plan.

For his part, the young expert pilot became increasingly more interested in trying it out. Just like Ves, Joshua frequently craved new mechs. He would get bored if he piloted the same one all of the time.

"I'd like to try this out." He said with greater certainty in his tone. "The extra wargear has to be useful, though."

Ves nodded in agreement. "That is what we are going to explore right now. Not every mounted wargear makes sense. It is very hard to turn your expert mech into a nimble and agile light skirmisher when we are adding to its bulk rather than the other way around. Let's see what you can do and what roles our clan is lacking."