

## Mech 3181

### *Chapter 3181: Outlived Usefulness*

Ves put the issue of masterworks aside for the moment. He was too far away from making a deliberate masterwork. Though he already possessed a considerable advantage due to his prior successes, the base chance of creating a masterwork was still low for him. The only instances where he came close was if the stars aligned.

In this circumstance, he should stop dreaming and focus on more attainable goals.

"The first expert mechs of our expert pilots don't have to be masterworks."

While it certainly helped with accelerating their progress, they weren't essential until the expert pilots had reached the limits of their progression. If they were on the cusp of becoming an ace pilot, then there were other factors that also determined whether they could break through. They were not completely hopeless.

Still, if Ves wanted the Larkinson Clan to grow stronger and field ace pilots that were the only adequate choice to fight against other ace pilots, then he should not forget about this matter entirely.

"Currently, our expert pilots are still in the early stages, so they don't need any extra assistance. It is only when they approach the stage of Patriarch Reginald Cross that they truly need a masterwork to help them advance."

It would take many years or even decades before people like Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi reached that point. Ves would probably be a much better mech designer by then, so any solutions he came up with now would probably be hopelessly outdated in the future.

There were four major benefits of making a masterwork expert mech this early.

First, Ves and any mech designer involved in its creation gained an increased affinity for mechs that measurably improved the quality of their subsequent mech designs.

Second, masterwork mechs performed better in battle. Even the smallest difference could tip a duel in the favor of the Larkinson Clan, so Ves did not look down on any gain no matter how little had actually changed.

Third, mech pilots progressed much faster when paired with a mech that was closer to their level of extraordinary status. Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship essentially implied that each of the four rungs of the ladder corresponded to the different ranks of mech pilots.

"Maybe that's also why they think that there is a fourth rung. The first one corresponds to regular mech pilots, the second one to expert pilots and the third one to ace pilots. Since we know that god pilots exist, there has to be a standard of mechs that fully compliment their own strength and capabilities."

Fourth, the Design Department didn't have to start a new expert mech design project that was expensive, time-consuming, troublesome and had a high chance of failing to achieve masterwork status.

All in all, everyone still benefited hugely for every masterwork expert mech the Design Department managed to make in this early stage of the Larkinson Clan.

"I'll just see where our next projects will take us." He decided.

From his own experiences, any project completed shortly after a successful masterwork mech creation usually turned into duds.

Part of that had to do with lack of accumulation. Over the course of designing his mechs, Ves encountered many problems which he wasn't able to solve but always lingered in his mind. By piling them up, his brain became filled with so many different ideas that all of them started to blend and mix. At a critical moment, the dam eventually burst and all of these started to fall into place and make sense.

It was difficult to describe this phenomenon, but Ves vaguely thought that it would not be possible for him to make another masterwork mech unless he completed more projects the regular way.

Work on the mech design projects resumed. Right now, Ves and his wife decided to work on the Vanguard Project and the Decapitator Project at the same time.

They both had a lot of elements in common. They were melee offensive expert mechs that possessed relatively balanced parameters and faced many of the same threats. Many of the solutions developed for one of the expert mech designs could also be applied to the other one after a bit of adaptation.

That said, the two projects had plenty of differences.

The Vanguard Project possessed a bulkier frame as it required more all-round protection in order to crash into and crack open prepared enemy formations.

Whether it fought in space, in the skies or on land, the Vanguard Project was supposed to embody its code name and lead the charge against the enemy!

As a result, the Vanguard Project sacrificed both speed and agility in favor of obtaining better protection. There was only one issue that constrained the ambitions of the mech designers.

"We don't have enough Unending alloy to offer thick and solid projection over the entire frame of our expert spearman mech. It is an excellent material, but we don't have enough to make liberal use of this material." Gloriana noted to an audience of recently-recruited assistant mech designers who were ready to perform some light and easy tasks in the design labs.

She pointed at a projection that highlighted multiple layers of external surfaces.

"This is why we have opted to go for a two-layer armor system in which Unending alloy will comprise the inner layer. While we would have wanted to use it as the outer layer, that is not ideal because the armor coverage will have to wrap over a larger volume and therefore use up more materials. Though Unending alloy is ridiculously strong compared to any other material we have access to, it can still melt or break when subjected to sufficient damage. Making the armor plating as thick as we can manage will prevent that from happening."

The Vanguard Project therefore stood out as a unique expert mech among the current batch due to its much less impressive outer layer made out of Breyer alloy.

Though the Larkinsons could have opted to employ a better and more resilient material for the outer layer, the mech designers anticipated that the Vanguard Project might get into frequent scrapes. Due to its prominent function, it was destined to get banged up each time it fought a battle.

Breyer alloy happened to be a material that the Larkinson Clan could easily get a hold of. In fact, it was rather suspicious how a regular supply of an alloy that wasn't produced in large amounts in the galactic rim kept filling up the cargo holds of the Larkinson fleet.

This was yet another one of those little oddities that the Larkinsons gradually took for granted. As long as the patriarch told everyone that they didn't need to worry about it, there was no point in continuing to dwell over the issue.

"To be honest, Breyer alloy is a fine material but it falls a little short when employed as the primary material of the armor system of an expert mech." Gloriana admitted. "That also makes it cheaper and easier for us to replenish, so it is not all bad. In certain circumstances, it can even fool our enemies into thinking that the Vanguard Project is one of our more fragile expert mechs when its inner layer of Unending alloy actually provides excellent protection to its internals."

The Vanguard Project was designed to be loud and attention-grabbing. Its threat level had to be high enough to compel enemies to invest significant assets in order to stop it from rampaging.

However, the biggest and most painful compromise the mech designers had to make was its ability to outfight other strong opponents.

"Due to the overall bulk of the Vanguard Project, it doesn't react as quickly as the slimmer mechs and it is less able to dodge and reposition itself at close range. The spearman mech's flexibility and range of motion is also more limited due to the need to cover its joints. If it is ever forced to duel against another expert mech, then it will likely have to trade injury for injury in order to achieve victory."

Out of all of the Larkinson expert mechs, the Vanguard Project would likely be the one that accumulated the most scars. It would also be the expert mech that was most likely to get demolished first.

All of this dampened her enthusiasm for his project a little bit. She wasn't able to muster the same degree of enthusiasm for his project as last time, which was a shame because she really wanted to repeat her earlier success. The more masterwork mechs she made, the more the Larkinson Clan was equipped to protect her future daughter.

"What of the Decapitator Project, ma'am?"

"That is Ketis' pet project, so she can tell you more about it." Gloriana grinned. "It's a much more exciting if risky expert mech design. The Decapitator Project is supposed to be a flanker, which means it trades protection for mobility. Its offensive power is higher as well as it needs to be able to exert enough mechanical strength to swing its greatsword. While the mech doesn't fare well against direct attacks, its superior mobility allows it to dodge and evade the worst incoming attacks."

Progress on the Decapitator Project picked up immensely after completing the Amaranto. Since that was the first time Ketis participated in the fabrication of a masterwork mech, she received a substantial boost in her ability to design a mech.

This had made her remarkably eager to apply all her new methods and solutions to the expert mech she cared about the most! The Decapitator Project became a bit faster, a bit stronger and a bit sturdier as Ketis and the other Journeymen utilized their newfound gains to turn it up a notch.

As Gloriana was attempting to bring the recent recruits up to speed, Ves met with Ketis in order to discuss the design of the greatsword at his personal workshop.

They were currently looking up at the Bright Sword Prime. The mech had to be broken down sooner or later so that the Design Department could reuse the precious Unending alloy incorporated in the prime mech.

"It's going to be a shame to dismantle this mech." Ketis sighed. "The mech doesn't deserve it. In the hands of an expert candidate, it can still do great things. Can't we just strip the current armor plating and put in Breyer alloy plating in their place?"

"That's too much work, Ketis. First, Unending alloy isn't just used to wrap up the mech. A large portion of the internal structure right down to the core parts of the internal frame

are made out of Unending alloy as well. We have to disassemble the entire mech regardless in order to strip out all of this precious material. Putting it back together without Unending alloy is difficult because Breyer alloy and many other materials aren't as strong. Their density and so on are so different that we need to make thicker structural elements in order to make the mech work again."

They would have to design the Bright Sword Prime in order to accommodate the thicker support structure, and that was a huge pain for just a single mech.

Ketis got the message. It was too impractical and not worth it for the Larkinson Clan to invest resources to preserve the Bright Sword Prime.

"The Bright Sword Prime and the other first-generation prime mechs were always meant to be stopgap measures." Ves said. "Though I value them and appreciate what they have done for us, we shouldn't let sentimental reasons get in the way of doing what is best for our clan. We designed and made these mechs to protect the clan. If we allow it to become a hindrance to this goal, then that is a grave mistake."

Ketis didn't understand why Ves could think that way when his design philosophy was all about treating mechs as living equals to humans.

However, Ves saw no contradiction in this case.

"Some mechs are more precious than others, Ketis. They are designed with a specific purpose in mind and it has to make sense for us to keep using them. We don't have any room to put weak and outdated mechs into retirement homes. The best way they can serve the clan is to give up their existence and allow the materials they are made of to help in the production of better, stronger mechs."

"This... can't you do anything to preserve life within this prime mech?" Ketis asked. "I mean, you're good at manipulating life, right? Why not transplant the life in this prime mech to the Decapitator Project? Won't that be a good way to preserve all of the progress that Venerable Dise had made so far in nurturing the Bright Sword Prime? It's a lot better than starting from scratch!"

This... was an intriguing idea.

#### *Chapter 3182: Constant Design Work*

Ketis presented Ves with an interesting option. If they were insisting upon disassembling the Bright Sword Prime in order to recycle its Unending alloy, why shouldn't they go a step further and recycle its spiritual foundation as well?

When Ves studied the dormant prime mech with his spiritual senses, he could feel the growth it experienced after many months of use. It already experienced a huge

transformation during the Battle of Reckoning and had become firmly imprinted by Venerable Dise.

Was it viable to transplant all of this spiritual development from the Bright Sword Prime to the upcoming Decapitator Project?

Ves had to think deeply about it before he could muster up an answer.

He eventually shook his head. "It's an interesting idea, but it wouldn't be fair to the newer mech. Let me give you an example. I have a daughter on the way. She's a completely new life that is well on her way to experience the wonders of life from a pure and unblemished perspective. Now, do you think it is right to just erase or kill this newborn consciousness and replace it with yours or someone else?"

This was quite an extreme analogy. Ketis frowned as she immediately repulsed at the thought.

"That would clearly be wrong." She admitted. "I don't think the two situations are comparable, though. A mech isn't alive until you make it. What if you build the mech around the life of an existing mech from the start? That way, a new life won't be able to form."

Ves shook his head. "There are other problems. Transplanting an old life in a new body will doubtlessly lead to compatibility problems. The fact of the matter is that the Bright Sword Prime is a vastly different mech from the Decapitator Project. Their properties and fighting style are only superficially similar. In truth, the changes are so much that reusing the foundation of an old mech into a much different one will lead to a lot of inefficiencies that will ultimately deprive Venerable Dise from getting the support she needs to make the most out of her expert mech."

In his understanding, the Decapitator Project also needed to start from scratch because the Bright Sword Prime was originally derived from the Bright Warrior design. This made it so that the prime mech never fully matched with Venerable Dise. Bringing it over would just preserve this flaw and waste some of the Decapitator Project.

The expert swordsman mech was the first mech designed by the Larkinsons that fit Venerable Dise from the ground up. The compatibility between the finished expert mech and the expert pilot should be 100 percent or close to it. Ves believed this was an essential standard that any expert mech had to meet.

Ketis brought up one more argument, though.

"You say all of that, but you've already decided to preserve the current version of the Shield of Samar by transplanting its life over to the Bulwark Project. Isn't this exactly what you said you wouldn't do, Ves?"

Ves smirked. "Nice try, but it's not the same. Unlike the other expert mech design projects, the Bulwark Project was explicitly set up as an upgrade project, not a completely new design project. It is a different approach that expressly seeks to transform the Shield of Samar rather than replacing this old mech. In this particular case, a new living mech will never form because it was never meant to birth one in the first place."

In the end, Ketis accepted the need to clean up the old in order to make way for the new. With cargo space at a premium, there wasn't any room to store the remains of old and decommissioned mechs.

Still, Ketis' attempt to persuade Ves to preserve an old but loyal living mech put him to thought. Despite what he said, he did feel sympathy for the Bright Sword Prime and the other prime mechs that the Design Department needed to dismantle in order to make way for newer and better machines.

Now that he thought about it, didn't he already possess a ready made resting for old and broken mechs?

"We put all of the remaining parts of the Bright Sword Prime and our other decommissioned mechs onto the Graveyard." He told Ketis. "In that way, our loyal machines will be with us and can be of service to us in another way."

She looked a lot less troubled after hearing that. "I suppose that is the best we can do for this old mech."

They returned to work after this. The reason why they brought the Bright Sword Prime to the mech workshop in the first place was to study its greatsword and see if they could derive any lessons from it that they could apply to the newer sword wielded by the Decapitator Project.

"I think we should keep this sword and modify it into a different and more suitable form." Ketis suggested. "Unlike the prime mech itself, this sword is already highly similar to the weapon design I have in mind for the Decapitator Project. Also, its use will largely be the same. We just have to adjust it to take the properties of the Decapitator Project into account while also integrating Bissonat in its structure."

These were substantial changes, but her idea was still valid. Ves thought about it for a moment and decided to agree to her request.

"Swords and any other weapons don't have to be shackled to any single mech. In fact, it is rather normal for weapons to be interchangeable. Expert mechs are different but I don't see as much of a problem here."

"Great!" Ketis grinned. "If we do this, then we will be able to transfer over at least some portion of Venerable Dise's old prime mech."

The new design she had in mind did not differ too much from the old one, but to a specialist like her, the shift was a huge upgrade.

"What kind of sword style is the sword and mech supposed to execute, exactly?" Ves asked. "I've heard that Venerable Dise has been hard at work in trying to refine and develop her own sword style. Will she still fight like a normal Swordmaiden or has she already set off on a different path?"

"The latter is the case. She's a Swordmaiden, but she's also her own person, so it is only right for her to develop her own sword style. She's been doing that in consultation with myself and the Heavensworders. As a mech pilot, she favors rapid, overwhelming assaults over steady, plodding duels. She's a hunter by nature and she wants to pilot a mech that can best allow her to get in, decapitate a powerful enemy mech and get out before she can be cornered. Mobility and momentum is very important to her for that reason."

"That sounds like a lancer mech but with more lateral maneuverability." He commented.

"I can see why you think that, but the Decapitator Project should also be capable of dueling tough opponents if necessary. It's not ideal, though. In a major battle, Venerable Dise would rather cheat than play fair and fight honorable duels. We're a bit different from the Heavensworders in this way."

The Swordmaidens were originally pirates who had spent decades doing their best to survive under harsh circumstances. That meant that they were a lot more practical and willing to do whatever it took to win a battle.

Mechs designed for honorable duels possessed different traits than mechs explicitly designed to take advantage of enemy weaknesses.

When Ves studied the current design of the Decapitator Project, he got the impression of a ruthless swordsman mech that wasn't interested in honorable knightly combat. Even if it was locked in a duel, it would do everything in its power to create an advantage and decapitate an opponent by any means necessary.

Ketis was responsible for the mechanical design of the Decapitator Project. She largely determined the overall shape and proportions so that it best corresponded with Venerable Dise's newly-developed sword style.

She even worked together with Gloriana to optimize and increase the efficiency of these elements. While Ketis understood swordsmanship and Venerable Dise's sword style the best, Gloriana was a lot more adept at refining the enthusiastic swordmaster's implementation.

Weeks slowly passed as the entire Design Department quietly worked to finish the remaining expert mech designs. During this time, many changes took place.

The Larkinson Clan had slowed down its growth but improved in many other ways. Headed by three proactive chief ministers, the various institutions of the clan had already completed a lot of reforms. The lives of average Larkinsons improved and there was much more to do in the fleet these days.

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were also undergoing changes as they had to make preparations to enter the Red Ocean. Unlike the Larkinson Clan, the two lesser partners of the Golden Skull Alliance did not possess a lot of capital ships. This was a big problem as they would have to dump all of their sub-capital ships once they reached the beyonder gate.

Under the current circumstances, it was extremely hard for both groups to acquire additional capital ships. However, neither of them had requested any help from the Larkinson Clan, which led the Black Cats to suspect that they were already working on a plan to solve this issue.

As the expeditionary fleet continued to cut its way through the Bardo Star Sector, it did not stop over in any star system. The three alliance partners still had plenty of supplies and even if some of their resources were running low, they could always place orders ahead of time and receive their shipment brought by specialized transport companies.

After three months of constant design work, both the Vanguard Project and the Decapitator Projects were nearing completion.

Since they were substantially more robust and more complex machines than the Dark Zephyr and the Amaranto, the two offensive melee expert mechs demanded a lot more time to fill up their entire designs. Then the mech designers had to test and optimize all of these elements, and that ate up a lot of time.

During this time, two major events took place.

First, the expeditionary fleet smoothly left the Bardo Star Cluster behind. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers entered into a somewhat tense new place as the entire Fermi Star Cluster seemed to have been a bit more badly affected by the Crown Uprising than other regions in the galactic rim.

Second and most importantly, Gloriana's belly had swelled to a noticeable proportion. No matter what dress or uniform she wore, there was no denying that she was carrying a child.

"Miaow."

Clixie rubbed the side of her cheek against Gloriana's belly during a typical morning.

"Meow?"

Lucky, who had finally returned from the Blinding Banshee, looked a bit bewildered at the sight. He was only gone for a few months and already Gloriana looked completely different!

Ves yawned and stretched his arms before picking up Lucky. "Haven't you ever seen a pregnant woman before?"

"Meow."

He ignored his recently-returned gem cat and reached out to press his hand on Gloriana's belly.

Different from the earlier stages, Ves felt an immediate reaction that felt warm and intimate in a way that was indescribable.

"You've grown so much. You're almost ready." He smiled.

After so many days of injecting spiritual energy in his already spiritually-augmented child, her spirituality had already grown a lot more formidable than most adults.

It was still in a pure and pristine state that did not exhibit any blemishes, so Ves wasn't too worried about robbing his child from her childhood. Her brain development simply hadn't caught up to that point yet. His efforts merely gave his growing baby an immense head start.

No other parent was capable of bestowing spiritual potential to a child!

It was too bad that this method wasn't valid to people who were already born. If that was the case, then he would have had a much easier time empowering the people he favored.

"Oh well."

His daughter had already come very close to reaching the level of strength where Ves could safely grant her a companion spirit seed.

"Just a few more days..."

*Chapter 3183: Boar and Leopard*

"We are nearing the star sector where two of our commissioned capital ships are being built." Gavin reported to Ves during a routine morning briefing session.

Ever since the chief ministers performed their duties, the duration of these sessions had become a lot shorter. Gavin stopped reporting about smaller-scale issues that were already being taken care of by the other officials within the clan.

Ves just wanted to be kept apprised of the general trends and high-level decisions that directly impacted his own possibilities. He didn't want to wake up one day and find out that the chief ministers sold the Spirit of Bentheim or something!

"I remember." He answered after a short while. "Vivian Tsai told me that the clan had contracted a shipbuilding company situated somewhere in the Cin Beta Star Sector."

Gavin nodded. "That's correct. According to the latest status reports, the Diligent Ovenbird's hull is fully built and just needs more electrical and internal installations before she can begin her trials. The Gorgoneion is a bigger and much more substantial capital ship and will need a bit more time before her hull is done."

"Has anyone tried to steal our orders during this time?" Ves critically asked. "The Cin Beta Star Sector is not that far away from the beyonder gate that is situated in the next star cluster. I can imagine that there are lots of aspiring pioneers who badly need a capital ship and can't resist exerting pressure on the shipwrights that are currently finishing our future assets."

"You don't have to worry about that problem, boss." Gavin smirked. "Minister Shederin has subtly conveyed your strong ties to the shipbuilding company and anyone who might have designs on our orders. Hardly anyone in this region of the galaxy is courageous enough to mess with the property of a tier 10 galactic citizen."

"Ah. Yes. Our 'strong' ties to the MTA. Useful, that."

Ever since Ves and his fellow Journeymen created their first masterwork expert mech, their status had clearly changed. Though the mechers were kind enough to suppress the news about their accomplishment, some of the changes couldn't be hidden.

The public records of Ves and the other three Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan clearly state that they had recently been promoted to tier 10 galactic citizenship. This was a huge and abnormal jump. Unless Ves somehow managed to hypnotize the MTA, he and his colleagues must have done something drastic that earned a lot of appreciation from one of the Big Two!

Therefore, it wasn't his upgraded galactic citizenship tier that intimidated rivals. What people were actually wary about was messing with people who currently received the MTA's favor.

"So if everything is going well, we should be receiving the Gorgoneion and the Ovenbird in a couple of months?"

"Yes, boss, though the exact timing depends on how much time it will take for us to complete your 'side business.'"

"You mean our little excursion to the lovely little Smiling Samuel Star Sector, Benny?"  
Ves smirked.

"Yes, that..." Gavin trailed. "Boss, I don't often question you these days, but are you sure it is wise to divert our fleet and enter an empire that does not look kindly on normal humans?"

"Heh, no matter what these dwarves want to do, they don't live in a galaxy where they are dominant. Even if they want to screw us over, they have to get through our entire fleet first. Dwarf mechs fall just as easily as normal humanoid mechs."

"Uhm, about that, I don't know if the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan will want to join you on this trip. According to Shederin, our two allies have serious misgivings about entering the Vulcan Empire. There is nothing that the dwarves can offer to them, so they would rather skip this detour and resume our journey to the Tarnished Crown Star Sector."

This sounded like a big problem. Part of the reason why the expeditionary fleet did not encounter any disturbances was because it was too damn strong. Neither private nor public forces ever thought about messing with the Golden Skull Alliance because the price of attacking their passing fleet was too great!

Though the Larkinson Army by itself was already more than strong enough to fend off most threats, the absence of thousands of additional mechs made it a lot more realistic to launch an attack.

This was not good news to Ves as he did not want his forces to appear weak when he entered the Smiling Samuel Star Sector.

"Will they split from us?" Ves asked.

"Surprisingly, it doesn't look like Glory Seekers and Crossers will go through with their threats to move on ahead to the beyonder gate and wait for us to arrive." Gavin replied. "First, they will become a lot more attractive targets themselves if they no longer combine forces with the Larkinson Army. Second, they want to stay in our good graces. The primary mission of the Glory Seekers is to protect your wife, so they can't just ignore that. The Hexers also believe in the Superior Mother and your ties to her, so Shederin judges that the Glory Seekers will stick with us regardless."

"What about the Cross Clan, Benny?"

"That's a more complicated issue. The rank-and-file Crossers have no stomach to follow us into the Vulcan Empire, but the leaders think differently. Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict are highly in favor of you and don't want anything to happen to you. We can rely on that dynamic to drag them with us into dwarf territory, though they won't be happy with us at all. Relations between us will definitely become strained for a time."

These were major downsides. Considering that they had fought and bled alongside the Larkinsons, this was not the right way to treat his allies.

Yet Ves didn't have much choice. He was not about to let an opportunity to complete one of the System's long-stalled Supply Missions disappear. The System urgently needed the Timpala Steel that Ves had buried in the star sector long ago.

Stuck between choosing whether he should piss his allies or piss off the System, Ves resolutely chose the former!

At least the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan weren't directly tied to his life. Relations could be mended and friendships could be regained. It was a lot harder to survive the consequences of the System's wrath!

"I know you don't understand, but you don't need to. I have business in the Vulcan Empire and I will head over there even if everyone else in the fleet leaves me behind." Ves stated in no uncertain terms.

These days, Ves didn't need to come up with any spurious excuses. His power and prestige had reached such a level that he didn't have to depend on anything else to have his way.

It also helped that he cultivated a reputation for eccentricity. Everyone knew that the patriarch was both brilliant and unconventional. He displayed so many idiosyncrasies that one more oddity should not be a surprise.

Still, this decision was a bit more extreme than others. There was no doubt that his incessant desire to venture deep into the Smiling Samuel Star Sector was straining many people's tolerance.

The two talked a bit more about the preparations for the upcoming trip. The MTA's permit along with Shederin's efforts to find a local guide that didn't hate humans as much made the trip a lot safer.

Ves smiled and leaned back against his chair. "If there is one benefit to entering Smiling Samuel, it's that the Crown Uprising has hardly affected the dwarves. Even the terrorists look down on their kind."

This has caused the Smiling Samuel to be a rare beacon of calm in these turbulent times. Though there was plenty of division in the Vulcan Empire, most of it had to do with the age-old struggle whether the god the dwarves named their state after was human or dwarf. This dogmatic question had plagued the Vulcan Faith since its inception and had never been resolved even as the dwarves somehow managed to dominate an entire star sector.

Of course, this had nothing to do with Ves. He was just an ordinary human visitor who just wanted to see the sights and dig inside a random asteroid belt, that was all. Once he got what he wanted, he would leave straight away and leave the dwarves to their devices.

After Gavin concluded his briefing and left, Ves took care of some other minor issues before standing up. Despite his reassurances, he still wanted to be sure that his clan would be ready to respond to any trouble that might unfold.

"We should complete the Vanguard Project and Decapitator Project before we enter Smiling Samual. Isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow..." Lucky yawned as he jumped from the desk he was perched upon and floated next to Ves.

"Has your stomach been feeling queasy lately? Are you ready to give me another batch of gems soon? It's already been a few months before you last paid your rent."

"Meow!"

It didn't appear that Lucky would be producing another gem anytime soon, so Ves did not press his cat any further and walked over to the design lab.

When he entered the large workspace, he was greeted with the sight of more than 150 young mech designers performing their designated tasks.

Most of them sat quietly behind their terminals. Their projected screens showed detailed design schematics, dynamic graphs and endless tables of numbers.

The older batch of fifty assistants worked a lot more adeptly than the newer batch of a hundred assistants. The latter had already received a lot of training but still had some distance to go before they become fully productive.

Gloriana couldn't wait that long, though. She decided to employ the new batch of assistant mech designers after just a few months so that she would have more manpower at her disposal.

Currently, the majority of assistants had already moved on to the Chimera Project and Bulwark Project. The expert mech designs meant for both Venerable Dise and Venerable Orfan were nearly complete.

When Ves approached Gloriana's workplace, she was carefully studying and putting the final touches to the Vanguard Project.

"How is it going?"

"It's two-layer armor system is anything but ideal, but I think our implementation makes the most out of the Unending alloy and Breyer alloy that we are utilizing." She answered as Ves leaned down to kiss her cheek and enjoy her fresh scent. "We will have to rely a lot on the effects of BSN-17A to augment the defense of the Vanguard Project. If Venerable Orfan can sustain the energy barrier that this material can project, then she can divert a lot of enemy firepower."

Master Willix had already done her job some time ago. What Ves found curious was that her approach to integrating resonating materials in an expert mech had become slightly more refined. It appeared that she too took notes of the solutions employed by the Superpublish function.

"Between the Vanguard Project and the Decapitator Project, which one do you think is stronger?"

"That's a silly question, Ves. They're both good in their own right. If I have to make a choice, I would place my bets on the Decapitator Project. Ketis might be a new and inexperienced Journeyman, but she's a fast learner and she knows more about swordsmanship than practically any other mech designer specialized in swordsman mechs. You can clearly see the difference if you compare the two designs. The Vanguard Projects fights like a tough but lumbering boar while the Decapitator Project fights like an agile leopard."

The difference between the two designs was not as big as the analogies suggested, but it was a good way to differentiate between the two. Ves personally felt the Decapitator Project had more promise as well due to the work that Ketis had done. The Vanguard Project simply didn't receive as much love and attention from the four Journeymen.

"Well, make sure to do your best to finalize the projects in a couple of days... We're closing in on Smiling Samuel and I want these two expert mechs to come online before we visit the dwarves."

*Chapter 3184: A Day Aboard the Discentibus*

"Maaow."

A grey shorthair hopped onto a bunk and prodded her paw on a sleepy face.

"Maaow. Maaow."

"Come here, Syrcy."

A pair of slender but toned arms embraced the cat for a moment. Lanie luxuriated in the warmth of her pet before she roused from her bed and freshened up. After donning her cadet uniform and trying her brown hair in a simple ponytail, she exited her small cabin and moved to the nearest mess hall with her cat padding after her stride.

"Hey Lanie."

"Good morning, Jacob."

"What's up, Gigi?"

"I hope you studied enough to pass the test this time, Imri."

"Don't even start on me about that. I don't have a cranial implant yet like you guys!"

Several other cadets who woke up at the same time strode towards the same mess hall situated close to their block of cabins. Once they entered the large compartments, they approached their tables while bots floated in while putting trays of nutritious meals.

In the early days, the meals consisted of industrial meals prepared by autochefs and large food preparation machines, but the cadets complained so much that the ship soon took on human chefs.

As the future of the Larkinson Clan, the cadets deserved to enjoy some refinements. Nothing was more important than supplying their growing bodies and minds with the nutrients they needed.

"Maaow." Syrcy rubbed her head against Lanie's boot.

"Go off to your little friends, Syrcy. I'll be okay."

"Maaow!"

The slender cat rubbed her face against Lanie's leg one more time before running over to a dedicated pet section of the mess hall. She threaded through throngs of dogs, birds, lizards and other pets before reaching a small circle of cats who greeted her arrival with slight enthusiasm before getting back to putting their heads back into their bowls.

As Lanie dug into her bowl of warm and filling porridge while chatting with the cadets sitting at the same table, someone sat down next to her at one point.

"Good morning, Lanie." He said as a bot plumped down a hearty meal consisting of eggs, sausages, beans and eggplant.

"Ohhh." A female cadet dramatically uttered. "It's the highborn again, looking to woo the princess of our clan."

"I'm not a princess!" Lanie barked back.

"That's not what everyone else is thinking, you know. You're one of the few trueborn Larkinsons in the academy and you're the highest performer to boot. You're still at the top of your year, right?"

Lanie shrugged. "I just have a head start, that's all. Once more people get invited to the Dragon's Den to receive their suite of augments, I'm sure they'll catch up eventually."

Due to her excellent performance in the academy, she received priority access to a suite of high-quality gene treatments and cranial implants that were especially developed by the Lifer biotech experts over at the bio research ship. Even though the augments weren't very refined, they were quite expensive and improved a lot of piloting-related parameters such as mental acuity, reaction time, high impact force resistance and other helpful improvements.

While it wasn't necessary for a mech cadet or mech pilot to possess augments in order to perform well, it made it a lot easier to pass the classes. Over time, the standards of the Larkinson Mech Academy had risen and it became increasingly harder for ordinary cadets to keep up with the curriculum.

Lanie didn't understand why the implants were only provided early to the best performers of the class. The gap between the top cadets and the bottom cadets of every class became wider. At this rate, the top graduates would probably receive a direct invitation to join one of the elite mech legions while the bottom performers might not even make it into the Living Sentinels.

It was none of her business, though. She was just a young cadet and had no right to tell the mech instructors that they were wrong for ignoring the less talented cadets.

She felt sad about some of her old friends that she had fallen out of touch with. They were no longer able to hang out as often due to enrolling into different classes. With her rapidly developing skill set, it made no sense for her to remain stuck in the more basic classes.

That had led her to hang out with a different crowd of potentates, chief among them the boy that tried to befriend her in recent times.

"Are you still planning to pursue a ranged specialization track? It's a real shame for you to commit to it when you are so good with melee weapons."

"I'm not changing my mind, Petrus." She said as she was halfway done with eating her porridge. "I do enjoy my time in the melee classes and I did score highly in the last exams, but I don't see this as my future. I'm much more interested in improving my marksmanship and hearing about the amazing new Amaranto and the new luminar crystal technology that will soon become the new standard has only made me more enthused about my choice."

Petrus Purnesse looked disappointed. "That's a great waste of your talents, Lanie. Won't you at least consider taking up at least some advanced swordsmanship classes? Maybe you can become the next Venerable Joshua Larkinson one day and be able to fight with any mech at any distance."

"Ugh, those new Heavensworder instructors don't like wafflers in their classes." Lanie grimaced. "They're good, there's no doubt about it, but they demand complete dedication to the sword."

"There are always other melee classes. You can join my axe classes, for example. Axes might not be as popular as swords in our clan, but they're excellent at breaking through armor."

"No thanks. I am already enrolled in a lot of other marksmanship-related classes. I still need to improve in many areas such as accuracy, energy weapon theory and also the new introductory class on luminar crystal technology!"

She was particularly enthused about the latter. Though the clan had been mum about the full capabilities of luminar crystals, the rumors she heard already made it was the new killer of the Larkinson Clan.

She couldn't wait to handle a real luminar crystal rifle herself!

After the cadets finished their breakfasts, they left to attend their classes for the day.

Lanie's schedule consisted of a mixture of physical exercise, simulation training and tactical instruction and basic physics.

The mix of theory, practice and physical exertion was carefully balanced to avoid overexerting Lanie. Though she had to work hard to keep up despite her augments, she was always rewarded for doing well.

Due to her distinct identity in the Larkinson Mech Academy, she received more attention than others. Though she hated to admit it, being a trueblood Larkinson had its perks. The fact that her scores vaulted her to the top of her year only seemed to vindicate her treatment.

The next time she met with Petrus was late in the day. Though Lanie had already gone through multiple tiring hours of instructions, she had become far too enthused to let her exhaustion get the better of herself.

"Finally! I've missed you so much, Sagittarius!"

The Chirons had become ubiquitous presences aboard the Discentibus. They were considered as the definite training mechs of the Larkinson Clan for many reasons.

The problem was that the Discentibus could only carry so many Chirons, so the mech cadets had to go on a rotation in order to get their turn to pilot a real, physical mech.

This was nothing unusual as many other mech academies adopted the same approach. It was too extravagant to reserve a single training mech for just a single mech cadet. Only the wealthiest and most elite mech academies in the galaxy engaged in such a wasteful practice.

As a result, the Sagittarius along with every other Chiron mech had already passed through the hands of multiple mech cadets today. Though the mech academy cleaned and fixed up the training mechs after every use, Lanie could still see plenty of signs of use by other mech cadets.

"It sounds like we're about to play out another battle scenario today." Petrus remarked. "I hope we'll be assigned to the same team again."

Lanie snorted. "I doubt that will happen. We perform too well. It makes much more sense to put us in opposing teams."

A mech instructor eventually strode in front of the gathered cadets. The younger clansmen all straightened up and stood at attention.

After the tough-looking veteran opened up the class by addressing some routine matters, he finally described the plan for today.

"Our fleet is about to head into dwarf country soon, and that has given us a great idea on how to conduct your next training scenario. It took a bit of time, but we managed to convince the engineers to ramp up the artificial gravity of one of the training compartments. Each of you will have the distinct pleasure of trying to pilot a mech under 1.5 g! Don't underestimate this small number. Every mech and every object effectively becomes 50 percent heavier. Now, I would love to explain to you how that will affect mech combat, but I figure there's nothing better than throwing you into the field straight away and letting you experience the changes for yourself!"

Half an hour later, the cadets had all entered their assigned Chirons and grouped up into teams of four. Lanie had become the leader by default and led her cadets through a hilly biome that was filled with artificially generated fog.

The sensors of a real mech were easily able to penetrate the fog, but in order to give ranged mechs more of a challenge, their sensors were deliberately crippled so that their visibility was not much better than the naked eye.

That didn't entirely prevent Lanie from detecting a threat.

"Stop. Enemies are hunkering at 2 o'clock. I can feel they are close!"

Though the Sagittarius was piloted by multiple mech cadets under a rotation, that didn't make the Chiron mech less effective. In fact, it was the opposite! The lessons learned by the other mech cadets somehow passed on to the mech and allowed others to benefit from the insights of others.

When the Larkinson Mech Academy discovered this phenomenon, they adopted the rotation schedule to take advantage of these unannounced capabilities.

The Sagittarius stood out from many other Chiron mechs due to two reasons. First, only ranged mech cadets were assigned to this specific training mech. Second, these cadets all consisted of the best performers!

This has quickly caused the Sagittarius to become a more specialized and focused training mech that offered excellent help to people like Lanie.

The bond between Lanie and the Sagittarius grew as the former drew more from the latter. Despite the fog obscuring their vision, the Chiron mech resisted the stronger gravity and raised its training rifle in a specific direction.

"Get ready!"

Lanie pulled the trigger, causing the training rifle to release a bright but completely harmless laser beam that struck a mech that had been kneeling roughly fifty meters ahead!

"Ahhh! How did you find us?!" An angry voice roared.

Seeing that the element of surprise had been lost, the remaining Chiron mechs rose to their feet and closed in on Lanie's team.

Unfortunately, the heavier-than-usual gravity acted against the approaching mechs and forced them to slow their advance lest they fell. This gave Lanie plenty of time to fire deep within the fog and eliminate three out of the four Chiron mechs of the opposition team!

By the time the final axe-wielding Chiron closed the distance, Lanie's teammates shamelessly grouped up and attacked their poor victim from multiple directions.

Skilled or not, Petrus Purnesse couldn't defend himself from attacks launched in three different directions!

"Lanie! I know it's you! How did you manage to find us and target us through this fog?! Are you cheating?!"

Lanie smirked underneath her protective helmet. "It's not cheating. I'm just that good. This is what dedicating my practice time looks like. I wouldn't have been able to suss you out this quickly if I didn't take all of those specialized classes."

She had received so much help from Ves, her mech instructors and the Larkinson Clan. She wanted to make sure she lived up to their expectations!

### *Chapter 3185: A Day Out*

Two of the most prominent Larkinsons in the clan enjoyed a rare moment together. Though they weren't able to spend as much time with each other lately, they still remained committed to their relationship.

Venerable Joshua could hardly believe that his second relationship hadn't decayed into a rotten mess like his last one. Ketis may have changed a lot since her return from the Heavensword Association, but she was still the same girl that initially approached him and forced him to polish his swordsmanship.

These days, Ketis spent most of her day at the design lab in order to do as much as possible to turn the Decapitator Project into a great expert mech. She frequently visited the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders to stay in touch with the thriving swordsman community of the Larkinson Clan.

For his part, Venerable Joshua was doing his best to contribute to the clan in order to earn more Larkinson merits and continue to serve as a model Larkinson. He also had to spend enough time on keeping his skills in shape to make himself as ready as possible to assume control of his upcoming expert mech.

Surprisingly, Ketis came up to him one day and requested that they go on a date the next time the fleet transitioned out of FTL travel.

"You don't want to go out in Dorum?" He asked.

"Nah. It's too close and familiar for my liking. I want to explore the new cities in the fleet. Many people are already raving about how great it is to finally have a party boat!"

The so-called party boat turned out to be the Vivacious Wal, the two-sided capital ship that offered a form of entertainment to almost any person.

As a pair of important and extraordinary clansmen, they attracted attention wherever they went. Their force of wills alone meant that no one was able to ignore their presence as they entered the hangar bay of the Vivacious Wal and headed deeper into the vessel.

At a certain junction, they were able to choose which of the two cities they wanted to visit. Joshua automatically turned to the entrance that led towards Dawn City, but Ketis took firm hold of his arm and dragged her over to the other entrance!

"Ketis! Why would you want to go to Twilight City?"

"Oh, come on, Joshua. Dawn City is a bore. It's too clean and bright over there. It'll be just like visiting a better and more upscale version of Dorum. Twilight City is a lot different from any other place in our fleet!"

Joshua did not expect to enjoy their date in this infamous place. His girlfriend was right in one thing. Twilight City was truly a place apart.

The overwhelming majority of ships in the Larkinson fleet consisted of relatively clean, modern and well-maintained vessels. Even the production halls of the Spirit of Bentheim were kept as clear and free of rubbish as possible in order to avoid a spec of dirt from ruining the fabrication of a critical component.

Upon entering the large and expansive cavern that encompassed Twilight City, Joshua first looked up at the ceiling and became immersed in the cloudy sky that made it seem as if they had landed on a real planet.

The illusion wasn't foolproof, though. No matter what his eyes told him, his intuition and other senses could still detect the presence of a solid layer of hull structure that was capable of withstanding a lot of attacks.

He then lowered his eyes to the skyline in the distance and became dazzled by the sense of excitement that coursed in the distance. Though the couple had not yet entered Twilight City proper, he already felt as if he entered into an alternate universe.

"Come on! We're almost there!" Ketis grinned as strode forward at a brisk pace while draggin him along.

When the couple reached the streets of Twilight City, they both became immersed in the facade of a once-prosperous city that had fallen into a strange decline.

A faulty, rust-laden cleaning bot bumped into Joshua's leg, causing the expert pilot to be thrown out of his odd fascination for the brittle walls that looked as if they were marked by decades of neglect.

Joshua gently pushed the bot aside with his leg, only for the stupid machine to press onto him again like a clingy dog.

"Annoying machine. Do your job or something! There's an oil spill right on the other side of the avenue!"

Joshua pressed the bot away only for it to return. When he failed to rid himself of this annoyance for the fifth time, Ketis finally rolled her eyes and strode forward to unleash a powerful kick that caused the bot to soar at least a hundred meters away!

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

"I did nothing except for doing what was supposed to be done." Ketis replied as she resumed going forward. "Didn't I tell you about my trip to Mancroft Independent Harbor? I think someone with a wicked sense of humor deliberately prepared these faulty bots as a homage to what we experienced during that trip. Whenever you encounter a bot that is trying to clean your leg, just kick it. The further you can launch it, the better."

"That's vandalism!"

"Oh, Joshua. It's okay. This is Twilight City. No one cares about these cleaning bots."

"What if the kicked bots land on someone else?"

"I'm sure the people who are running this place have already thought about that." She said without much concern.

She proceeded to drag Joshua to various venues that had already gained fame throughout the Larkinson Clan.

They entered a small dingy arena where Larkinsons fought each other with their bare hands and fists. The sheer brutality of it was galling, but with modern healing technology, nearly every injury could be healed.

Of course, there were sufficient safety precautions in place to prevent brain injuries and other tricky afflictions.

After this little warm up, they visited a bar that was frequented and operated by Swordmaidens. Off-duty members of the mech legion as well as Heavensworders liked to frequent this bar whenever possible. Joshua was impressed with all of the swords hanging from the ceiling with their tips pointed downwards. The display was such a huge safety hazard that only the most courageous clansmen dared to visit this place!

Several hours later, the pair moved out of Twilight City and headed over to a different section of the Vivacious Wal. There, they changed into basic combat suits before heading deep into a jungle biome.

The moisture and sweat was making Joshua feel uncomfortable. His combat suit was nothing more than a padded garment that offered none of the climate control functions of smart clothing.

He looked down at the sword he held in his hands. It was a simple arming sword that Ketis had specially picked out for him. It was a scaled down version of the one-handed sword that his girlfriend had already designed for the Chimera Project.

"Ketis, I—"

"Shh!" She furiously raised her palm at him while steadily lowering her stance. "Our prey is close. The exobeast is just up ahead. Let's get closer but watch your footing."

They slowly waded closer, taking care not to step on any branches or disturb any of the dense foliage. However, before they reached a clearing, a large, plated exobeast the size of a cow charged straight in their direction!

"Dodge!"

Ketis reacted speedily enough and easily moved her body away. Joshua started off slower but his combat abilities were not for show. Though he rolled aside in a disgraceful manner, he quickly picked himself up only to see the large grey beast swerve around and charge towards his girlfriend!

"UUHHEEEEEEEEE!"

"Hah!"

Ketis easily sidestepped while whacking the side of the tough beast's reptilian head with the flat of her blade. When the beast attempted to chomp her another time, she smacked the creature's head as if it was a naughty dog.

"Stop attacking me! I'm not your food! Attack him instead. Doesn't his flesh look juicy?"

Whether her persuasion worked or not, eventually the exobeast got frustrated at his continual failure to attack the human woman. The feral creature slowly turned towards Joshua and noted his smaller sword and his weaker aura.

Though the exobeast felt the human man might not be his enemy, his instincts and his hunger won out. The beast let out another alien cry before charging straight at the hapless-looking Joshua!

"UHHHHAAAAAAA!"

"Joshua! Stop standing like an idiot and defend yourself!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" He yelled as he tried to stay on his feet and avoid getting chomped or stampeded upon. "Aren't you going to help me out, here? My sword can't even get through this exobeast's armor!"

"That would defeat the point." Ketis smirked as she casually leaned her body against a tree. "You've been doing well in your swordsmanship training, though I wouldn't call you a swordsman per se. One of the areas that you need to work upon is your killing sense. All of the practice sessions that you've received merely allowed you to refine your techniques. You haven't actually applied them in a real fight, and that is what I want to remedy today. So have fun and remember my lessons!"

Joshua had an awful time trying to fend off this large and heavy creature. While he was an expert pilot who possessed superior fighting skills and instincts, the exobeast he was fighting possessed a much greater advantage in physical strength and endurance.

If the expert pilot was able to pilot a mech, then he could have relied on his machine's physical prowess to fight against opponents that were a hundred times stronger than this feral predator.

Unfortunately, his girlfriend threw him in a situation where he had no choice but to rely on his body to stay on top of this fight!

In the first few minutes, Joshua was losing a lot of energy as he spent most of his attention on evading the deadly creature's attacks. He occasionally managed to stab his sword at his adversary, but the organic plating that covered the reptilian beast always caused the blade to bounce away.

"I can't go on like this!"

His sword wasn't as sharp and strong as Bloodsinger. The only way for him to beat this creature was to target his vulnerabilities.

He did not think he would be able to attack the creature's eyes or open maw without getting injured in return, so he came up with a quick plan.

"Come her, you dumb beast!"

"UHHHAAAAAA!"

The seemingly inexhaustible beast charged straight towards Joshua and widened his teeth-filled maw to catch the annoying human only for his juicy target to move to the side.

Crack!

The exobeast collided straight against the trunk of a mid-sized tropical tree!

The force of the impact was so strong that the trunk had cracked. While the exobeast was trying to gather its wits, Joshua had darted to the creature's side and stabbed his blade through the thinner and almost unprotected hide at the underside.

Green blood poured through the wound as the exobeast thrashed! Joshua was able to pull back his weapon and raise it into a block just before a meaty paw smacked into it, causing the expert pilot to get flung at least ten steps back!

"That hurt."

"This is no time to relax, Joshua. Did you really think that little pinprick did anything? Look at your prey."

Before their eyes, the exobeast let out a soft cry before the flow of blood stopped. The alien creature had healed the cut and looked twice as angry as before.

"KETIS!"

"The fight's not over yet, Joshua! Keep those legs moving! Outmaneuvering this beast is key to defeating it. Just stab it in its unprotected areas enough times and it will eventually fall."

"My legs will fall apart before that happens! I never fought a scrap like this without my mech!"

"There's always first time!"

*Chapter 3186: Worthiness*

Imon Ingvar looked up at one of the most special and unique mechs in the Larkinson Clan.

Though it had been overshadowed by the prime mechs and the expert mechs in recent times, there was no doubt that it was still one of the most unique and impressive mechs that the patriarch had ever designed and built.

Still, as much as Imon enjoyed the privilege of piloting this great and powerful machine, he felt it was not the mech that matched him the best.

Soon, his turn would come to an end. The mech would be passed on to another expert candidate to see whether it could assist in helping them break through.

"Brother."

"Sister."

A caped woman wearing a light grey uniform with officer markings had entered the small hangar bay of the Graveyard and approached the dormant mech.

"It's been a while since I saw the Quint." She remarked.

"It's been a while since I saw you, Casella."

The woman whose bearing had become a lot more authoritative as of late loosened her posture a bit and shrugged. "There are always issues that need to be dealt with in the Living Sentinels. Transitioning from a mech force into a more formal and structured mech legion has given me a lot of work. We're settling in now, fortunately. I have enough time to pick up my mech practice again."

Imon frowned when he heard that. "It's not right for you to neglect your practice in favor of administrative duties. We're expert candidates. We are one step away from becoming a true hero."

"There's no rush. I am already fulfilling my calling, brother. While I don't mind getting anything extra, I'm more than content with leading the Living Sentinels. There is more than one way to contribute to our clan. What I like about my fellow clansmen is that they don't force me to follow a single path."

Though Imon had more to say about her lack of priority, he refrained from speaking any further. He knew her well enough that she would never change her mind just because he had a different opinion.

"Well, the Quint is yours now, at least for the time being." He said as he dramatically waved his hand at the masterwork mech. "I've been taking good care of it and a part of me will miss it. There's a real difference between piloting a masterwork mech and a more normal machine."

"What is different about it?" She curiously asked.

"Well, I don't know what the mech designers have been doing to the Quint, but it is considerably more powerful than an average Bright Warrior. No matter what configuration you choose to sortie with, you'll always feel like a champion when you go out with this mech."

"I imagine a large part of that is because it used to be piloted by Venerable Joshua."

Imon nodded. "It's a living mech that has definitely kept something from its original pilot. It's difficult to describe, but I just feel I can execute my moves a little better. Compared to other living mechs, this one is definitely a lot more alive."

"It sounds as if it can be a great help to any expert candidates. Are you regretting the fact that you have to pass it on? If you want, I can talk to Commandant Cristoph or General Verle on your behalf. I don't particularly need a turn with this masterwork mech."

"You don't need to do that, sister. The Quint hasn't worked out for me, but I think it will fare better in your hands."

"How so?" Casella looked curious at her brother. "I would have thought a strong mech is just to your liking."

"I thought so as well, but that was before I actually got to pilot this mech. It's powerful alright, but it's not a machine that is meant to be piloted by someone like me. I can feel it each time I use it. The Quint has a bit of a personality, you see. Every living mech does, but this one is a lot smarter and pickier than usual."

"Oh."

"You'll experience it for yourself soon. Don't try to hide anything from it. You'll be connecting to the mech so it will know who you are and whether you are hiding something from it. Just bare your entire self to it and let it judge your worthiness."

Casella began to look doubtful. "This sounds quite different from what I expected. Is this mech really...?"

"I don't think you'll have to worry that much, sister. The Quint is a masterwork mech that feels as if it is dedicated to protecting our clansmen. Since you are already doing that as the Sentinel Commander, you'll probably get along better with it. I look forward to seeing you pilot it for the first time."

"Well, there's little point in delaying it any further. I have other duties on my agenda."

She moved to the ready room and changed into a piloting suit before she returned. She floated to the open cockpit and entered it before it closed.

Deep inside the old but majestic Quint, Casella felt a moderate pressure on her psyche. There was a good reason why the masterwork mech was restricted to expert candidates, and it wasn't because it was too precious.

Ordinary mech pilots simply couldn't withstand the pressure of its dense and heavy glow!

It was especially risky when they attempted to interface with such a powerful living mech. The patriarch had told the clan in no uncertain terms that mechs as powerful as the Quint were not meant for normal mech pilots.

"There will be more mechs like this one." Casella predicted.

After a brief pause, she resolutely activated and interfaced with the mech.

A torrent of data and energy that was more overwhelming than any mech she had piloted before poured straight into her mind!

Her eyes widened as her lack of practice was haunting her at this moment. She never endured such a strong and forceful interfacing attempt!

She almost cried out as the pressure was starting to overwhelm her capabilities. Yet before she could press the abort button or call for assistance, her entire consciousness seemed to have been whisked away from her head.

In one moment, she was sitting in the cockpit of the Quint.

In the next moment, she was floating in some kind of digital realm that sparked with data and energy.

"Am I... hallucinating?"

She half-thought that she was tripping on something as she entered a strange state. Though she felt that she was still lucid and conscious, a vague haze had settled over her mind.

She tried to look down on herself only to realize that her body wasn't present. It was as if only a portion of herself had been brought to this strange and unusual realm.

As Casella slowly tried to make sense of her current condition, a glowing green point began to approach her position. It grew larger and larger until a green comet that dwarfed anything inside this realm slowed and stopped in front of her apparent vision!

The green ball exuded a mixture of calming and pleasant emotions. She recognized it as the unique glow of the Quint. Not only did she feel the warmth of family, but also the joy of life. These two influences combined together to shape the life that defined the masterwork mech.

Now, it was facing Casella directly.

Though she didn't possess a mouth, Casella attempted to say something. Surprisingly, she could hear her own voice, if not exactly in a normal way.

"Are you... the Quint?"

The giant green orb did not seem to respond. It merely hovered close to her consciousness while subjecting her with its powerful glow.

"Am I being judged?"

YOU ARE.

Casella almost let out an undignified screech! She had faced many horrible opponents in battle, but the Quint's response had definitely given her a fright!

The power of the Quint along with the way it communicated directly with her mind caused this conversation to gain a degree of intimacy and solemnity that was far beyond anything she experienced!

"Am I... worthy to pilot you?"

The green orb continued to exude a warm and welcoming glow, but its attitude did not make Casella feel very reassured.

CASELLA INGVAR-LARKINSON.

"Yes, Quint?"

WHY DO YOU PILOT MECHS?

"I pilot a mech to protect my clan. Our clan."

The orb flew closer.

BEFORE YOU BECAME A LARKINSON, YOU WERE AN INGVAR. TELL ME, YOUNG COMMANDER. WOULD YOU RATHER GIVE UP ON THE CLAN AND RETURN TO HOUSE INGVAR?

Casella was just about to give the most diplomatic response she could muster in a short amount of time, but she briefly recalled her brother's advice.

The Quint was directly connected to her. It could see whether she was lying or obfuscating the truth.

The mech was probably judging her at the moment. It would not only be wrong, but also dishonorable for her to lie to her own living mech.

As someone who might have to depend on the Quint to help her in battle one day, she had to build up a sincere rapport with her mech. Whether she was allowed to keep this masterwork mech or not, she did not want to add another disgraceful memory to her mind.

"To be absolutely honest... I regret much about the fall of House Ingvar. If the Royal House of the Black Poppy hadn't conspired to destroy my house and cut off my road to return, I would have never agreed to join the Larkinson Clan. My real family, my real home was back in the territories of House Ingvar. I am grateful for the clan for taking me in and finding a new place for me, but I am just a girl trying to pick herself up and find a second home among the Larkinsons. I'm happy here, and I genuinely consider my fellow Larkinsons to be my brothers and sisters, but... I wish I could have still been an Ingvar."

She felt ashamed for admitting the feelings that she had buried deep in her heart. Casella wasn't sure whether her brother felt the same way. He was also a loyal son of House Ingvar, though perhaps his time with the Larkinsons had caused him to forget his past attachment.

Several minutes passed by, though Casella wasn't sure about that. Her perception of time wasn't exactly clear while she was locked in this strange realm.

The giant green orb retreated a bit. Though it still exuded the same kind of warmth and vitality, the additional distance caused her to miss the old intensity.

CASELLA INGVAR-LARKINSON.

"Yes, Quint?"

YOU ARE NOT THE MECH PILOT I SEEK.

"Oh..."

A crushing sense of disappointment overcame her mind. Even though she had done the right thing by admitting her true thoughts, apparently it wasn't enough for her to be sincere.

THE LARKINSON CLAN DOES NOT CARE ABOUT YOUR PAST, NOR YOUR FORMER LOYALTIES.

THE LARKINSON CLAN ONLY CARES ABOUT YOUR DEDICATION AND YOUR WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE YOURSELF FOR YOUR FELLOW LARKINSONS.

ARE YOU WILLING TO SACRIFICE YOUR LIFE TO SAVE YOUR CLANSMEN?

"I am." She answered in a firmer tone than before.

No matter what lingering sentiments she held towards her fallen house, she was a Larkinson now. Not only that, she was a soldier and commander. As a Living Sentinel, it was her duty to protect the Larkinsons!

ARE YOU WILLING TO SACRIFICE THE LIFE OF YOUR BROTHER TO SAVE THOUSANDS OF OTHERS CLANSMEN?

What!?

This was a difficult question. As much as she wanted to respond with a righteous-sounding answer, she knew that there was only one true answer in her heart.

Yet just before she voiced her response, a sudden inspiration entered her mind.

"I... will never let my brother and any other clansmen fall." She answered with a firmer tone. "I will seek to prevent a situation where I have to choose between the two. No matter which Larkinson is at risk, each of them are equally worthy of protection. I would rather take action myself and risk my own life if that is what it takes to save both my brother and every other Larkinson!"

The green orb began to pulse. Warmth and vitality seemed to flow in her consciousness as she felt more close to the Quint than ever!

VERY WELL. THE LARKINSON CLAN NEEDS A MECH PILOT LIKE YOU. GO NOW AND FULFILL YOUR GOAL WITH MY BLESSING.

Before Casella could say anything more, she was suddenly ejected from this strange digital realm.

As her consciousness returned to her body, the Quint seemed to sing to her in a way that directly touched her heart!

Imon, who was observing the initial activation from a distance, began to smile as he felt the Quint exude a stronger and more harmonious glow.

"I knew you could do it, sister."

#### *Chapter 3187: Another Pitstop*

After finalizing the Vanguard Project and the Decapitator Project, the four Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan were ready to embark on their next fabrication attempts. They gathered in the design lab where they decided on a course of action.

"We need to get these two expert mechs in action as soon as possible." Ves told the others. "We've almost reached the Smiling Samuel Star Sector where I need to fulfill a certain task. Now, I'm not going to explain to you why we have to head into the Vulcan Empire, but I'm sure you know that the dwarves over there aren't exactly the friendliest bunch. If we can add two more expert mechs to our lineup, we will gain a bit of additional deterrence."

"Will the dwarves really dare to touch us?" Juliet quietly asked.

"You can never know." Ves honestly shrugged. "Our expeditionary fleet is already strong and we have a history of wiping out military strike forces and we are also entering their territory with the blessing of the MTA. There also shouldn't be a compelling reason for them to attack us. That said, the dwarves have a general hatred towards the so-called 'tall folk' and they are whipped up by their odd faith of theirs."

Ketis snorted. "The Vulcan Faith is one of the most contradictory religions that I've encountered, and trust me, I've seen some crazy stuff. How is it possible for a dwarf-

centric religion to worship a tall folk as their revered god of all of the possible choices? Whoever came up with this dumb idea practically set up the dwarves for failure! From what I've read about the Vulcan Empire, the infighting between those who believe Vulcan to be a human and those who think he's a dwarf has been raging on for many decades!"

"Ahem!" Ves loudly coughed. "Ketis, don't talk about faiths in such a disrespectful fashion. Who knows whether you'll slip up in front of a dwarven delegation and draw a lot of trouble to us. We need to be more tolerant of the beliefs of others. This applies both inside and outside of our clan."

Ketis crossed her arms. "I still think it sounds stupid. The dwarves might as well worship a giant lizard god or something. At least they aren't revering their historical oppressors who continue to discriminate against them in many ways."

"You know, there might be a ploy behind the Vulcan Faith." Ves suggested. "It could be a clever, no genius ploy to keep the dwarves in check. Think about it. Dwarves have always been unruly due to their admittedly justifiable complaints about their ill treatment. Rather than deal with this headache across multiple star clusters, why not gather them up in a single star sector and rid the surrounding regions of their kind? In order to make sure they don't have any ideas about expanding outwards, introduce a source of conflict in their most sincere beliefs and voila, the Vulcanites are locked into constant internal strife that mostly keeps the dwarves occupied against themselves!"

It sounded pretty devious now that he thought about it. As far as he was concerned, the inventor of this brilliant and effective plan deserved a pat on the back!

Unfortunately, Ves was the only one who felt smug about what he said. The other three Journeymen did not look so convinced.

"Uhm, we're not here to talk dwarves today, so let's move on." His wife said after a while. "The fabrication of a single expert mech is a strenuous event. Fabricating two of them at the same time or in quick succession is a great burden to us. Even if we take periodic breaks, we still have to work at least twelve to fourteen days in a row in order to complete these offensive machines."

"What are you suggesting?" Ves frowned.

"We should pour our total concentration into fabricating just one of the two expert mechs. This way, we won't get distracted by ideas that are only applicable to the other one. Our expert mechs deserve our full concentration. We should take at least a few days but preferably a week off before we embark on fabricating the other expert mech."

"That will impose significant delays to our schedule."

"We have to do this, Ves. I don't want to rush either of these projects. Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise deserve better."

Ves sighed as he activated his comm and called up the schedule. "Hmmm, I guess it won't hurt that much if we make another pitstop. I'll tell the chief ministers to make the arrangements and have our fleet stop at a port system near Smiling Samuel where we can replenish our supplies and pick up another batch of recruits."

After leaving the Pelsa Ryndover System, the expeditionary fleet pretty much traveled non-stop across the remainder of the Bardo Star Cluster as well as a significant portion of the Fermi Star Cluster. This was a huge amount of distance and it was inevitable that some of the vessels accrued a bit of wear and tear.

This wasn't necessarily a big deal. Ships were built to last and they could travel on for many more light-years before some of their systems started to creak in a worrisome manner.

The expeditionary fleet was already quite close to the lesser beyonder gate that was just a star cluster away, so the state of the Larkinson Clan's sub-capital ships took on less and less importance. The only reason for the Larkinsons to preserve their integrity was to keep their resale value as high as possible.

What Ves did care about was the state of his fleet's capital ships. The only newly-built capital ship was the Spirit of Bentheim. Every system and module was still brand new and even the extended-range FTL drives pilfered from the Auralis were also relatively young.

It was too bad that the engineers were still in the process of disassembling, inspecting and rebuilding these Fridaymen devices in order to make sure they were completely reliable.

Aside from his flagship and the nearly-completed Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird, the remaining capital ships of the Larkinson Clan were second-hand goods. Each of them had already been in service for a couple of decades to half a century. This meant that they had around fifty years or so left where they were able to operate at their peak before many aging ship modules started to degrade in efficiency and reliability.

This was a nearly unavoidable process and only a lengthy and expensive overhaul could stave off this process to an extent.

What people weren't necessarily aware of was that constant or heavy use of ship systems wore them out a lot faster when they were supposed to. If they did not receive timely and frequent preventive maintenance, then multiple decades could easily be shaved off their total lifespan. This was especially dangerous in situations where a single major battle pushed many of these ailing systems beyond their limits.

In short, the more his clan took care of its essential assets, the more they would have the Larkinson Clan's back when his clansmen needed them the most!

After briefly conveying his intentions to his chief ministers, Magdalena soon sent back a reply.

"Okay." He said to the others. "I've just been informed that the expeditionary fleet will make a pitstop at the Amswick Star System."

"What kind of place is that?"

"It's a port system of the Empire of the Lost."

"That's an unusual name for a state." Gloriana grew curious. "Usually, people aren't eager to associate themselves with the notion of defeat."

"According to what I've learned, the Empire of the Lost is actually not a traditional state of the Bertrand Obsidian Star Sector. It's actually occupied by the survivors who fled the dwarven takeover of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. The strongest factions and organizations that managed to get out with as many assets and people that they could carry on their refugee ships had to find a new place to settle. They essentially flooded one of the existing states of Bertrand Obsidian and forcibly took it over. This was the birth of the Empire of the Lost."

The three women fell silent for a moment. This was a tragic history that hit Gloriana especially hard. She faintly saw the future of the Hexadric Hegemony in this sordid tale.

"I see." Ketis murmured. "The state is named this way because the fled survivors have never reconciled with their defeat. They wear their badge of shame as a reminder of what they once were and keep their original homes in mind. I bet they are still plotting a way to get back their territory from the dwarves."

None of the Larkinsons cared about the plight of the Lost. There were losers of conflicts everywhere in the galaxy. Whether their defeat was just or unjust, the fist was the final arbiter.

What mattered was that the Amswick System was a good place to stock up on supplies and spend some time performing useful maintenance.

Since it was a port system, the expeditionary fleet was already heading towards it anyway. The only difference from their current plan was that the Larkinsons and its allies would stop over for a while instead of leaving as soon as their FTL drives finished cycling.

In the meantime, the mech designers made some additional preparations for their fabrication attempt. Ketis even came up with a rather outlandish idea.

"You want us to what?!"

"I thought I made myself clear, Ves. The Decapitator Project is an expert mech that will carry the hopes and expectations of the Swordmaidens as well as the Heavensworders in our clan. I want to pick out a large delegation from them that will stay inside the workshop and witness the creation of our first expert swordsman mech from afar. I will make sure that they won't disturb the proceedings in any way."

"I don't know whether this is even proper."

"This is the only other way I can think of to increase the chances of turning the Decapitator Project into a masterwork mech. I have to try! Please give this plan a try. If it works, then it's great, and if it doesn't, at least we are able to draw a couple lessons from the attempt."

Ves did not relish the prospect of working in front of a large audience, but the benefits intrigued him. He briefly recalled the time where he set up a large ritual to birth the Superior Mother.

Could he set up a similar ritual to augment the fabrication attempt of the Decapitator Project?

It was worth a try.

Even if all of the show and dance did not actually grant any solid boosts, it would still give Ketis a huge boost in motivation. That might be enough to push her into an inspired mood, thereby drastically increasing the quality of her output.

"I'll allow it." He said. "In fact, I've got an even better idea. How many Swordmaidens and Heavensworders are in our clan right now?"

"More than 40,000 last I checked." Ketis confidently replied. Her eyes lit up as she began to have an inkling of what Ves had in mind. "The numbers are probably even more now that we've gained some additional recruits, but the original numbers are at least that much. Each of them are strong supporters of myself and Venerable Dise."

He smirked. "How about gathering as many of them as possible to cheer us on while we work? This will no doubt be a huge logistical challenge, but as long as we try hard enough, we can probably make something happen."

It could also turn into a huge flop, but Ves didn't mention that at the moment. What mattered was putting Ketis in her best possible mood.

From the moment he mentioned his bold idea, her eyes lit up and her force of will became a little sharper.

Thinking about gathering so many sword enthusiasts together reminded her of the time she broke through at the First Sword Arena. The energy of so many people seemed to have filled up the giant sword-shaped arena and given her the push she needed to undergo apotheosis!

An expectant smile appeared on her face. "Let's plan this out properly, Ves... We need a lot more space in order to make this work."

### *Chapter 3188: Empire of the Lost*

The Empire of the Lost was a relatively young state that was burdened with a loaded past.

When the Vulcanites initially rose up and rallied their dwarven compatriots from nearby star clusters, their conquest did not happen overnight. Many years passed by as the increasingly more emboldened rebels conquered state after state, beginning from the weakest and most decayed third-rate states to finally breaking apart the once-powerful second-rate states.

The dwarves accomplished all of this while fighting and dying under their unflinching belief in Vulcan and the notion that they were superior to the tall folk!

Due to the blending of many different people and cultures in a single amalgamation, the Empire of the Lost was a bit of a mess. It was like the Friday Coalition but with more partners and without a neat partition between them. While the cultural differences between them had lessened through the passage of decades, the state was still dysfunctional in many ways.

The only common threads that tied them all together was their undying hatred for the Vulcanites and their persistent desire to return to Smiling Samuel and take back the territories that they lost.

"What a sad people." Ves commented to Chief Minister Magdalena as the two stood in the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim while the fleet transitioned into the Amswick System. "These guys just can't get over their loss and move on. I hear they are still trying to plot an invasion to push the dwarves off their former homes, but they never mustered up the courage to pull the trigger."

Magdalena held a more generous view of the Lost. "They have good reasons to avoid another confrontation. They suffered enormous losses during their flight. The Empire of the Lost is far from being able to contend against the united and much more expansive Vulcan Empire. It makes much more sense for them to bide their time so that they can rebuild their strength."

"That makes sense, but... from what I have read about the Lost, the newer generation born after the flight from Smiling Samuel care less about paying back old grievances

and more about living decent lives in the empire. In a few more generations, most of the survivors of the tragic flight will have died without ever seeing their dreams fulfilled. I bet the Empire of the Lost will slowly change into a normal state."

The only unstable factor that could derail this predicted outcome was if the dwarves left their star sector and began to expand into other ones. The Empire of the Lost was too close to Smiling Samuel and would definitely suffer the brunt of dwarven aggression.

Not that Ves cared about this. The benefit of being a traveller was that he did not have to sympathize for the plight of any local people.

Upon entry into the Amswick System, the expeditionary fleet received a lot of attention from the local authorities. The port system was not just a major economic hub, but also a strategically important stronghold. It was the central node upon which the Empire's defense against the Vulcan Empire rested upon.

Due to this crucial consideration, the Amswick System was the best-fortified star system of the Lost. It not only concentrated a huge amount of orbital and fixed defenses, but also hosted an entire mech army that were currently spread across multiple bases covering multiple angles of approach.

"The defensive layout of the star system is interesting." Magdalena commented as she pointed at the projection of the overall plot. "The defenses are arrayed like an onion. There are multiple concentric circles of fortifications that become increasingly denser and more concentrated towards the center. While the outermost defenses can easily be bypassed by any invading force, leaving them up will make any attacker vulnerable to attacks from the rear. A proper invasion plan would have little choice but to take out the outer defenses one by one."

"That sounds like a wasteful defensive scheme." Ves said. "Isn't it better for the Lost to just concentrate all of their defenses on a couple of key planets? This way, the dwarves wouldn't be able to defeat them in detail. The invaders will have to face much stiffer resistance if they want to push through the condensed defensive lines."

The chief minister shook her head. "The Amswick System is never supposed to hold back the Vulcanite onslaught by itself. The idea behind setting up layered defenses in a star system is to delay the invaders and increase their consumption of manpower, mechs and supplies. By the time the dwarves reach the final layers, they will already be weakened and vulnerable to an extent. That is where reinforcements from other parts of the Empire of the Lost can pounce the invading force from behind."

There were many other tactical and strategic considerations that Magdalena hadn't mentioned yet. There were so many variables at play here that it would take days to inform Ves about all of the nuances behind the defensive strategy of the Amswick System.

During this time, the fleet confirmed its arrangements with traffic control. It turned out that there was no possibility for foreigners to get close to any of the bustling planets.

"The traffic restrictions are just as strict as the Prosperous Hill Star System that we once visited." The chief minister informed Ves. "Every foreign and almost every domestic vessel is prohibited from entering the inner system. A local transportation monopoly takes care of every transfer of passengers and goods to and from Amswick V, which is the principal commercial planet of this port system. The only good news is that the transportation service possesses an abundance of cargo and passenger transports, so we won't have to wait too long to receive our shipments."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Take advantage of that to stock up on an abundant amount of war supplies. It's questionable whether we need any of it, but it is best to be prudent. I would rather end up with an excess amount of unused stuff than run short of it when we need it the most."

"Understood. Prices of combat supplies have gone up as of late, though. The Empire of the Lost is not in its most quiet period at the moment and the constant pressure exerted by its dwarven neighbor is a constant source of concern."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "The LMC is still doing well, right? We can afford the expenditures."

As the fleet slowly settled into its assigned sector that was far from any other visiting ship or fleet, numerous preparations were being made to fabricate the two expert mechs.

After numerous discussions with different mech designers, expert pilots and commanders, Ves decided to pull out all the stops for the Decapitator Project but not for the Vanguard Project.

When Ves talked to Venerable Orfan about it, she did not become a fan of the scheme.

"We're Brighters, Ves." She told him. "We don't believe in this crap. The Vandals who are my strongest supporters are different from the Swordmaidens. Aside from their loyalty to the clan, they hold nothing sacred. They believe in their own strength and their own means and don't engage in any of this superstition. They'll obey if you order them to take part in this charade, but I don't think you'll get the result you want."

The Flagrant Vandals were one of the secular-minded mech legions of the Larkinson Clan. It more closely retained the traditions of the Bright Republic's Mech Corps but also kept its more irreverent culture.

Ves realized that this plan might not work for the Vanguard Project. "Ah, I should have known. If this is the case, then we don't have much choice but to fabricate your mech the normal way."

"It's fine." Orfan clapped her hand on his shoulder. "I hear that masterwork mechs come by chance. Either I win the lottery or I won't. I won't cry if I lose this time. Right now, I just want a decent expert mech that can allow me to fight to my heart's content."

"I understand."

She was trying to avoid putting too many expectations on his shoulders. The successful creation of one masterwork expert mech raised the bar for the other expert mech design projects. Disappointment was inevitable as success in this area was tenuous at best. Otherwise, Ves wouldn't have gone as far as organizing a gigantic ritual to see whether that would help with increasing the quality of the Decapitator Project.

The bombastic attempt to fabricate the Decapitator Project in full view of thousands of clansmen presented many different challenges.

Aside from preventing the crowd from disturbing the Journeymen at work, they also had to find a space to accommodate them all. The personal workshops aboard the Spirit of Bentheim didn't offer enough room to host such an immense crowd so Ves had to find a different venue to hold the public show.

"Would you be okay with fabricating the Decapitator Project aboard the Vivacious Wal?" He asked his wife.

Gloriana frowned at him. "Out of all of the possible choices, why there? It's far too busy over there and it is not the most stable platform. Who knows what kind of subtle vibrations and other disturbances occur over there that can interfere with the production of delicate and crucial components."

"Look, there aren't many spaces that are big enough that can host a lot of people in a short amount of time without leading to massive congestion and other problems. The mech arena in the center of Twilight City is literally made for this purpose. We just need to mitigate any sources of disturbance by preparing the arena grounds. There are plenty of devices that we can install and solutions that we can deploy to address any of the concerns that you have mentioned."

"I don't know, Ves. It feels wrong for us to fabricate a mech outside of our dedicated factory ship. We'll also have to ship all of our delicate high-quality production machines to another capital ship, and that comes with many risks."

"Trust in our people. I'm sure they will move our equipment without scratching them. C'mon, just try it out."

Though Gloriana had plenty of misgivings, her objections to this odd plan were not that strong. Even she was a little curious whether all of these extra measures would have an effect on the final outcome.

"Fine, do what you want, then. There will be hell to pay if any of my precious machines get damaged. I'll make sure to inspect and calibrate each of them once they are moved to the Vivacious Wal."

After they finished talking business, they turned their attention to their growing child. Gloriana was roughly four months pregnant now and her belly had become a little bit more pronounced.

Both of them placed their hands on the belly.

"Our daughter is growing bigger." Gloriana smiled in a loving manner. "I can't feel her kicking yet, but the scanners already show that she is beginning to move around. Her development is completely fine at the moment. She had developed health and the few odd mutations and gene expressions that she exhibited are well within tolerance."

Humans were complex creatures and were filled with endless variations. Beyond the earliest stages when they just consisted of a handful of cells, it was no longer as easy as before to correct every single genetic oddity. The geneticists in charge of managing these developments therefore acted with more restraint. As long as the baby did not gain any deformities or known maladies, it was fine for them to show a little variation.

"Have the doctors detected any unusual physical traits?" Ves asked.

Gloriana grinned. "Well, her cells are stronger and more vigorous than before. She is able to resist germs a lot better. The combination of her designer genes as well as the Superior Mother's blessing will ensure she will become the healthiest baby possible!"

Ves wasn't sure about the veracity of her claim, but he was glad to hear his baby was fine, at least in a physical sense.

Her body needed to be strong enough in case anything happened when he conducted his planned procedure on his daughter.

#### *Chapter 3189: White Mouse*

The Larkinson fleet made some big movements. Not only were clansmen taking exceedingly great care to move Gloriana's precious production equipment from the Spirit of Bentheim to the Vivacious Wal, the Swordmaidens and Heavensworders were also making arrangements.

It was impossible and highly irresponsible for the Swordmaidens and Heavensworders to leave their posts at the same time. They had to set up at least a partial rotation to make sure the ships were taken care of and that they had sufficient mechs on hand to guard against unexpected incidents.

The planning of the ritual also took a bit of time. Ves only came up with it a short time ago, so Ketis and her circle had to scramble to come up with a ceremony that was elaborate, impressive and authentic enough to achieve the desired effect.

Fortunately, the Heavensworders came to the rescue. Relying on many millenia's worth of heritage and traditions, they were easily able to come up with thousands of large-scale rituals that served to bless the making of a heroic sword or the ascension of a swordmaster.

To Ves, it didn't matter what kind of weirdness the Heavensworders had in mind. As long as they believed in their own nonsense, the mood in the mech arena should be sufficient enough to give Ketis and perhaps the other mech designers enough stimulation to make the Decapitator Project a little more exceptional.

During all of this whirlwind of activity, Ves received a surprising request from the Cross Clan to travel over to their flagship.

"What do the Crossers want?" He asked his assistant as he was petting Lucky.

"The Cross Patriarch wants to talk with you. He hasn't told us why, but if I had to make a guess, he probably wants to begin discussions on the design of his next expert mech."

"Ah. Well, if he expects something from me, then he'll have to wait for a while. After we complete the Decapitator Project and Vanguard Project, we still have to finish the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project. That will take at least three more months or maybe four due to the greater complexity of the latter projects. After that, there are a lot of other projects that need to be taken care of as Brutus' expert mech and so on. I hope they'll understand."

"Uhm, you should tell that to the Crossers yourself, boss. Anyway, you can head over to the Hemmington Cross whenever it is convenient."

"I'll travel in a couple of hours."

Ves took care of some other routine matters first. He checked up on the preparations aboard the Vivacious Wal. He quizzed his students to see whether they kept up on their studies.

One of the more interesting talks he conducted was with Dr. Ranya. With the growth of the Larkinson Biotech Institute and its importance in ensuring his future daughter grew up healthy and without any flaws, he took the time to shuttle over to the Dragon's Den.

By now, the bioresearch vessel's utilization was much higher than before. Her biomes already hosted hundreds of different designer beasts and exobeasts. Many of them were purchased from market, but a couple of the organic products were actually homegrown.

Dr. Ranya personally brought him to a viewing area where they could watch the first of many designer beasts that the Lifer beast designers had cooked up in recent times.

"What am I looking at?" He asked as he strode to the windows of the high tower.

The windows did not just provide a clear view of the forested terrain below, but also projected enhanced and alternate viewpoints that were currently tracking a sample of the interesting creatures that prowled this biome.

Lucky flew over to the windows as well, but quickly grew bored with the sight. Cats were much more interesting than other animals in his opinion.

"Meow."

The gem cat flew over to Dr. Ranya and landed on her shoulder.

"When you gave our teams the task to develop useful designer beasts that can produce powerful mutations, they began with their original research projects first. We have a host of beast designers aboard this ship that have already worked on numerous existing designer beasts. We have been digging them up and used them as the base of what you want to obtain. So far, the designer beasts we have made range from flying fish, poisonous primates, long-living dogs and gigantic armored snakes. The latter should currently be in your sights."

Though Ves wasn't able to see any snakes from his high vantage point, the projectors already tracked numbers of members of this artificial species. The snakes were just as big as she described. One of them was as thick as the leg of a humanoid mech and was impressively long. It probably took a lot of tons of food to fill up the stomach of such a massive creature.

When Ves swept the forest below with his spiritual vision, he failed to encounter any strong presences. His enthusiasm level immediately dropped.

"I take it that your teams didn't have much luck in producing any mutated beasts."

"Our researchers tried their best to induce more mutations." She said. "This big snake that you're observing now is considerably larger than it ought to be because of that. Sadly, that is the most that we have been able to achieve. All of the mutations that we have encountered so far are either inconsequential or purely physical in nature. We haven't created any designer beasts that can exhibit strange abilities like Arnold."

Ves began to look skeptical. "Maybe your approach is faulty. Physical mutations aren't useful at all. What I'm looking at are mutations in the mind. I'm not sure how you can encourage that, but I feel that randomly messing with the genes of these beasts will not increase our chances of gaining a new Arnold."

"I know that." Dr. Ranya sighed. "We know too little about... Non-physical mutations. The few specimens we have are too few for us to observe any solid patterns. We can either continue to play with genes as we have done before, or..."

She did not say anything more as she grabbed Lucky from her shoulder and started to inspect him from every angle. She looked as if she had become a vet who was performing a biannual checkup on the gem cat.

"Meow?"

"What did you want to say, Ranya? What idea do you have in mind that you're not sure whether you want to share?"

Ranya sighed as she let go of Lucky. The cat floated back to her shoulder and used it as a perch again.

"I've been thinking a lot about the phenomenon that you call spirituality. According to you, spiritual energy is derived from sentient creatures and sentient thought. However, there is obviously more to the story since only a fraction of organisms possess enough spirituality to do anything with it. Currently, Arnold is our only living specimen. A few months ago, I started to take samples of his cells and merged them into other designer beasts."

That was quite an interesting idea!

"Did you get any useful results?"

"No, though my experiments are still in an early stage. To be honest, I don't have much hope that this experiment will yield a mutated beast. However, I think we can produce more drastic results if we adopt a slightly different approach."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'd like to borrow an active sample of the life-prolonging treatment serum that you hold. If my assumptions about its formula are correct, it should contain the raw energy needed to boost an ordinary designer beast."

"No. Absolutely not. This is a strategic resource that I can only spare for vital projects that deliver a guaranteed pay-off. We can't squander it on spurious experiments." Ves responded.

Dr. Ranya looked a bit disappointed, but she anticipated this answer to an extent.

"Then what about borrowing your own cells?"

"What?!"

"Please hear me out, sir." She quickly said as even Lucky started to look oddly at her. "While our attempts to implant Arnold cells into other designer beasts has not achieved any immediate results, the story is slightly different when we attempted to use your cells. Do you remember the examinations you went through in order to prepare for the formation of your designer baby? Well, we still have some tissue samples of your flesh in storage, so I decided to take one out and implant it into a simple creature."

Ves became a bit alarmed all of a sudden. "Ranya! I did not give permission for you to use my cells in an unauthorized and unannounced experiment! Has it ever occurred to you that you should inform me before you use my own tissue samples in some crazy experiment?"

"It was just a tiny sample!" Ranya defended herself. "To be honest, we were getting rather desperate back then. I wanted to show a positive result to you so that you won't think that we haven't made any appreciable progress."

He sighed. Ranya might have acted a bit unethically, but she didn't do anything too egregious. The deed was already done so there was little point in sticking to it. Besides, even he was curious at what this experiment yielded.

"So what happened?"

"I think it's best that I show you in person. Let's head over to my private lab."

They exited the observation area and moved to her laboratory. As the head of the Larkinson Biotech Institute, she claimed the largest laboratory and filled it up with all kinds of advanced lab equipment. There were numerous machines at work at the moment. Many of them cultivated different kinds of plant life while others were trying to perform deep analysis on different tissue samples.

Ranya ignored all of that and strode straight to a side chamber which turned out to be a dissection area. She approached a wall and pulled out a transparent cube which contained the corpse of a simple white lab mouse.

The cube kept the mouse's body frozen.

When Ranya placed the cube onto the table, Lucky flew down a bit in order to inspect the mouse.

"Meow."

"Of course it doesn't look appetizing to you. It's an organic mouse, after all." Ves rolled his eyes at his cat.

When Ves inspected the little mouse carcass with his spiritual senses, he became surprised by what he noticed.

He detected the tissue sample that used to come from his body. Though it had already lost almost all of its potency, Ves did manage to detect a small whiff of spiritual energy.

What really caused him to be surprised was that he managed to detect an even smaller trace of his spiritual energy had managed to spread across the mouse's entire body! Though it was extremely faint, it reminded him a bit of how he and subsequently the Superior Mother infused his unborn daughter's body with their energies.

The difference was that it didn't seem to have ended up well for the mouse.

"How did it die?" He asked. "I see its head didn't blow up. That's different."

"Should I expect that to happen?" Ranya raised her eyebrow.

"Erm, nevermind. Just tell me what is going on with this mouse."

"It's a bit of a mystery to me, honestly. Normally, the method we use to integrate human tissue samples to mice is highly mature and almost completely safe. Sure, the mouse will be burdened by extra tissue or organs that aren't meant to be there, but we have always managed to keep them alive. Not this time. Just hours after grafting your tissue into its body, it started to exhibit less activity. This slowly continued until it became comatose. An hour later, its unconscious body functions shut down, causing it to die."

This was an interesting sequence of events. The mouse had died gradually and over time. Also, it didn't suffer any deadly physical maladies. Instead, it slowly grew sleepy until it finally entered its eternal slumber.

As Ves continued to inspect the carcass with his spiritual senses, he developed a suspicion of what had happened.

#### *Chapter 3190: God or Monster*

Ever since he and his mother began to infuse his unborn daughter's body with spiritual energy, he began to develop an interest in how it interacted with biological tissue.

Clearly, there was a stronger relationship between the two than he initially thought. It made sense in a way as the spiritualities of the vast majority of sentient beings were anchored to their bodies and more specifically their brains.

For a long time, he thought that the bond between the two was loose. As long as the brain was sufficiently complex enough to produce a meaningful degree of sentience, the intelligent creature in question was able to gain and activate their spiritual potential.

In all of his theoretical frameworks, Ves based all of his subsequent theories around this simple assumption.

So when Ves encountered a case where his daughter's brain was incredibly underdeveloped yet still managed to reach a point where she gained spiritual potential, something had to give.

What did it mean for someone's entire body to generate spirituality instead of just the brain?

Would his daughter become even more talented and powerful in this area than himself?

Just thinking about it caused him to shudder. Would she become a monster? Would she become... a god?

No!

Not if he could do anything about it! As long as he was there to guide his daughter into controlling her potent spirituality, nothing should go wrong. The companion spirit seed he intended to plant in her would also help a lot in regulating her excess power.

As long as everything went well and his daughter managed to grow up alongside her companion spirit, she would start off her adult life at a much higher starting point than himself.

On one hand, he felt immensely pleased at the prospect of being able to raise a daughter who was much more powerful than him, at least when she graduated from her studies and started her first job.

On the other hand, he wasn't sure whether he would be able to control such a powerful offspring. Who knew what she wanted to do and how much she was willing to defy her 'dearest daddy' with a heap of power at her disposal!

The more he thought about it, the more he felt that this was a realistic risk. Even though his daughter still had several more months to go before she was finally born, already the potential of the growing fetus inside Gloriana's belly was frighteningly powerful at this very early stage.

God or monster?

The former did not exist and he would definitely make sure to prevent his daughter from ever becoming the latter!

In order to help him understand this strange new phenomenon, Ves needed more data. That meant that he needed Ranya to conduct focused studies on this topic.

Naturally, he would never allow her to treat his daughter as her test subject. Just the thought of taking a few cells from his baby girl just to implant them into a mouse or something sounded abhorrent!

This was why Ves bravely decided to volunteer himself. If anything detrimental happened to him, then he would at least be able to spare his upcoming daughter from the suffering.

His eyes firmed up as he took one last look at the dead white mouse that Ranya had experimented upon. Dr. Ranya's initial attempt failed abjectly, but the clues that he was able to derive from it were quite novel and refreshing.

"How many mice do you have?"

"Do you really have to ask that?" Ranya responded with a mirthful look. She waved her hand across her expansive laboratory. "The Dragon's Den is not just a lab ship, but also a bioproduction plant akin to a miniature version of the Spirit of Bentheim. The mass cultivation of lab mice is an essential function to any site that conducts bioresearch. We can literally grow millions of mice at once from any known genetic strain we can think of. We can even cultivate other animals and exobeasts for experimental purposes on a large scale. If any of our research has reached an advanced scale, we can even switch over to mass producing clones."

Ves jolted a bit after he heard that last part. He stared directly in her eyes.

"Are you talking about sentient clones that are capable of living like actual humans?"

She shook her head. "We do have the capability, though only a handful of senior Lifer researchers are capable of conducting advanced human cloning. For experimental purposes, generating low-order human clones is more efficient. They aren't humans per se. They are merely sacks of meat that look like humans but don't have any consciousness."

"I see. So are you able to produce these low-order clones en masse?"

"We are, but for most experiments, we usually start off with humble lab mice. They're smaller, cheaper and easier to grow and maintain. They leave smaller messes behind and they can be disposed of with much less hassle. If we move on to conducting experiments on full-sized human clones, we would have to occupy a special lab that is configured for handling human bodies and there are only so many of them aboard this ship. Right now, most of them are already occupied by research teams developing new genetic augmentations, minor longevity treatments and specialized implants for mech pilots."

The Larkinson Clan could easily purchase off-the-shelf versions of these products off the market, but Ves and several people within the clan thought it was prudent for the clan to master these industries. This way, they not only reduced their dependence on external services, but could also turn biotechnology into the second revenue source of the Larkinson Clan.

Not every pioneer who ventured into the Red Ocean was able to grab thousands of talented biotech researchers from a state that possessed a strong heritage of raising them. It would be an enormous waste if Ves allowed the Lifer scientists and the Dragon's Den to become underutilized.

Ves felt very pleased that he had access to his own bio research division. Not only was he able to commission studies on any topic he deemed interesting, but he was also able to do so without bothering with any of the annoying ethical and moral challenges that he would get if he contacted an outside company.

The benefit of effectively controlling the Larkinson Biotech Institute was that it had become his playground for any fascination related to biotechnology. Initially, he wanted to use it to provide augmentations for his clansmen and cultivate new mutated beasts that had the potential to expand his collection of design spirits?

As for now? Ves began to figure out that Dr. Ranya and her teams of researchers might also be able to help him discover more about the nature of spirituality and how it empowered humans. Considering that he had haphazardly treated his own unborn daughter as an experiment, it became more critical than ever for him to expand his studies in this direction!

"I'd like you to do something for me, Ranya."

"What is it you require, patriarch?" She asked, becoming more attentive as she noticed his demeanor had grown more serious.

"I need you to set up a... secret research department. I trust you to handle my more sensitive requests with discretion, but you are not enough for what I have in mind. I need you to gather a team of trusted researchers who can keep their mouths shut to perform broad research on the properties of spirituality and figure out ways to harness it in humans."

This was not a casual request. Dr. Ranya weighed the possibilities.

"I can set up a new research department and keep it confidential easily enough. I imagine that my own measures probably won't be thorough enough, so I will need a lot of help from Calabast and the Black Cats to make it foolproof."

"You will have the help you need, and the funding." Ves said.

The former member of the Wodin Dynasty thought a bit more about the steps she needed to take. "It shouldn't be a problem for me to obfuscate the administration and set up a secret lab aboard this ship. The real challenge is finding the right personnel. I can imagine that you already know what the Lifer researchers are like. They are very professional when it comes to maintaining their confidentiality. Their loyalty also

shouldn't be in doubt considering that they have taken well to joining a clan that is willing to provide excellent facilities and abundant funding for their project."

"Then what's the problem?" Ves frowned.

"These Lifer researchers come from a state that has always emphasized the importance of innovation and developing new products in order to expand and diversify the biotech industry. As a result, they can be... a bit overenthusiastic about their research. What I mean by that is that they sometimes lose sight of their limits and go too far with their experiments. Much of what I am trying to improve at the moment is to implement more oversight among our research teams. This will be more difficult to implement in a secret research department because it can't involve too many people."

He could see why this would be an issue, but he did not let that stop him from going through with this essential plan. "We can't remain as ignorant as we are now with how spirituality and spiritual energy interacts with humans. I mean, I don't even know what's going on with my daughter anymore due to all of the spiritual energy that she has sucked up! I'm not afraid of any experiments going too far. What I need are results and confidentiality. Give me answers and try to keep what this new department is doing as secret as possible. Can you do that, doctor?"

The director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute nodded solemnly. "I will make sure that you will have your results. I will personally see to everything. I have a high interest in these studies as well. I haven't heard anything like it in other biotech researchers. From what I have seen and inferred so far, spirituality may be the key property that will truly lead humanity to a new stage of evolution. Spirituality is responsible for making mech pilots, mech designers and swordmasters special. Imagine what it could do to our race if every person and every profession becomes extraordinary!"

Such a radical change would completely upend human civilization, and Ves wasn't sure whether it was for the better. Even if this scenario was the utopia that the MTA was striving towards, handing lots of power to an endless amount of people was extremely dangerous. After all, there were many individuals who weren't able to use their powers as responsibly as himself!

"Don't take spirituality lightly, Ranya." He warned her. "I know first-hand that messing with people's spirits in any way can easily turn fatal. Start your studies on small, disposable animals and work your way up to clones of the low-quality kind. My main interest right now is to find out how we can infuse human flesh with spiritual energy and what that does to an organism. I have a few hunches but I don't dare to voice them yet. I just want to understand what it does to a human."

To be honest, he had also become a bit jealous of his daughter's fortune. Unlike her, his own body tissue was not infused with spirituality. He felt as if he was a defective human compared to his future offspring.

Was he happy that she had the potential to become stronger than him? Certainly.

Was he happy about the prospect of being left in the dust? No.

As a responsible parent, Ves felt the need to overtake her and make sure he remained in the lead so that he could guide his daughter's development. The last thing he wanted to see was for her to make a mistake and steer her spiritual development in the wrong direction!