

## Mech 3091

### *Chapter 3091: Bardo Star Cluster*

Crossing a star cluster was different from crossing a star sector.

Now that the expeditionary fleet finally reached the border that demarcated the end of the Yeina Star Cluster and the beginning of the Bardo Star Cluster, everyone in the fleet became emotional.

Neither the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers nor Crossers had ever traveled so far beyond the normal confines of their local region.

Everyone held their own thoughts on the matter. Some saw it as an escape from their old homes. Others believed the passage would allow them to break out of their cocoons and soar into the skies like butterflies.

Whatever metaphors that the people in the fleet used to rationalize the crossing, there was no doubt that they would be putting a stripe between them and their past.

Once they left the Yeina Star Cluster, they would take one step out into the wider cosmos. The scope of everyone's vision would stretch far wider than the state, star sector or star cluster they originated from. To a number of people, it was only now that they began to feel that their former homes were not as impressive as they thought...

States like the Hexadric Hegemony, Heavensword Association and Life Research Association may be formidable in their backyard, but their playground was nothing compared to an entire continent!

As Ves along with his circle of advisors stood on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim, he became swept by emotion as well. An apprehensive but hopeful mood ran throughout the entire fleet. He was gratified that most of the Larkinsons around him were looking forward to the future instead of feeling regret at leaving their past behind.

To Ves, the Komodo Star Sector had already turned into an afterthought to him. While the Komodo War still raged as hot as ever, all of the light-years between him and the frontlines made it difficult for him to care about the outcome.

He still hated the Friday Coalition, but his grudge against them seemed trivial compared to the heights he was climbing. The Larkinson Clan was almost done with digesting the tens of thousands of new recruits that had recently joined its ranks. The clan administration was already planning a second round of recruitment.

As for the Hexadric Hegemony...

He threw a brief glance at Calabast. She showed no indication that she felt any regret for leaving the Hexadric Hegemony or leaving it to its potentially tragic fate.

Out of everyone in the Larkinson Clan, only Gloriana exhibited the strongest reaction. Still, even she knew that there was little she could do to remedy the situation. The border systems of the Hexadric Hegemony were being battered by vengeful Fridaymen. If not for the fact that the Hexers wrecked a lot of infrastructure in the space they had previously conquered, the Fridaymen would have been able to achieve more progress at this time!

Even Gloriana's occasional outbursts had grown more hollow. Though she cared a lot about the Hexadric Hegemony and its people, she cared about her family even more.

The Wodins were not without means. The dynasty had already made good progress in forming evacuation fleets and enacting their long-prepared contingency plans. The Glory Seekers was merely one of their continuity options.

Even if the Hegemony fell, Madame Constance Wodin and many of her relatives would be able to find a living elsewhere.

Of course, before the state fell, none of the Hexers intended to let the Fridaymen win. Their pride and their belief in female supremacy did not allow them to surrender!

All of this meant that Gloriana did not insist on helping the Hegemony as much anymore. She was a member of the Larkinson Clan now and her wellbeing was no longer bound the fate of the Hexadric Hegemony.

Besides, it was not as if the Hexers would disappear from the galactic stage if they lost their state. Gloriana frequently talked to her old contacts, so she was aware that the Hexers may be plotting a comeback in the Red Ocean.

All in all, hardly anyone in the Larkinson Clan had any reason to stop going forward. The influence exerted by the Larkinson Network gradually increased everyone's attachment to their new clan. This process naturally reduced everyone's attachment to their old homes.

These days, Ves barely thought about the Bright Republic at all. The humble third-rate state was practically dead to him. The fleet had already become his true haven.

He looked at the projection of the entire expeditionary fleet. The starships had already cycled their FTL drives long ago. The reason why they did not attempt the instant they were ready was because the engineers were all tasked with inspecting every critical system related to their operation.

Crossing into another star cluster was no joke. Just like the borders between star sectors, the borders between star clusters also consisted of gravitic barriers. Whether

they were natural or artificial, when humanity took over a space region, they deliberately strengthened the walls in order to prevent hostile alien civilizations from sweeping across human space in an instant.

There were indications that the partitioning of space was no longer as absolute as before, though. Phasewater not only opened up new methods of superluminal travel, but was also capable of improving existing methods of travel.

Researchers who already had access to phasewater successfully managed to use it to strengthen an FTL drive. Depending on how phasewater was applied, an upgraded drive possessed more range, stability and in extreme cases even allowed them to leapfrog past several star sectors at a time!

The astounding benefits of phasewater would eventually transform and revolutionize space travel across the entirety of human space, but it would take many decades for the changes to be felt by average people.

If Ves and the Larkinson Clan ever returned to the galactic rim, the Yeina Star Cluster would probably look completely different!

Ves minutely shook his head. There was little point in looking back. Even he couldn't stop the expeditionary fleet from advancing anymore. He put so much effort into selling a dream of a new life in the Red Ocean that the Larkinsons would probably disregard his authority if he tried to hit the brakes.

"What are your views on the Bardo Star Cluster?"

"It's a fairly typical rim star cluster." Shederin Purnesse answered first. "Bardo is more developed than Yeina, so the degree of development in the star cluster is considerably higher than you are accustomed to. Many states have a rich and stable heritage, so wars are less frequent. The power distribution is already set in these areas, so the nature and frequency of war is subject to more rules and restrictions."

The states in the Bardo Star Cluster placed more emphasis on stability. Risk takers might be able to win, but the long stretch of time has caused many of them to disappear from history.

The ones that remained standing might not have been able to expand their territory or gain a lot of prosperity, but their prudence had paid off. In the end, the enduring successes of stable states encouraged others to follow suit, hence the overall decline in conflict.

That said, power struggles still existed. Rival powers simply accomplished their goals in different ways. In the worst case scenarios, wars still broke out, but it was too easy for them end up in a situation where both sides lost.

"Open warfare is considerably less frequent in the Bardo Star Cluster, but smaller skirmishes and unannounced conflicts have increased." General Verle's projection explained. "The risk of encountering them or getting caught up in them is low, though. The battles generally don't take place along the established trade routes. Unpredictable results might ensue if the combatants pull in a third party that was more powerful than anyone anticipated!"

Ves smirked. "These states are quite clever. The people back in our native star cluster could have learned a lesson from the Bardo Star Cluster."

He wouldn't have gotten dragged into so many conflicts if people just left him alone.

"We don't have ties to the states and organizations of Bardo, so we should be able to pass through their space without interruption." Calabast stated. "Though we cannot rule out the existence of relations that might cause the local powers here to target us, we are not that easy to attack. We should still exhibit basic prudence and send more scout ships ahead of our route in order to forewarn us against any ambushes and dangerous fleet presence."

"I'll take care of it, sir." General Verle said. "The Flagrant Vandals are already familiar with the protocols. I agree with Calabast's assessments. We are just one of many large fleets that merely want to pass through to the star cluster without affecting the local situation. There are so many other travelers that we are indistinguishable from the crowd."

Ves hoped that was the case, but if his advisors were wrong, the Larkinson Clan should be able to take care of itself. He just hoped that he would be able to get a couple of expert mechs online before anything bad happened. The power of the upcoming Larkinson expert mechs were absolutely not average!

"Since all our preparations are complete, let's proceed." He commanded. "Begin the transition!"

The massive fleet of the Larkinson Clan, Glory Seekers and Cross Clan simultaneously exited realspace and proceeded to go forth into a new region of space.

The Spirit of Bentheim and many other ships shook a bit due to the rougher-than-usual transition. Ves didn't show any concern as this was an expected side effect.

He still let out a tiny breath in relief after he confirmed that the Spirit of Bentheim and any other ship in the Larkinson fleet reported no significant issues.

Before Ves returned to the design lab, he asked one more question.

"What progress have we made in securing our new big purchases?"

"We have already concluded a financing agreement, so money is no object. We will have no problem with spending the equivalent of 11 trillion hex credits." Shederin replied.

"Who is willing to loan us that much money? And why so much?"

"The list prices of the second-class capital ships are already outdated." The chief diplomat replied. "If we want to secure the ships we are eyeing on, we need to present enough cash to persuade their current owners to give them up right away. If we wait any longer, there is a considerable chance that those with deeper pockets have already claimed the vessels for themselves."

Though non-combat oriented vessels such as the Discentibus and the Vivacious Wal did not directly increase an organization's combat effectiveness, they were very suitable for those looking to migrate to a different region of space. No ship was useless. At the very least, their huge hulls allowed them to function as jumbo-sized cargo haulers.

"Since we have the money, I take it that we should have no problem with getting the ships we want."

Shederin smiled. "We should be able to reach the star system where they are being sold within three to four weeks. The only issue is that negotiations are proceeding more slowly than we wish."

Ves scoffed. "Let me guess. The sellers realize that prices for starships are constantly rising, so they are looking to secure a bigger payday, right?"

Shederin regretfully nodded. "That is indeed the case. You have to realize that the owners of the ships are affected by naked greed and interest. These desires are difficult to suppress."

"I don't blame you. Anyone with a brain will know how to maximize their profits when they are holding on to valuable goods."

The problem was that the deal might not be settled once the Larkinsons arrived at the trading system. Ves did not want his fleet to be delayed so it was crucial for Shederin to solve this problem before that time.

"The new ships are worth the effort." Calabast reassured him. "Don't worry. If Mr. Purnesse's persuasion is not enough, I will give him a hand."

That should be enough, he supposed.

*Chapter 3092: Three Amigos*

Once the fleet actually crossed into the Bardo Star Cluster, the Larkinsons realized that it wasn't as special as they thought.

Space was space. Bardo was also occupied by states, the organizations and average citizens. While they might hold different names and possess different cultures, the dynamic in the new star cluster was not that exciting.

Once the magic died down, everyone shoved aside their wonder and sentimental feelings and went back to work.

Ves also proceeded to do his work. While he hadn't been able to secure the new starships that Gloriana needed, he instructed his fleet to lend a bit more processing power to the Design Department.

At the cost of reducing the effectiveness of other research activities, his wife gained the processing power she wanted. This ensured that the drop in productivity by giving the assistant mech designers a lighter workload did not slow down progress too much.

The Disruptor Project was quickly becoming more refined, but Ves and Gloriana knew that this was just the beginning...

"Our initial simulations exposed a fair number of problems." Gloriana explained as she petted Clixie. "While I expected to encounter these issues, solving them isn't as straightforward. Some issues relate to the operation of high tech components. We need to obtain the assistance of their original developers in order to resolve any problems related to these powerful mech parts."

The Design Department largely made use of Hexer component licenses, so the mech designers had to knock on the doors of a very specific group of component developers.

"Are you able to get us the support we need?" Ves carefully asked.

His wife sighed and leaned against his arm. "You know how it is back home. Hegemony space has become increasingly more depressed and everyone in the state is scrambling to do something. The developers aren't responding to my inquiries as quickly as I hoped. In some cases, the original development teams of the components in question have already been disbanded. It is a lot harder for us to get hold of an engineer who can speak about the components with confidence."

The dependence on third-party support meant that the Disruptor Project wouldn't be finished anytime soon. They may have to extend the optimization time by a couple of weeks in order to account for the various delays.

"What other issues are we dealing with? I doubt this is the only source of delay."

"It is difficult to simulate the performance of an expert mech." She flatly stated. "Leaving aside the difficulty of modeling a mech that incorporates resonating exotics, we can't predict what will happen when an expert pilot resonates with the machine. Our depth in this field is too shallow. Only Master Willix is able to address any concerns related to the expert pilot and resonance aspects, but reaching her has become a lot more difficult than before. She is preoccupied with other matters and talking to her directly is out of the question. The most I can do is to compile all of the problems and send the documents and related information to her mailing account. She will eventually get to my message and compose quick replies that won't always deliver clear conclusions, but will at least point me in the right direction."

Gloriana exhibited a decent amount of frustration at the setbacks. Her dream of finishing the project quickly was quickly being dashed.

"If we have any idle mech designers, we can put them back to work on the other projects." Ves stated. "We haven't been making much progress in the other expert mech designs. This is a good opportunity to ramp them up. We don't need as much processing power to complete their first iterations."

He had a good point. "I will adjust the schedule if necessary. I don't want to pull too many people away from the Disruptor Project, though. Finishing Venerable Tusa's expert mech quickly provides us with a lot of benefits. The fact that we will be able to test and verify our respective innovations in a real expert mech is the one I am eyeing the most!"

They both looked at the current version of the Disruptor Project. Compared to the initial iteration, Ves already spotted a few minute differences. While the overall design did not look much different, these tiny changes granted the expert mech crucial performance increases. Whether they eliminated problematic flaws or found more efficient implementations, Ves estimated that the performance of the expert mech had already risen by 1.3 percent.

Though that didn't sound like much, there was a lot more room for optimization. The current results already proved that the Disruptor Project was far from reaching its final state.

"Miaow~"

Clixie playfully batted her tail onto Ves' lap. He reached out to nuzzle her head.

As long as he kept his wife happy, her cat was happy as well!

Once they split up and proceeded to work on their individual assignments, Ves decided to ready the design spirits for the Disruptor Project.

Though the spiritual design of the expert mechs was already strong in its own right, he had always designed the mech with its design spirits into consideration.

The easier task was to prep Arnold for his future role. When Ves dropped by Calabast's office, the eight-legged exobeast was rubbing his face against his owner's boot.

"Squeak. Squeak."

"Oh yeah, Ves. Why have you come? Do you want an update on the security situation of the Bardo Star Cluster, or are you here to inquire about our progress in securing a deal for the new ships?"

"Neither." He waved his hand. "I'm not here for you this time. I'm here for my test subject."

Calabast instantly drew her eyes below her desk. Arnold was blissfully rubbing his mammalian face on the smooth texture of her boots.

"Arnold, get out and present yourself."

"Squeak!"

Much to Ves' surprise, the exobeast fully immediately dropped his current activity and crawled out like an obedient little schoolboy.

"Squeak?"

Calabast looked at Ves. "Here he is. Do whatever you need to do with him. Just give him back to me alive, please."

"Hey, what do you take me for? I am not planning to do anything drastic to him. Let me take a look at him first."

Ves bent down and carefully touched Arnold's head. Seeing that the critter knew better than to bite his hand, he leveraged the physical connection to perform a deep spiritual scan on Arnold.

Nothing was out of his expectation. Compared to his last inspection, Arnold had grown a lot stronger than before. His spiritual development had accelerated ever since Ves employed him as the design spirit of the Devious model.

With at least hundreds of thousands of Devious mechs performing sabotage missions along the frontlines of the Komodo War, Arnold received a rich amount of spiritual feedback.

Still, the exobeast was far from matching other design spirits. Ves could even say that Arnold's spiritual development was slower than it should when it received so much spiritual feedback from different people.

Ves had a suspicion that design spirits that were still alive in a physical sense might have more difficulty in growing their spiritual prowess. Their physical bodies not only served as their anchors, but also their shackles. There were much less barriers to growth if the spirits weren't bound by the limitations of their physical shells.

He briefly contemplated whether he should 'free' Arnold from his mortal coil. Surely the exobeast could do without licking boots, right?

"Squeak!" Arnold's eight legs quickly scurried back.

Though the arganid clisenta species was not known for their fighting prowess, the alien creatures were quite sensitive towards danger. Ves was impressed by Arnold's ability to recognize a possible threat.

"Don't screw around with Arnold, Ves."

"I'm not screwing around! I'm merely assessing his current state."

"That hungry look of yours makes me think you were entertaining very different thoughts. I doubt Arnold tastes good if you put him on a barbecue rack."

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

Arnold was so afraid that he was on the verge of employing his extraordinary ability to escape. It was too bad that it was impossible for him to get away. The Spirit of Bentheim was fully in Ves' grasp, and nothing was beyond her hull except vacuum!

After Ves had his fill of tormenting Arnold, he quickly completed his inspection and turned him into the Disruptor Project's design spirit.

In addition, he borrowed a small spiritual fragment from the growing design spirit, though Arnold suffered so much pain that he crawled behind Calabast's boots while looking aggrieved.

"Squeak squeak squeak..."

"Awww. It's okay, Arnold. It's over now. Ves won't do anything bad to you anymore, isn't that right?"

"I'm done." He said as he temporarily stored Arnold's freshly harvested spiritual fragment in his mind. Blinky was already taking good care of it. "Your pet will probably act a bit listlessly for the next few weeks. He'll slowly recover over time."

It wasn't necessary for him to harvest any design spirits to empower a mech design. Ves merely had to instruct entities to occupy the conceptual space of the mech designs.

The true reason why he wanted to borrow a spiritual fragment was to empower the prime mech aspects of the Disruptor Project. As classification of mechs invented by himself, Ves had to leverage his own distinctive methods in order to turn Venerable Tusa's future combat machine into his latest prime mech.

When Ves returned to his personal workshop, he stored the fragment into a P-stone and proceeded to turn to his next task.

When Ves held the P-stone containing the spiritual remains of the Inexorable One, he briefly cast his mind back to the Battle against the Abyss.

The dark gods that had arrayed against his task force were immensely impressive despite the fact that they had lost in the end. In fact, the Larkinsons hadn't strictly beaten them at all. Ves instead called his mother in desperation who subsequently smacked the ancient entities so hard that only spiritual fragments were left of them at the end!

Of the three amigos, the Unending One was the most powerful and most useful to Ves. The Blinding One stood out due to his luminar identity and his intelligent, humanoid roots.

As for the Inexorable One...

"She's just a big bird. A big, dead bird."

His impression of the Inexorable One was the vaguest of the three. He hadn't paid much attention to the avian dark god while she dueled against Tusa while he benefited from his recent breakthrough.

The only details that stood out was that the dark god was probably a mutated exobeast of the avian variety and that she was apparently a female one at that. Her speed was a notable strength of hers but what impressed him even more was her sorcery. For some reason, she was able to summon strange tornado manifestations in space that was able to disrupt the performance of mechs.

Ves wanted to preserve both of these traits in his new design spirit, but he wasn't sure if he was able to preserve the Inexorable One's powerful spiritual abilities. They not only required a lot of strength to perform, but also depended deeply on the dark god's unique knowledge accumulation and development path. Much of that would probably get fragmented or lost if Ves processed the Inexorable One's remains.

He let out a sigh. "The dead must pass on. It's not a good idea to preserve too much of a dark god anyway."

He did not want to bring the Inexorable One back alive. Dark gods were ancient beyond imagination and they were incredibly wily even if they had reached their lowest point.

The process of Blinky's creation had taught him a profound lesson on the capabilities of these evolved spiritual entities.

Ves smirked. "I'm not making the same mistake twice, isn't that right, Blinky?"

Mrow.

He had a couple of new options at his disposal after he acquired Blinky. The companion spirit possessed a great sensitivity towards spiritual energy. It was his food, after all!

#### *Chapter 3093: Convenient Assistance*

Ves entertained many ideas on how to utilize the Inexorable One's design fragment. The avian dark god lent itself well for mobility-oriented purposes, though the big bird was a bit more versatile than that. This actually gave him a bit of a headache.

"If I use up the fragment to create a straightforward spiritual product that centers around speed, then I would probably waste the Inexorable One's crowd control capabilities."

The opposite was the case if he intended to leverage the Inexorable One's ability to call tornados and other weird stuff. Though Ves was enormously attracted to the dark god's mastery in manipulating the environment, it was rather hard for him to fit this aspect in a design spirit that was meant to empower light mechs.

Ves wanted to process the Inexorable One into a form that preserved both its strengths, but that directly risked the return of the dark god. If he ended up creating a spiritual product that shared a high degree of resemblance to the avian entity, wouldn't he end up building a ladder that would allow the dead entity to climb back to life?

He figured that was the principal reason why the Unending One managed to attempt a takeover even if Ves employed numerous precautions. He had become so certain that he had sanitized the Unending One's spiritual fragment.

The spiritual attributes related to the tentacled whale's devouring and digestion capabilities served as the great being's core functions... The Unending One was literally based around these two core functions.

In this context, removing all of the other excess spiritual attributes was not that big of a deal. The bulk of the meat was still there even after Ves trimmed all of the excess fat and blubber from the spiritual fragment.

Once he began to use it up to create Blinky, the Unending One found a sufficient entry point to get back to life! When Ves ignorantly fed spiritual energy to his newborn

spiritual product, he inadvertently spoon fed one of his old enemies the exact resource he needed to begin his takeover attempt!

In his upcoming attempt, he had to prevent or at least be ready to respond if it happened yet again. The stakes were less dire since his new creation wasn't literally connected this mind, but the consequences were still dire if the Inexorable One succeeded in taking over the newborn spirit.

"I can't do much to prevent it from happening again." He frowned.

He could probably reduce the chance of a disaster by removing even more portions of the Inexorable One, but that would also leave him with less raw materials. He had to strike a balance where he removed enough attributes to deny the dark god an easy return but also ensure he had enough elements left to turn his latest spiritual product into a powerful and remarkable addition to his collection.

He smirked. "Compared to last time, I have gained a powerful advantage. Blinky! It's time for you to shine."

Mrow!

A purple spiritual cat emerged out of his head and preened in midair. His condition was good at the moment. His purple fur looked healthy and lush, the motes of light streaking across his form were lighting him up like a festive decoration and his glowing eyes as well as his embedded Worclaw crystal were glowing with power.

Ves took hold of Blinky and started to tweak the cat's furry ears.

Mrow~

"Hehe. That's enough pampering. I need you to do your job now. Just follow my instructions and make sure not to miss anything dangerous. Are you ready?"

Mrow!

Under his instruction, Blinky dove into the P-stone containing the Inexorable One's remains and went to work.

The difference that Blinky could make became very clear. Ves was a human who did not possess a lot of finesse in manipulating spiritual energy. His attempts to shape his products were best described as crude, primitive and laughably simple.

This was why Ves thought of letting Blinky do the heavy lifting this time. While he never designed Blinky to take over these duties, the companion spirit possessed an even higher talent than him in manipulating spiritual energy.

As a creature that lived and breathed spiritual energy, Blinky did not disappoint. He licked the Inexorable One's spiritual fragment and studied it in order to figure it out. After the cat gained the fragment's measure, he began to manipulate it in earnest.

Ves watched on in fascination as Blinky smoothly separated the more undesirable attributes from the more desirable ones. While Ves was able to do this as well, his method was a lot rougher and less effective.

Once Blinky partitioned an undesirable portion, he took a careful bite out of the spiritual fragment and swallowed his mouthful whole without any concern.

Ves didn't feel any worry either. Back during the Battle against the Abyss, the Unending One cannibalized his fellow dark gods without any issue. Blinky was more than capable of devouring this weak remnant.

A flow of purified and converted spiritual energy already emerged out of the spiritual cat. The meal hardly sated his hunger.

Mrow.

Blinky continued to work over the Inexorable One's fragment. After his first attempt, he already knew what to do. The cat continually removed every spiritual attribute that was not related to what Ves had in mind for his subsequent work. His exceptionally sensitive perception towards energy allowed him to distinguish even smaller elements that Ves would have missed.

Though Ves observed Blinky's work carefully in the initial minutes, he gradually relaxed and leaned back in his chair.

"Ah, this is the life." He smiled.

Perhaps he should create another companion spirit so that he could delegate even more work. He was already thinking about creating a cat that excelled in mech design.

Of course, he instantly discarded this idea. The entire notion was ridiculous! Not only did Ves lack the mental capacity to accommodate another companion spirit, the mere thought of allowing a cat of all creatures to design a mech was blasphemous!

"Besides, delegating the core abilities which I rely on to earn a living and excel in my profession is a very bad idea."

Ves identified himself as a mech designer, so he should make sure he performed his core duties himself. This was the only way for him to improve.

Mrow!

Blinky emerged out of the P-stone a moment later. The cat looked quite content.

"You're done already?"

Mrow.

"Are you sure."

Mrow mrow.

"Oh. Good job, I guess."

Ves held the P-stone and studied it carefully. The purified fragment was remarkably clean and pure to his senses. The degree of purity that Blinky managed to achieve was absolutely remarkable!

He no longer wanted to delay. Since everything was proceeding well, he immediately moved on to creating his next design spirit.

Ves had already prepared the ingredients beforehand and brought them out one by one.

The purified fragment of the Inexorable One was the main ingredient. Everything else played an assisting role.

The first auxiliary ingredient was a tiny spiritual fragment from the Golden Cat. The ancestral spirit did not like being harvested for ingredients so often, but Ves had little choice.

Only the Golden Cat could ensure that the resulting spirit would remain loyal and committed to the Larkinson Clan. Ves could not afford to leave anything to chance.

The second minor ingredient was Qilanxo. Though Ves had also frequently asked her to donate her fragments, this time he truly needed to make use of her sophisticated spiritual manipulation capabilities. The former lizard was the closest comparable entity that could complement this aspect.

"The dark gods are an even better choice, but..."

Ves instinctively wanted to avoid mingling the dark gods together in any way. It was already bad enough to deal with one of them. If all three teamed up, not even he would be able to prevent the return of his old enemies!

The third minor ingredient was the most controversial. It was vastly different from the rest because it did not come from a regular spiritual entity.

Instead, it originated from the strong mind and will of an expert pilot.

Ves looked around to see if there weren't any angry expert pilots lurking nearby. He carefully proceeded to draw out a P-stone that radiated a desire to live free.

Mrow.

Blinky's expression turned nasty. Swiping this fragment from Tusa's mind while the expert pilot was asleep was not pleasant.

The cat only took out a small portion, not enough to affect Tusa's strength in a significant manner but still enough to leave him with an awful headache for a couple of weeks.

"I hope Tusa doesn't find out who's responsible." He muttered.

For now, the doctors aboard the Dragon's Den weren't able to figure out why Tusa had gone down with an ache in his head. Ves had no intentions of revealing the truth to everyone, though he did quietly inform Ranya of the truth in order to prevent any overreactions.

Though Ves had undoubtedly harmed Tusa with this act, he excused himself because it was for a good cause.

"You'll thank me when I am done!"

After all, this upcoming creation was primarily aimed at light mechs and light mech pilots. It was high time for him to create a design spirit that specifically complemented fast, swift and elusive mechs.

"Now, for the last extra kick."

He also readied one vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. While he wasn't willing to expend too much universal life energy for this creation attempt, a modest amount should be enough to increase the potential and accelerate the growth of his spiritual product.

After triple checking all of his ingredients, he deemed that everything was in order.

"Let's begin."

He did not break the spiritual fragments by himself. Instead, Blinky stepped up once again and shattered every spiritual fragment into extremely fine shards by shredding them with his claws.

Mrow! Mrow! Mrow!

The shards that Blinky created were more even and much finer than what Ves was able to produce. There were surprisingly more of them than he was accustomed to, but they were also a lot more regular and easy to puzzle together.

Together with Blinky, he rapidly merged the pieces into a single whole. He made sure the shape of the developing entity conformed to the shape of a bird.

As the spiritual shards continued to dwindle, the bird-shaped spiritual entity gradually took form. Guided by his will, the spiritual attributes of the ingredients combined into a fluid, slippery and speedy bird.

As the spiritual product neared completion, the bird's shape was still in flux.

This was a deliberate design choice on Ves' part. He wanted to create an elusive, mysterious bird. Evasion and obfuscation was just as important as speed. The latter was far from his only priority.

His progress was much faster than usual with Blinky's assistance. The completion of the spiritual product proceeded in a very anticlimactic fashion.

The resulting newborn spirit did not release a powerful pulse, but that simply meant that the elusive bird possessed a much better grasp of her own strength.

Chirrup!

The small spiritual bird finally uttered her first cry! The bird rapidly flapped her tiny wings but soon settled down to gaze at her creator.

Her appearance was astounding. While she still maintained the basic shape of an avian creature, the surface constantly changed. In one moment, she possessed black feathers. In another moment, her feathers became blue. The size and overall contours of her body also shifted from time to time.

Chirrup?

Ves smiled. "Your name shall be Trisk, the Uncatchable Bird!"

Chirrup!

The tiny bird lifted her wings and chirruped in celebration!

After Trisk became content with her new existence, Ves proceeded to feed her with a portion of potent universal life energy. The newborn spiritual product grew rapidly and gained a respectable amount of strength right from the beginning.

With the birth of Trisk, the second design spirit of the Disruptor Project was ready!

*Chapter 3094: The Next Step*

Trisk possessed a whimsical and curious personality. As soon as the ever-shifting bird came into existence, it exhibited a curiosity that made it difficult for Ves to settle down.

He had to call Goldie to take Trisk under their wing and show her latest colleague the ropes.

Nyaaaaa.

Chirrup chirrup!

Nyaa nyaaa.

Chirrup chirrup!

The two cute spirits hit it off immediately. Trisk's shifting colors started to lean towards gold as the bird flew on top of Goldie's head.

It did not surprise Ves that Goldie and Trisk easily befriended each other. The former donated an ingredient to create the latter, so the avian spiritual product could be regarded as Goldie's offspring.

Not that the two saw it that way. The two acted more like sisters than anything else. Many of the other design spirits were far too dour and serious for a young spirit like Goldie to play with. Trisk's birth neatly solved her lack of playmates.

"Be sure to watch over Trisk, Goldie." He reminded the cat. "I'm not sure if the Inexorable One is still lurking around or something, but I don't want one of our old enemies to come back from the grave."

Goldie nodded at Ves.

Nyaaa.

This was his only lingering concern. While Ves was quite happy that Trisk's creation process proceeded smoothly, he felt oddly disturbed for some reason. The dark gods had proven to be incredibly wily and he should never assume that the threat had passed.

"In a way, I would rather suffer an immediate attack than be left with uncertainty." He muttered.

At least the Unending One pounced at the opportunity straight away. Whether Trisk also served as a vessel for a dark god, Ves didn't know.

"Perhaps I am just being too paranoid."

His approach towards Trisk's creation process was considerably more refined than before. Before this point, Ves had always relied on his own capabilities to create his spiritual products.

The addition of Blinky enabled Ves to work alongside his first spiritual assistant. As a companion spirit that was both an extension of his own capabilities and an inheritor of a portion of the Unending One's great affinity for spiritual energy, the Star Cat turned out to be a fantastic helper!

He realized that Blinky could offer even more assistance. His companion spirit's excellent control over spiritual energy allowed him to manipulate and transform spiritual energy in ways that Ves could only dream of. Several interesting ideas came up that he had previously dismissed due to determining that he lacked the required ability to realize them. Now that he had a wonderful assistant at his disposal, perhaps he might be able to revisit these promising applications!

"I'll leave that for later, though. For now, the Disruptor Project takes priority.

Its completion came closer and closer. While the mech design still required a lot of refinement, Ves was already confident that it would be able to perform well right out of the box. The inclusion of both Arnold and Trisk rounded out the spiritual design of the expert light skirmisher. This marked the completion of his most important responsibility.

"Gloriana will be happy." He smiled.

His wife had been nagging him about how long it took for him to deliver the goods, but he had always been holding out until he felt that the time was right.

He packed up his goods and put them back into the vault. As Ves returned to the design lab, he dutifully informed his wife of his latest development and went back to work.

Blinky emerged from his mind and began to form a design network that brought together the mech designers on shift.

A few days went by. Though Gloriana had lowered the intensity of work schedules, she slowly ramped it up when she felt the assistants had enjoyed enough of a rest. Everyone went back to crunching work for long hours at a time.

The work they performed was not too strenuous, but the fine details they were working on demanded great finesse and precision. Gloriana and every mech designer constantly had to judge whether it was worth it to invest hours or even days of their time to accomplish a 0.1 improvement in performance.

Gloriana definitely insisted on pursuing these opportunities as even the smallest difference was essential in her eyes. However, Ves and the other Journeyman possessed a more practical outlook.

There was no guarantee that the solutions they came up with would actually realize a clear performance gain.

In many cases, improving the effectiveness of one part often reduced the performance of another part.

Was it worth it to reduce the heat capacity of the Disruptor Project by 2 percent in order to gain a 1 percent boost in forward acceleration?

Was it worth it to increase the power of the mech's arms by 3 percent but reduce its mobility characteristics by 2 percent?

As the project head, Gloriana had to weigh all sorts of tradeoffs. In order to end up with the most optimal design, she had to find the best balance points for all of these issues. Her work became a lot harder when changes rarely affected a single variable.

In truth, a change as significant as reducing the size of a part produced a cascade of consequences. The demand on processing power grew greater as the mech designers constantly had to calculate whether their proposed solutions would end up improving or harming the mech design.

Whenever they ended their shift, the wedded couple returned to their grand stateroom in an utterly tired condition. Gloriana was barely able to muster up any energy to enjoy her sumptuous, brain-boosting meals.

Despite her exhaustion, Gloriana glowed with contentment. As they slipped into bed, she sidled up to Ves and leaned her head against his chest. The aroma of her bath scent tickled his nose, causing him to squeeze her slender body closer.

Their cats settled for a nap as well. Clixie jumped up to a cat bed set on the side and yawned.

"Miaow~"

Lucky floated down from the air and occupied the other half of the bed. He nuzzled Clixie before yawning as well.

"Meow~"

As Gloriana idly stared at the two cats, she issued an abrupt declaration.

"It's about time for us to start having kids."

Ves, who was already beginning to slip into his dreams, jerked open his eyes!

"What?!"

"You heard what I said. It's time to take our relationship to the next level. We love each other, do we not? Then we should move straight on to performing our marital duties and raise six lovely kids who share our genes."

"Uhhh... I'm not objecting to that, honey, but isn't this too soon? We have plenty of years left ahead of us. Our clan is still undergoing rapid growth and I don't think the current state of our fleet is good enough to provide the best growing environment for our kids. We can still do better."

"It's enough for us to be their parents." She smiled and rubbed her stomach. "A good growing environment is important, but my mother succeeded in raising me back in the Hexadric Hegemony. Our fleet isn't much worse in comparison. With the Superior Mother's help, I am confident that I will be able to raise the most beautiful, clever and diligent children in the galaxy!"

That was a considerable boast! Though Ves wanted to argue about the validity of some of her assertions, he was still caught up in how soon she wanted to take their relationship to the next level.

"Uhm, we should at least wait until we have reached the Red Ocean and gain a footing over there." He argued. "We will both be swamped with design work and other duties before that time. How can we spare any time to pay attention to our children?"

"We'll manage." She dismissively said. "Work is important, but family is also important. Plenty of mech designers have managed to balance these two necessities. I don't see how we'll be any worse. Right now, the main reason why we are working so hard to complete the expert mech designs is because our clan urgently needs to cover its deficiency in top-level strength. After we complete the current round of design projects, there is much less urgency to rush through our subsequent projects."

She was right. The projects that they would embark on next were still important, but it wasn't a big deal if they had to spend an additional month to complete them. Besides, as long as the Design Department continued to expand, the lead designers were able to delegate more work to each other and to competent assistants.

These were just a handful of the methods that married mech designers employed to cope with the increasing demands of their time. Though Ves felt tempted to make the most out of his early golden period and work hard to close the distance to Senior as much as possible, he could not ignore his emotional need to start his own family.

He sighed. "If you think that we can handle it, then I'm not as opposed anymore, but don't you think we should at least postpone this decision until we have departed from the Milky Way?"

"No. I want the opposite. I want our first child to be born in the galaxy where we were born and raised. I don't know what the future holds, but if we never go back, I at least want one of our blood to carry the mark of our home galaxy."

This was a sentimental notion that probably made no practical difference. As far as he was aware, there was no meaningful difference between children born in the Milky Way and children born in the Red Ocean.

Yet Ves became swayed by the sentiment. As nonsensical as it sounded, Gloriana's argument resonated with his emotions.

"Suppose I agree with your suggestion." He said. "Having kids is not simple for the likes of us. Both of our genes are so altered that the chance of natural conception is too small. Even if we manage to conceive a child through a natural process, my messed up DNA will likely result in biological product that is better off dead."

"YES! HAVE SOME CARE! DON'T EVER TALK ABOUT OUR POTENTIAL BABIES LIKE THIS!" Gloriana angrily slapped his chest. "I am aware of the risks. I have already discussed this issue extensively with Ranya. We have picked up plenty of Lifer doctors and geneticists who are specialized in developing designer babies. I have already booked an appointment with them. We just need to visit the Dragon's Den a number of times over several months in order to perform inspections, conduct tests and proceed with the fertilization procedure."

A weird feeling ran through his body. "You've already made an appointment."

"Of course I did. We need to make sure that the doctors do the best possible job. I don't want them to spare any expense or withhold any good ideas. Didn't our clan borrow a lot of money recently? Please set aside a trillion hex credits for me. The MTA offers a suite of very potent augments and I must ensure that our designer baby enjoys the best that we can offer!"

"A trillion hex credits? Are you crazy?!"

A pair of scorching eyes pinned him down. "Crazy? Are you sure about that? Don't you want to set our first child up for our success? I don't want her to fall behind our subsequent children. A trillion hex credits won't even allow us to afford the best that the MTA can offer. I'm depending on our biotech specialists to add their own contributions to our future firstborn daughter."

This was getting crazier and crazier. Though Ves also wanted his children to gain a head start in life, this was starting to get overboard... There was nothing wrong with

raising normal kinds as far as he was concerned. Was it really necessary to go through these extreme lengths in order to design the perfect baby?

*Chapter 3095: The Firstborn Design*

Since the distance to the beyonder gate was constantly shrinking, Gloriana wanted to start right away. She freed up enough time in their work schedules to shuttle over to the Dragon's Den as soon as the fleet emerged from FTL travel.

The half-biological research vessel had become a bit livelier since the last time he visited her. The crew had increasingly turned the Dragon's Den into their home and workplace by modifying the interior and putting up more banners and other symbols.

Perhaps inspired by the Four Aspects of Lufa, the resident biotech experts put up small statues in many compartments and corridors. While the craftsmanship of the Lifers lacked the spark of life that characterized his own work, Ves appreciated the intention.

Even if he thought the living statues looked kind of creepy.

The Lifer biosculptors created lifelike approximations of the Golden Cat, the Superior Mother, Qilanxo, Lufa and other known design spirits. Their interpretation of how all of them looked was directly affected by the existence of previous images of their subjects.

For example, the statues of the Superior Mother all looked remarkably like his mother back when she was alive. Ves modeled his own initial statue after Cynthia, and the subsequent creators accessed archival footage of her back when she was alive.

Of course, these statues also happened to unnerved him the most. He had the weird illusion that his mother was constantly monitoring him through the judgemental eyes.

The other living statues disturbed him in a different way. For example, the Lifers didn't possess a solid impression of how Qilanxo looked like. They could only gain a description by listening to the eye witness testimony of some of the Vandal veterans in the fleet.

Though the dinosaur-like statues largely reproduced Qilanxo's distinctive features, the proportions were all wrong and the vibe they exuded did not match the majesty of the former sacred god.

Ves felt tempted to create his own living statues in order to give the enthusiastic Lifer biotech experts proper examples to correct their artwork, but he soon shook his head. This was a trivial issue and not a matter that needed to be fixed. His design spirits weren't there to be worshipped. They were there to assist the pilots depending on his mechs. Anything else was just extra.

When he and his wife reached the research laboratories, they separated in order to undergo separate checkups.

"We have actually laid the groundwork for this project a long time ago, so we don't have to keep you indisposed for long." Dr Ranya said as she supervised a team of Lifer doctors going about their work. "The main reason why we need to conduct additional examinations is because our situation has improved. The new hardware that we have gained along with the Lifers joining our department has substantially upgraded our capabilities and opened up new opportunities."

"All so you can design a better baby, right?" Ves sardonically asked.

"Designing babies is one of the most expensive industries in human space, sir. You cannot imagine how many wealthy people throughout the galaxy are willing to pay to conceive of a genetically and biologically upgraded descendant."

Though Ves did not intend to give up on this route, he was still unaccustomed to this process. "What's wrong with making babies the old-fashioned way?"

"There is not much wrong with natural birth, sir." Dr. Ranya answered. "With modern technology and advances in medical science, we are able to correct most deficiencies before they can turn into lifelong disabilities. The only issue is that the genetic predisposition for cognitive abilities, emotions, talent and other traits are largely randomized. While birth is not the sole determinant of success in life, why wouldn't you want to stack the deck when the option exists?"

It made a lot of sense to invest a lot in setting up a child up for success. He even understood the market dynamic after Ranya clarified the designer baby industry. While the number of rich people in the galaxy was just a fraction of the total population, the net worth of these individuals was insanely high. There were much wealthier people than Ves in the Yeina and Bardo Star Clusters and they were probably even more eager to obtain high-quality designer babies!

After all, a child was not only a vehicle for parents to pass on their legacy, a successful offspring could also feed back the support they received many times over.

In other words, children were investment vehicles that had the potential to achieve an insane return of investment. Perhaps the next generation might achieve so much with the help of the benefits they received early on that they brought back a hundred or even a thousand times more money than what their parents initially paid!

Of course, love also played a factor. Humans, like many biological species, were genetically programmed to love their children and do their best to raise them well.

However, this instinct never took advanced technology into account. While humans in the distant past lacked the technology to artificially boost the capabilities of their

children, the current era provided countless solutions for every kind of customer at many different price levels.

The cost to get started with a design baby was quite hefty, but not prohibitive. It was just that the barrier of entry was still high enough to scare away most average citizens.

"What do you have in mind for my first designer baby?" He said as the examinations continued to proceed.

A variety of advanced scanning equipment thoroughly inspected him from top to bottom. Ves had no idea what they were trying to observe or whether there was any point to this procedure. He already put his body through plenty of checkups in the past.

"Gloriana has a very specific idea of what her firstborn should be like." Dr. Ranya's expression twitched. "Her first child must be female and possess augments that are geared towards emotional intelligence, beauty, social engineering, acting, persuasion, and other related traits. Of course, the baby must also receive at least some augments that are geared towards improving her physical condition, fighting consciousness, tactical awareness and reaction time. This is a standard package she intends to apply to all of her children in case they develop the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs."

Ves blinked. "I thought that Gloriana would have wanted to nurture a mech designer from the start."

"Madame Constance did not start off with raising a mech designer, so Gloriana won't attempt to do so either. According to Hexer tradition, the oldest of the six should always become the leader whenever possible. The oldest daughter's role is to act as a guardian and a pioneer for her younger brothers and sisters. In fact, I think Gloriana intends for her firstborn to become the next leader and possibly the first matriarch of the Larkinson Clan!"

"Does the baby have to be a girl?"

Ranya looked at Ves as if he was stupid. "Of course. A boy can't possibly serve as a leader and a proper role model to his younger siblings. At least that is what the Hexers think. Don't worry. Gloriana is a believer in balanced families. You will definitely have your sons."

He wasn't worried whether Gloriana was willing to have sons. What he was truly worried about was her attitude to raising them. There was no doubt in his mind that she would treat their sons a lot differently than their daughters.

He sighed. "If Gloriana raises our sons like a Hexer mother, then I guess that I'll have to step up as their father."

He didn't believe that Gloriana would abuse or neglect their future sons. The issue was that she would follow after her mother and end up raising their little boys into slightly bigger boys. He could never forget his impression of her five siblings.

Gloriana's older sisters were all strong and confident women. While Madame Constance undoubtedly raised them with high expectations, her approach paid off as none of her daughters were average.

As for her sons... the less said about them, the better. The only outlier was Brutus Wodin and that was only because he had the double luck of possessing the right genetic aptitude and successfully advancing to expert pilot.

Even then, his personality was so filled with Hexer indoctrination that Brutus was quite possibly the most pathetic expert pilot that Ves had ever met!

Dr. Ranya gave Ves a reassuring smile. "We have already left the Hegemony behind. Gloriana doesn't strictly insist on following every Hexer tradition. She also respects you and listens to your opinions. I suggest that the two of you should come together in order to plan out your offspring strategy."

She spoke of raising children as if it was a battle that needed to be won. Ves felt more and more disturbed by how unnatural it all sounded.

After a lot of thinking, he finally figured out the reason behind his instinctive repulsion towards excessive intervention.

His domain revolved around life. Part of his philosophy was to let nature take its course. While he did not object to stacking the deck to an extent, he did not like the way that Gloriana intends to plan out many of his future children's life choices, career trajectories and other major decisions.

Though children themselves didn't always make the best decisions, they still earned the right to choose their own course in life.

What if their firstborn didn't want to become a matriarch? What if she wanted to follow the footsteps of her parents and become a mech designer?

Ves would support her daughter no matter her decision as long as she didn't want to become a pirate or some other stupid choice. Even if her augments did not match her chosen profession, it wasn't as if this was an insurmountable problem. Plenty of people achieved success without benefiting from genetic treatments and implants worth trillions of hex credits.

The complexity and randomness of life could still ruin even the most extravagantly-raised designer babies.

"I'll talk to Gloriana, I guess." He said.

"You do that."

Once the round of examinations passed, Ves donned his uniform again and reunited with Gloriana when they returned to their shuttle.

As the swift vehicle launched into space and returned to the Spirit of Bentheim escorted by a host of Avatar mechs, Ves looked at Gloriana as she cradled Clixie as if the cat was her baby.

"Oh, you fuzzy wuzzy lady, you're so cute, aren't you?"

"Miaow~ miaow~"

"You'll be a good guardian cat for my babies, right? I'm depending on you to watch out for my upcoming daughter."

"Miaow!"

"Ahem." Ves coughed.

Gloriana briefly interrupted her cuddling session and turned to Ves while raising her eyebrow. "What is it, Ves?"

"Uhm... about our designer baby..."

"I'm not changing my mind about her future." His wife stated. "You probably prefer to raise as many mech designers as possible, but that is foolish and short-sighted. Our first daughter must take charge. You won't be able to lead the clan forever, Ves. Sooner or later, you have to prioritize your mech design career and give up a responsibility that demands more and more commitment. I don't trust anyone else to succeed you as leader except our own flesh and blood. Taking charge of the clan is not easy and it will only grow more difficult over time. While it won't be hard for our baby to surpass your performance as a patriarch, that isn't good enough. She must become a leader beyond comparison!"

She had become so fervent about this topic that Ves physically had to lean back. Her mind was already set and her obsession about this matter was so great that his courage deflated like a balloon!

"Er... that sounds great, but don't work too hard, okay? Our children would probably be fine regardless of how much we invest in their upbringing."

Gloriana didn't even deign to give him a response. She turned back to Clixie and grinned... "My babies will all become perfect. I have two great role models in the form of

my own mother as well as Ves' mother! With all of the effort I put into preparing for their upbringing, my children will doubtlessly soar and take flight without exception!"

*Chapter 3096: Clixie's Anxiety*

Ves and Gloriana still had to return to the Dragon's Den several more times in order to undergo more examinations and procedures.

Hopefully, the doctors would be able to design and conceive their first baby in a couple of months.

This meant that the Miracle Couple had to focus on delivering a completely different child.

As if buoyed by the prospect of having her first baby, Gloriana focused on her work with renewed enthusiasm. It was as if the results of their current project directly affected the success of her firstborn daughter!

"Enough slacking off! We need to optimize the Disruptor Project to the highest standard! Our work is far from done. We still have to address at least several thousand identified issues. I will not even consider finalizing the mech design before we have handled them one way or another. I will not accept any half-hearted proposals!"

She turned back into a tough taskmistress again, but nobody buckled under the pressure. After the assistants were allowed to take it easy for a time, they returned to work with renewed vigor and gusto. Hundreds of smaller issues were being solved every day. The weight placed on the shoulders of the lead designers had grown less burdensome as they didn't have to split their attention so much.

Different from Ves, this was Gloriana's favorite phase of the design process. This was the period where good mechs had the potential to become great. This was also the best opportunity for her to apply her design philosophy and achieve a better fit between expert mech and expert pilot.

Even Venerable Tusa sensed the changes whenever he paid a visit to the design lab. After enduring an hour-long interrogation session about his preferred seating and interior cockpit configuration, he left her office with a tired expression.

"Ugh, I'm still suffering from a migraine, and your wife isn't helping matters. Is she always like this?" He asked as he nursed his head.

"She can be a handful sometimes." Ves mildly responded.

"Why did you even marry her in the first place?"

"She is good at designing mechs."

"That sounds like you, alright. How much longer do I have to wait until I can actually pilot my damned machine."

"We're still in the process of fixing the final bugs and smoothing out the final wrinkles. While I don't think that we'll be able to solve every outstanding issue, Gloriana can't let this phase linger too long. To put it in very simple terms, I think we are about 95 percent done. Gloriana is aiming for 100 percent, but perfection is impossible to attain. As soon as our progress stalls, I'll encourage her to move forward even if the design is only 99 or 98 percent done."

This was a gross oversimplification of the current outlook of the Disruptor Project, but it got the message across. Venerable Tusa looked slightly more hopeful.

"All of the work you put in is quite incredible. I never thought that you would be able to design a complete expert mech for me in so little time. The estimated specs of my future expert mech is also impressive. I've never piloted a light mech that is anywhere close to comparable to such a machine. Second-class expert mechs are really something else!"

Ves placed his hand on the expert pilot's shoulders. "Over fifty Larkinson mech designers have been doing their best to arm you with the greatest war weapon that our clan can supply to you, but don't forget that this isn't a gift. The Disruptor Project may be yours to pilot, but it belongs to the clan."

"You don't need to worry about that." Tusa responded with a serious face. "I know my duty. The clan has become my new family now. Just because I like to be free doesn't mean I don't care about others. It's just..."

"What is it, cousin?"

"What do you think it will be like to pilot my upcoming expert mech?"

"Who can say?" Ves shrugged.

"C'mon. You have to have an idea about it. You're one of the people who worked on it! What can I expect?"

"Usually, I would be able to give you a clear indication, but we haven't been able to test any prototypes, so I don't have a solid idea as of yet. This expert mech is vastly different from any of the standard mechs that I have designed before. That detail is preventing me from making any solid predictions about the performance of your mech. I can only state that the first time you interface with your mech will be a special and unique experience. It's not a hastily-modified rush job like the Piranha Prime. Your first proper expert mech is not only alive, but literally designed from the ground up to be your trusty partner in battle."

While Ves wasn't able to estimate the actual performance and piloting experience of his first completed expert mech, he was definitely certain that it would be revolutionary. The combination of expert mech and prime mech was not a simple sum.

Ves moved over to the work table and picked up the figurine he handcrafted at the end of the last design phase. Compared to before, it exuded a considerably stronger vibe.

The influences from both Arnold and Trisk on the expert mech design had already changed the character of the scale model. Ves had the feeling that it had become a lot more slippery and untargetable than before.

"Here." He passed on the figurine. "If you really want to prep for your upcoming expert mech, then try and get accustomed to it by studying this scale model."

Venerable Tusa curiously received the object and held it in his hands. As an expert pilot, he could sense the unusual properties of this deceptively simple toy.

"I can do that. I know what I need to do in order to grow closer to my mech. I will make sure I'll develop a good relationship with my mech right away when I pilot it for the first time."

Ves provided Tusa with a couple of vague tips to put him on the right track. The expert pilot didn't need too much instruction as the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan had already made a lot of progress in deciphering the best practices to piloting living mechs.

Work on the project continued to proceed when Tusa left. Everyone was putting their all into the project, not because Gloriana was hounding them, but because they each wanted to see the culmination of all of their hard work.

As Ves became increasingly more invested in finishing this project, he no longer paid attention to other matters.

He was faintly aware that the expeditionary fleet was almost nearing the foreign port system where the Larkinsons were supposed to close a deal with some ship sellers and take possession of a handful of new capital ships.

He was also aware that Shederin Purnesse consulted with some senior Larkinson leaders and proposed an extensive reorganization of the hierarchy of the Larkinson Clan.

Yet he simply didn't have any attention to spare on these matters. All of it could wait until the Design Department finally completed the mech design and the Larkinson Clan finally gained its first actual expert mech.

He did not hesitate to make full use of Blinky during this critical period. Even if depending on his companion spirit came with several repercussions, Ves believed it was worth it to pay a modest price to achieve a qualitatively better result.

Mrow!

"You're my favorite cat now, Blinky!" Gloriana beamed.

That statement did not sit right with Clixie. "Miaow!"

"Oh, I wasn't being serious. You're still my closest cat, Clixie."

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat still looked aggrieved. As cats like Lucky, Goldie and Blinky continued to grow stronger and develop new abilities, the only organic cat in their little family was feeling increasingly more left behind.

Though she possessed strengths of her own, none of them were relevant as Gloriana never put herself in a position where assassins could sneak up to her or something.

Clixie padded over to Ves' side of the design lab and hopped onto the table next to the terminal. She winked her big eyes at him and raised her front paws in a pleading gesture.

"Miaow. Miaow. Miaow."

"Uhm, excuse me?" Ves pulled his mind out of his calculation work.

"Miaow miaow."

"You think you're too weak?"

"Miaow!"

Ves reached out and grasped Clixie before pulling her closer. He gently rubbed the top of her head in order to soothe her troubled emotions.

The cat squinted in pleasure.

"You're family, Clixie. You don't have to be good at anything to stay by our side. We love you even if you can't phase through walls like Lucky or form a design network like Blinky."

"Miaow miaow miaow."

Ves abruptly froze. "Who told you that?"

"Miaow."

"Damn Lucky." He cursed. "Why can't my cat keep his goddamn maw shut."

"Miaow miaow." Clixie softly swatted her tail against Ves.

"Look, I sympathize with your plight, but you don't know what you're talking about. If Lucky told you about my experiments, then he should have also described how fatal they can be. It's no joke trying to transform average humans into individuals with the potential for greatness. I have yet to succeed with my attempts and it will probably take a while before that changes. At the very least, I refuse to treat you as my test subject. Gloriana will literally kill me if you come to harm because of me. You'll have to wait until I have developed a safe and secure method."

"Miaow?"

"It will take months but most likely years."

"Miaow..."

Clixie's ears drooped.

"Hey, I already told you that you don't need to feel so depressed. We don't care if you are lacking in abilities. Of course, I wouldn't say no if you become more powerful. You don't have the talent to develop powers on your own, so you need to wait for me to come up with a solution. I will promise to you that I won't neglect you. My wife and I still expect you to play a major role in taking care of our future children."

"Miaow."

Though Ves wasn't able to give Clixie the answer she wanted to hear, he at least presented her with the hope of changing her fate.

To be honest, he wasn't really certain whether he should do anything at all for Clixie. It felt a bit wrong for him to change the established trajectory of a cat that was already doing fine on her own.

He did not believe that Gloriana would discard Clixie as if her pet was an outdated mech model. Though his wife was obsessed with performance, she did not necessarily extend that to her family.

At least that was what he thought.

Still, as Clixie's begging eyes continued to look up at him, he couldn't resist the urge to solve her increasing anxiety.

She was right that every other pet in the family was growing stronger by the day. They hadn't come close to reaching the end of their growth potential.

"Miaow miaow miaow."

After Clixie received the answer she needed, the cat left his side and returned to Gloriana to continue her role as her guard and her cuddle object.

This brief interruption did not delay him too much. As he and every other mech designer continued to pour their heart and soul into this project, they became increasingly more affected by Gloriana's drive.

Through Blinky's design network, every other mech designer began to solve problems at record speed. Their quick successes increased Gloriana's momentum, which subsequently caused the network to proliferate her strength!

Though this positive feedback loop did not ramp up forever, the list of problems that Gloriana wanted to solve was rapidly dwindling by the day.

Eventually, the Design Department reached a point where every outstanding problem had either been addressed or deferred for other reasons.

"It's time." Ves said as he stepped behind Gloriana as she was obsessively pouring over a data table. "You need to give it a rest. The Disruptor Project has become as good as it can get with our ability. Unless we improve our skills, we won't be able to achieve any significant improvement."

His wife didn't respond right away.

#### *Chapter 3097: The Right Choice*

Gloriana's workspace usually looked impeccable. She abhorred disorganization and always aimed to keep her desk, storage cabinets and other furniture neat and free of clutter.

This description did not match the current appearance of her current environment.

A stack of secure data pads were spread haphazardly over a table.

A few scale models of certain sections of the Disruptor Project were strewn on another table. A few parts had been pulled out of them and left on the side so that Gloriana could modify them and see how the changes affected the design on a physical level.

Gloriana had placed many other tools, knickknacks and messy projections around her. Her need to solve the remaining difficult problems was so great that she didn't even think it was worth it to clean up her items and make everything neat again.

This was the clearest indicator to Ves that his wife had gone too deep into the rabbit hole.

When she didn't react to his initial inquiry, he slowly approached and embraced her from behind.

Gloriana could not possibly ignore such a movement. She drew her mind out of her virtualized mental processing state and flicked her head at her husband.

"Ves. You're in the way."

"I'm trying to stop you from going off a cliff."

"I'm not done yet! The expert mech we've designed up until now might be fine for you, but it is still not as perfect as I wish! Leave me be and let me solve these remaining issues. There has to be a better way to handle them. I don't want to settle for a passing grade. Not with a project that is his important. I know I can obtain a better outcome. I just need to learn the right knowledge or develop a new method!"

Ves breathed deeply, taking in her fading perfume. She had been working for so long today that her flowery scent no longer intoxicated him that much.

That was a shame, because he always enjoyed being around her when she delighted all of his senses.

"Gloriana, you're the project leader now. You can't just ignore everything including your own tight work schedule in order to indulge in your current obsession. Your responsibility is to deliver a powerful new product to the Larkinson Clan in a reasonable timeframe. At the start of this round of mech design projects, we aimed to complete the Disruptor Project quickly. Why are you deviating from your overall strategy?"

"We can't stop at this moment. I can't stop. There is still much that we can improve. The theoretical performance of the Disruptor Project hasn't reached its limit yet. We can still do more." She whispered.

This was the troublesome part about working with perfectionists. Mech designers like Gloriana paid too little attention to the good points of a mech design far more attention to its flaws and shortcomings.

What he needed to do was to correct and ground her perspective.

"Honey, take a step back and look at our mech design from a holistic perspective. If you no longer zoom into the details, perhaps you'll realize our expert mech design is already a great feat of mech engineering."

Ves manipulated the main projection so that it no longer offered a detailed look at the waist section where his wife sought to tinker with a mechanical transmission system. Once he zoomed the view to show the appearance of the mech as a whole, he gazed at it with a smile.

"Do you see how powerful it looks? How elusive it feels? How difficult would it be for enemy mechs to target it in battle? All of this is a result of pouring several months worth of love, passion and urgency into its design. Perhaps the design doesn't come close to its absolute optimal state, but the only individuals who can attain this theoretical state are Star Designers. No matter how good you think you are, you are far from reaching that level."

A sense of unwillingness radiated from Gloriana. Her fists clenched as her strong confidence in her own design ability began to strain.

"Be realistic. You're just a Journeyman now. We aren't even qualified to design expert mechs independently. Master Willix did all of the heavy lifting on integrating the resonating exotics into the mech design, installing a specialized neural interface that is customized for Venerable Tusa, expanding the programming in order to enable the activation of resonating abilities and more. If she wanted to, she could have fixed or optimized all of the areas which could be improved in her eyes, but she didn't. Do you know why?"

Gloriana frowned. "Why?"

"Because we are still on a learning journey. We are nowhere close to reaching our ambitions. Our best work is still ahead of us, so don't be impatient and try to reach for the sky when you can only jump a meter off the ground. What we can do is work hard to improve ourselves so that we can jump a little higher. No matter how much progress we make, as long as we keep breaking our personal record, we will be one step closer to attaining our goal."

His wife leaned back against his chest. Her hair nestled against his neck and clean-shaven cheek.

She let out a tired sigh.

"I'm not satisfied with my gradual progress. I have improved a lot in recent years as I became exposed to more wonders. I've been breaking my limits so often that I am not satisfied with accepting my current ones. I know I can break them. I just have to find the right approach."

Ves frowned for a moment. "You can do that, but you don't necessarily have to do so now. No matter what kind of meaning you ascribe to the Disruptor Project, in the end it is just a product. The Larkinson Clan needs to get its hands on an expert mech quickly.

It is one of our greatest shortcomings and the lack of any strong machine that we can pair with our impatient expert pilots has long been one of our sore points."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Remember our creed. We exist to serve mech pilots. The moment we step out of the confines of this principle, we no longer practice the true meaning of mech design. Our job is not only to design the most appropriate mech within our ability, but to deliver our work to our client in a reasonable timeframe. There is always an expectation on the delivery time of a mech. We are service providers, Gloriana. Our place in society is to meet the needs of others, not ourselves. What you are currently doing is pure self-indulgence. Have you asked the clan and Venerable Tusa whether they even care about the work you are doing at the moment?"

"..."

"Though so." Ves stopped embracing his wife from behind and straightened his back. He moved over to the desk and leaned against it in order to face Gloriana properly. "I don't want to be the adult in the room, but you really need to set your priorities straight. To you, the perfect expert mech is one without flaws, but you are not the one who sets the requirements. The client does. Right now, our clan would rather have a functional expert mech now than a minutely better expert mech months later. We can't wait that long. We are about to enter a port system where we have to conduct a lot of transactions. If our clan can show off a powerful expert mech, then that will add to our prestige and allow us to conduct more favorable transactions."

The value of an expert mech did not merely lie on the battlefield. They were impressive machines regardless of their combat applications and any private organization that was able to field one would doubtlessly become a lot more notable.

In fact, this was the main reason why the Cross Clan remained strong after its drastic flight. The symbolic and inspirational value of Patriarch Reginald Cross and his Bolvar Rage was so great that it single-handedly propped up the clan in its darkest days.

Gloriana's eyes grew turbulent. Her thoughts became frazzled as competing demands warred within her mind.

She fully understood his arguments and agreed with them. However, that did not solve the contradiction between the purpose as a mech designer and her personal desires and ambitions.

In her mind, designing the perfect mech was a far better way to serve her clients than delivering a lower-quality product. This was the area she excelled in and the advantage which she wanted to become known for. Anyone looking to obtain the best and most flawless mech designs should think of her before other mech designers!

How could she do that if she kept settling for compromised designs?

When Ves saw that Gloriana still wasn't willing to let go, he became quite frustrated. He always had a hard time convincing his wife to bring a project to completion, but this time was worse because an expert mech design project that she was personally leading.

The amount of emotional investment she put into this project was far more than their prior projects! It would be a surprise if she hadn't become so attached to the expert mech design that she essentially treated as her own child.

Yet all good things must come to an end.

"Gloriana?"

"Yes, Ves?"

"I don't think the perfect vessel for Tusa has to be a machine that is devoid of flaws. As long as it is able to serve him well at his current state, our work already does the job it is supposed to do. That matters the most. A mech that takes too long to complete might be a bit more sound from a technical perspective, but the opportunities that Tusa and our clan has missed because of its late delivery means that the outcome is anything but perfect."

She widened her eyes. She hadn't really viewed the circumstances in this light. His goal-oriented perspective gave her a fresh look at her current preoccupation.

Ves knew that he was finally making progress.

"Will Tusa care whether our mech design is 0.1 percent less efficient or that its heat sinks heat up 0.5 percent faster than they ought to? I don't think so. Even if we deliver an expert mech with clear flaws, as long as they don't lower Tusa's performance, it can still be a perfect vessel for him. Every mech comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. Just because our work retains the latter doesn't mean we are doing anything wrong. Mechs and mech pilots are two halves of a single whole. When the two are put together, the resulting combination will absolutely exceed any trivial problem that we have ascertained!"

This was when the true magic happened. An expert mech might be impressive on its own, but it was nothing until it was put to use by its intended expert pilot.

Gloriana eventually slumped in her chair. "You're right. I've been tunnel-visioning on perfecting our work so much that I lost sight of our main objectives. I've always been a mech designer who prides myself on giving my clients what they want. I've been doing Venerable Tusa a disservice by disregarding his own needs."

"I'm glad you've realized it now." Ves smiled. "Besides, the development of an expert mech never ends once we fabricate the mech according to the current iteration of the design. We can continually tweak and update the expert mech over time as the situation continues to develop. In my eyes, the 'perfect' mech for Venerable Tusa is one that can grow with him over time. Neither of them have reached their strongest point. They still have an entire journey ahead of them. Do you understand?"

Gloriana became more thoughtful as she contemplated his alternative perspectives. A couple of vague insights settled in her mind as her stance on certain matters had shifted.

"Fine." She slowly said. "I will finalize the Disruptor Project. As soon as we complete our final checks, we... can move on to fabricating the actual expert mech."

She had finally made the right choice.

#### *Chapter 3098: Before the Job*

True artists and creators always aimed to form the best possible works they could achieve. Each of them were driven by the desire to make greater achievements and earn greater success.

How could they possibly gain the acknowledgement of their peers and be regarded as one of the leaders in their own field if they did not create impressive works?

Yet the criteria that determined whether a product was 'best' or 'perfect' never centered around the creator alone. Their profession never existed in isolation. A work of art or a feat of engineering were principally made to satisfy the needs of others.

The degree in which the product satisfied and met the needs of its user was the basis in which artists and creators justified their craft!

While there were plenty of creators out there who did not pay too much attention to the needs of their clients for various reasons, anyone who wanted to reach the top of their craft had to abide by a higher standard.

Star designers weren't celebrated for their ability to design supreme creations. They were all celebrated because they were able to satisfy the needs of clients a lot better than any other mech designer!

This was the mindset that a service provider should have and take pride in. Though Ves did not agree with the MTA on many matters, he fully supported their principles on this matter.

Once Ves managed to sway his wife to this viewpoint, she no longer insisted on continuing to optimize the mech design any further.

The performance of the mech had already exceeded their expectations from the start, and that was only based on the technical specs alone. Expert mechs were much more powerful than that because their potential only became evident when they were paired with an expert pilot.

Though Master Willix probably possessed the means to make somewhat reasonable predictions about the true resonance effects of the Disruptor Project, she did not share them with the Larkinsons. She had been quite stingy with regards to explaining the more esoteric aspects of the mech design. She strictly abided by her original stance that Journeymen simply weren't ready yet to tackle this complicated and high-level field.

In fact, the feedback she issued to the Larkinsons had become more and more scarce, which suggested that she was fully occupied with her own priorities at the moment.

Ves did not feel any regret over this. In fact, he felt it was great that Master Willix no longer hung over his head that much. He already had a feeling that his contribution to the Disruptor Project might lead to drastic results. He didn't want to be interrogated by the MTA Master immediately after he fabricated the mech.

"Speaking of fabricating it, we're almost ready to go." He muttered.

He directed his eyes at the fabrication plan that his wife had composed. She had already simulated the fabrication process many times. She mapped out the equipment they used, the parts fabrication order, the assembly order and other aspects.

All four Journeymen had to do their part in this process. As much as Gloriana wanted to perform all of the work herself, the contribution of her fellow designers was essential in order to maximize the quality of the aspects that fell under their respective specialties.

For example, only Ketis could make the knives that channeled her design philosophy and only Juliet was able to fabricate a flight system that was as potent.

Ves had to take part in the process as well in order to make the mech as alive as possible. This was a key pillar of strength to the Disruptor Project, so Gloriana could never allow him to stand on the sidelines!

"It's just..."

His wife exhibited her excessive control freak tendencies once again. The fabrication plan followed a highly regimented system where every time block was clearly planned out to the tiniest detail. Every participating mech designer had to accomplish specific tasks within their time frame in order for the entire fabrication run to proceed as optimally as possible.

"This is impossible! The fault tolerance of this schedule is too small!"

Though the plan was able to adapt to any setbacks and unexpected changes, it became increasingly more difficult to do so as the situation continued to veer from Gloriana's perfect schedule.

He confronted his wife over the suitability of such a detailed plan.

"Just because a fabrication run doesn't go according to plan doesn't mean that the outcome will disappoint us. Think of the times when we gained inspiration during our work. If everyone insists on following your strict timeline, there won't be any chance of fabricating an expert mech that is greater than what matches the current design!"

Gloriana didn't look pleased when he made this argument, but she reluctantly agreed to simplify the plan and add greater tolerance to changes.

Aside from this little snag, all of the preparations were in order. The Larkinson Clan had gathered and readied all of the raw materials a long time ago. Gloriana even scanned and inspected each material in person in order to make sure that their quality and purity met her standards.

Now, they were all waiting for the right opportunity. Once the fleet emerged out of FTL travel in a fairly busy star system that served as a transit point, the Spirit of Bentheim had settled back into realspace.

Though it shouldn't have made a difference whether a mech was being fabricated on a ship that had entered the higher dimensions, Gloriana did not want to leave anything to chance.

"Just like our upcoming firstborn daughter, our first expert mech must be a product borne out of the Milky Way Galaxy." She stated. "The atmosphere on the Spirit of Bentheim is subtly different whenever we are traversing to another star system. I don't want our expert mech to become too detached from its origin."

Ves thought it was all superstition, but he didn't bother to argue with her about that. Right now, their mood and emotions played a vital role in how their upcoming fabrication run would proceed.

Anything that made the participating mech designers happier, more optimistic and more confident about their success was precious. The four Journeymen each followed their own rituals in order to adjust their moods as best as possible and cleanse their minds of any distractions that could affect their concentration.

Ketis opted to return to the Swordmaidens and spend an entire day with them. She sparred against Venerable Dise. She trained a batch of hopeful girls who sought to join the ranks of the sisterhood. She also practiced and familiarized herself with several knife fighting styles with the help of Heavensworders who partially mastered the obscure techniques.

Juliet went back to the Penitent Sisters in order to connect to her roots and reaffirm her intent to excel so that she could provide greater benefits to her fellow comrades. She joined them in their prayers to the Superior Mother and she also tinkered with their Valkyrie Redeemers in order to get more in tune with their living aspects.

As for Ves, he did not do that much to be honest. As someone who was constantly swamped with responsibilities, the best way for him to rest was to stop and take a long breather.

This was why he was currently sitting in the office of his grand stateroom while Lucky was dozing off close on his desk.

Chewing sounds escaped from his mouth as Ves had just filled his stomach with the contents of a special and emotionally-significant nutrient pack. He stared at the empty wrapper and carefully put it back in his desk drawer.

Eating the 'Ulimo Special' was a special occasion to him. The nutrient packs produced by a pirate plant not only possessed a unique flavor composition, but also sated him in a way that went beyond staving off his hunger.

Though he felt slight regret that he reduced his collection of fine-tasting nutrient packs by yet another sample, he still considered it worth the loss.

A feeling of warmth and satisfaction radiated from his stomach and electrified all of his limbs.

A stream of cool and refreshing clarity entered his mind and cleansed some of the concerns that had been weighing on him. Not even drinking a glass of extremely precious wine was able to make him feel more alive. It was as if his body and mind was floating on clouds. Eating this nutrient pack was a much more pleasurable rush than injecting his body with stimulants!

"Ahhhh... those pirates may be horrible people, but they sure know how to synthesize the best nutrient packs."

He ascribed this peculiarity to how extensively the Nyxian pirates depended on nutrient packs for their daily sustenance. Organically grown food was a luxury in the Nyxian Gap. It was simply too resource-intensive to set up farms in such a difficult environment.

"Since the pirates eat so much of this stuff, it shouldn't be too surprising that they came up with better formulas."

Ves even thought that all of the major nutrient pack manufacturers could learn a thing or two from their pirate counterparts. The former should send liaisons to the latter in order to buy the secret to better tasting and more satiating nutrient pack formulas.

"Maybe I'll get into this industry as well some day." He muttered. "The market leaders clearly aren't innovating enough if a bunch of regional pirates can come up with something better!"

Of course, this was just a passing whim to Ves. He would have never formed such weird thoughts if he was preoccupied with serious matters.

In fact, he knew he had a host of matters to deal with. General Verle, Calabast, Shederin Purnesse and more all wanted to reach him in order to discuss matters of vital import to the clan.

Ves blocked them all. Right now, the successful conclusion of the Disruptor Project was his overarching priority.

"Everything else can wait."

Still, after he filled up his stomach, he began to grow a little bored. He was not the sort of person who was comfortable with staying still. He was always itching to do something. He had become so accustomed to filling up his time with one activity or another that he didn't feel comfortable with letting hours pass by without doing anything productive.

He decided to walk around his office and admire his various trophies and sentimental possessions.

"Hmm, my Prosperity Tree looks a lot better."

He remembered that it looked a lot worse in the past. It even came close to dying, but Ves had forcibly intervened by injecting it with a dose of spiritual energy.

Whether it helped or not, at least his grandfather's gift did not give him any grief this time. The small tree looked more green and vivid than ever and Ves could practically smell the flourishing nature from its tender leaves.

He even had the illusion that the branches were swaying rhythmically, but that was just silly. The air in his office did not circulate fast enough to have this effect.

As Ves contemplated whether he should trim the leaves or something, Lucky suddenly woke up and released an alarmed yowl.

"MEOW!"

Before Ves could turn around, Lucky already phased through the door and headed straight to the bathroom!

Ves' eyes lit up. "Finally!"

There was only one reason for the gem cat to visit the bathroom. After months of lazing around, Lucky was finally about to earn his keep again!

Ves left his office and headed into the bathroom as quickly as possible.

"Meow!"

"Hey, don't avoid me! I just want to make your gem alive, that's all. This will be quick, I promise!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Blinky! Help me pin down Lucky! Don't let him get away!"

Mrow!

With Blinky's help, Lucky was unable to escape. Ves only had to touch his gem cat's stomach for a tiny moment before channeling a burst of his spiritual energy.

Soon enough, the deed was done, and Lucky collapsed onto the bathroom floor as his body felt a lot fuller than before.

"MEEEEOOOOOWWWW!"

*Chapter 3099: Unknown Patron*

Too many months had passed since Lucky produced a gem. His last one was an odd one called Supreme Comprehension. Suffice to say, his cat had definitely become affected by the environment when his bowels disgorged this troublesome gem.

Ves even questioned whether it had been wise for him to perform an experiment by making it alive. If his cat ended up producing a standard gem, he might have gained one more gem that could empower an expert mech or other precious machine.

"C'mon. Don't produce anything too vague and weird this time."

"Meeeowww... Meeeowww... MEEEEOOOWW!"

Lucky was rolling on the bathroom floor as if his body was infected by an alien parasite or something. It was quite odd for him to exhibit such a strong reaction to a process that he was designed to perform.

All of this indicated that Lucky was about to unleash a major haul. Considering that the cat had taken his sweet time to digest all of the exotics he had eaten, the gems he was about to 'produce' should not be weak!

Ves was all smiles as he squatted next to the mechanical cat. His anticipation grew the more Lucky was in pain.

"Meeeoow!... Meeeeeeeeoow!... Meeeeeeeeooooowww!..."

"Hehe, serves you right for withholding your production for so long. Exercise your digestive system more next time. "

This ordeal went on for seven minutes until Ves finally spotted some activity on Lucky's backside.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

In just a handful of seconds, three powerful gems shot out and collided against the bathroom wall!

"Three gems! Yes!"

Ves became incredibly happy when his cat gave him a triple surprise instead of a single delight.

While he did not necessarily object to receiving a single, extremely powerful gem, his collection of gems had dwindled quite a lot. His pouch currently held just four of Lucky's products, two of which consisted of dark gems that had been affected by the abnormal environment of the Nyxian Gap.

[Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. Carry this gem at your own risk.

The effects of the two remaining so-called Unstable Chaos Essence Gems did not instill him with a lot of confidence. He had already confirmed that they were able to release a lot of explosive energy if they sustained enough damage. There was no way that Ves wanted to integrate them with any of his important mechs for that reason.

This meant that Ves actually possessed just two 'normal' gems, and both of them came with their own quirks or restrictions that reduced their value to a low point in his eyes.

Gems directly translated to potential masterwork mech opportunities as far as he was concerned. Each one he could use to bump the quality of a freshly fabricated mech into a machine that conceptually transcended the original scope of the design was a strategic asset!

Though Ves was still afraid that Lucky had ended up producing weird gems again, the colorful appearances of the gems suggested that they likely belonged to the normal variety that straightforwardly upgraded a specific attribute of a mech.

To Ves, that sounded as if he was about to receive his early birthday presents!

"Meooow... meeooooowwww..."

Ves completely ignored his exhausted and suffering gem cat and moved over to the side of the bathroom to pick up the three gems.

Despite the place where they originated from, the gems were clean and dry, so Ves did not show any disgust when he touched them and held them in order to confirm that they were all real.

"Three gems." He softly repeated.

Though Lucky was able to produce more gems at a time, Ves did not feel any regret that he only obtained three this time. He was just happy that he gained more flexibility and options now that he supplemented his depleted collection of gems.

He no longer waited and employed his System vision in order to learn about their effects.

[Bastet's Favor]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Enhances the cutting power of a mech by 20 percent.

[Bastet's Regard]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Improves the agility of a mech by 20 percent.

[Bastet's Affection]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Increases the firepower of a ranged mech by 20 percent.

His smile abruptly froze as he read through the descriptions.

"What the? Who the hell is Bastet?"

Ves retrieved his pouch of gems from his uniform pocket and pulled out one of his older gems. He quickly inspected its description.

[Bastet's Whisper]

The echoing whisper of a feline patron can be found within this gem. Enhances the acceleration of a tiger mech by 30 percent.

"...There is no way that this is a coincidence."

He briefly turned to Lucky, but saw nothing wrong. His cat was currently rubbing his backside while yowling with lingering pain.

"Meeeooww... meeoooww... Meeeeooowwww..."

Seeing that neither the gems nor his gem cat could provide him with any clues, he no longer bothered with this mystery. No matter how the gems were named, the fact of the matter was that he gained three more ways to augment his mechs!

"I have a bit more confidence in making a masterwork mech now that I have these goodies." He grinned.

Bastet's Regard was particularly relevant to him as it sounded like the perfect gem for the Disruptor Project. While the chance of getting any of his mechs within throwing distance of this coveted quality standard was low, he felt a bit more reassured that he had a viable option at hand.

The only uncertainty was that his last-second attempt at making Lucky's gems alive failed to yield the expected results. None of the new 'Bastet' gems exhibited any significant signs of life.

"Maybe the last time was just a fluke?"

He needed to conduct more tests in order to figure out the rules behind this phenomenon.

The delivery of a fresh batch of gems ultimately put him in an even better mood than before. He had become even more eager to start fabricating the expert mech for real.

Lucky's agony slowly subsided after a few hours and a much-needed nap. Ves also enjoyed a good night of rest, especially after he 'synergized' with Gloriana after an impromptu 'design session'.

The Miracle Couple woke up and prepared for the day at optimal conditions. Neither of the two felt troubled at this time. They could hardly be in a better state to fabricate a mech.

When they went down to Gloriana's personal workshop, they met up with both Ketis and Juliet. The two women had also made sufficient preparations for the intensive slog

ahead of them. None of the Journeymen showed any intention of backing out at this point.

Gloriana began with reminding them of her overall plan.

"My husband and I are able to fabricate our best mechs by completing them in a single run, so that is what we will do. While it takes around two to three days for us to fabricate a typical mech, the Disruptor Project is an entirely different beast. I estimate it will take at least five whole days of uninterrupted work to complete it, so that is what I have based my plan around."

"Five days is a little much..." Juliet softly complained.

"It's doable as long as we make use of stimulants. We'll probably collapse at the end, but the results will be worth it." Gloriana stated. "What matters is that we devote ourselves entirely to making the Disruptor Project our best mech yet. It is the first expert mech that we have all designed. It carries each of our essence and its performance and potential is unmatched to any mech that we have worked on before. I don't want any of us to ruin such a great work because we are too reluctant to work overtime."

She did not intend to be soft this time. This time, she wasn't dealing with a bunch of weak and barely competent assistants. The other Journeymen had already formed their design philosophies and possessed superhuman minds and physiques. They were more than capable of working continuously across several days.

"I have one question." Juliet briefly raised her hand. "Since Master Willix played a key role in making this expert mech possible, will she take part in this fabrication run?"

Gloriana shook her head. "No. She has already made it clear that we're on our own. Don't worry. She already told me how to process the resonating materials that we are about to apply to our upcoming creation. While it would be helpful if she was helping us in person, the Disruptor Project is ultimately our work. I don't believe that we need to borrow her strength in order to achieve a better result!"

Her confidence was inspiring, though Ves wasn't sure it was merited. There was no way that fabricating an expert mech was that simple.

After clarifying a few more matters and answering a couple more questions, Gloriana impatiently waved her hand.

"You all know what to do already. There is no point in rehashing the same points. Let's proceed with our final preparations. I will give you half an hour to center yourself. After that, we will proceed with creating our first expert mech!"

Gloriana and Juliet both approached the statue of the Superior Mother that had been moved to the workshop.

Both Hegemony-born women fell to their knees and earnestly prayed to the lightning-struck statues.

Ves did not join them, of course. While he was fine with allowing them to do anything that made them feel better, there was no way he was going to worship his own mother! She was not god!

"Ugh." Ves shook his head and turned to Ketis. "What will you be doing?"

"What else?" His first student smiled at him. Her sharp will condensed as she unsheathed Bloodsinger from its scabbard. "I'll be cutting some alloy plates."

As Ketis proceeded to do just that, Ves felt as if he was surrounded by crazies. He scratched his head and decided to pass the time by spending time with the cats.

"Meoooww... meooooowww..."

"Miaow. Miaow."

Mrow. Mrow.

Once the half hour had passed, the Journeymen gathered yet again. Now that the moment had finally come, each of them had become a lot more driven and eager than before.

Seeing that everyone was in their best state, Gloriana did not delay any further.

"Let's begin. All of you know what to do. We have five days to complete our first expert mech. Good luck and get to work!"

The Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan all split up and proceeded to work on their respective tasks.

The ELKINE 3D printer quickly warmed up and began to buzz as Gloriana fabricated the first parts. Her work became a lot more complicated because the difficulty of processing and integrating resonating materials with other materials was a lot higher than usual. For this reason, she took it upon herself to personally fabricate the most complex components.

Of course, it was impossible for her to maintain her peak concentration for more than several hours at a time. She had already set up a rotation where she would allow one of the other Journeymen to take her place and fabricate different parts.

In the meantime, Ves and the others made use of the other production machines to produce specialized components such as processors, knife blades, armor plating and more.

No one was allowed to stay idle. Even though light mechs were considerably faster to make, it was a different story for an expert mech. The design of the expert light skirmisher they were working on crammed so many powerful parts in a tiny frame that a single critical fabrication fault could have profound consequences to the total performance of the end result!

Though it was always possible to fix such errors after they completed the fabrication run, this was obviously not the ideal outcome that Gloriana and the others had in mind.

As the initial hours began to pass, Ves suddenly came up with a bright idea.

Since his companion spirit was able to assist with designing the Disruptor Project, could the cat also help with fabricating the mech?

It was worth exploring this new option!

"Blinky!"

Mrow?

"Stop freeloading in my mind and help us out! Let's see if your design network can increase our performance!"

#### *Chapter 3100: Sharing Talents*

Ves had leveraged Blinky's design network enough times to grow familiar with its effects and limitations.

As far as he was aware, the fragment of Aisling Curver's design philosophy that he incorporated into Blinky's composition was responsible for this effect. No other ingredient could explain how the spiritual cat was able to tie the minds of different mech designers together as if he had formed an alternative version of Master Huron's neural network.

Of course, due to his spiritual nature, the network that Blinky formed had more in common with the other spiritual networks that Ves created. The connections were purely spiritual in nature and their range was limited.

What distinguished the design network from the other variety of spiritual networks was how well it transferred mech design-related thoughts, emotions, instincts, sentiments and so on. A normal spiritual network did not form connections that were as deep.

Ves theorized that the fact that this capability originated from a Journeyman Mech Designer caused the design network to excel in sharing mech design insights. The benefits that everyone in the network gained while it was active was so beneficial that it was practically a game changer to the Design Department!

"What would it be like if I merged Master Huron's fragment into Blinky?"

For a moment, an intense greed overtook his mind. He felt tempted to turn his fleet around and head straight back to the Komodo Star Sector, hunt down Master Huron and harvest his potent spirituality to upgrade Blinky's design networking capabilities to a higher level!

Ves quickly shook his head. "Damn, what am I thinking?! This is not the time for me to indulge in unrealistic fantasies."

He purged this silly idea from his mind right away. Master Mech Designers were immensely powerful and would never put themselves in a position where he and his clan could hunt one down. Even if he caught one, the repercussions of doing so were so massive that the mech industry would probably brand him a pariah!

Besides, his fleet had already crossed over into the Bardo Star Cluster and was well on its way to the nearest beyonder gate. It would be an enormous waste of time for him to turn around.

Though Ves was attracted by the potential of design networks, it was not a substitute to being good at mech design. Its effectiveness was only as good as the strongest mech designer connected to the network. Developing his own ability and overcoming challenges by himself was the most reliable way for him to advance to Master.

That said, forming a design network conveyed a lot of advantages beyond the moment. Ves felt as if he was exchanging insights whenever he formed a network with him and his peers. By gaining a more direct first-hand perspective on how they approach the same craft, Ves and the others were able to broaden their vision and understood their own position relative to other mech designers.

The problem of contamination was also much less of a concern when the design network only encompassed higher-ranking mech designers. Journeymen would have never been able to reach their current height if they did not strongly believe in their own ambitions and goals.

All in all, Ves felt compelled to employ his design network this time. Several hours had passed since the start of the fabrication run and already the Journeymen were bumping into numerous difficult issues.

Everyone underestimated the complexity of fabricating powerful expert mech components. The parts which incorporated resonating exotics were especially difficult to make because they combined several highly-energetic materials together that tended to interact in unpredictable ways when not handled with precision.

Of the four mech designers, only Gloriana possessed the knowledge, precision and intuition to fabricate the parts that incorporated the substance known as Perfidious Steel.

The reasons for this were twofold. Aside from the aforementioned energy interactions, the inherent attributes of this artificial alloy also interfered with the operation of their instruments.

Even if Perfidious Steel was in its dormant and inactive state, it could still cause a sensor to misjudge the size or position of a portion of this material. It was already bad enough if this happened once, but if the distorted readings kept resulting in more misalignments and misshapen parts, then the overall integrity of a larger system would definitely take a considerable hit!

As soon as he settled on this decision, he carefully approached Gloriana and waited until she was done with fabricating a particularly delicate subcomponent.

"Yes, you're supposed to be reshaping the Unending alloy plates that we have cannibalized from the Piranha Prime. What are you doing here?"

He did not answer immediately. Instead, he decided to convey his intent by summoning Blinky from his mind.

Mrow~

The purple companion spirit floated in midair and glanced curiously around him. His black-tipped tail flicked with curiosity as the cat became immersed with all of the mech-related activity taking place in the workshop.

Gloriana only took an instant to comprehend her husband's message. Her eyes shone with eagerness as she reached out and carefully petted Blinky's head.

Mrow mrow~

"Can Blinky truly facilitate our work during our fabrication run?"

Ves nodded. "Yes, but you already know about his limitations. He can maintain this state for two hours or so. Maybe it is longer now that he doesn't have to form so many connections, but eventually the exertion takes a toll on his mental fortitude. He will need at least twice as much time to rest and recuperate."

A boost that lasted two hours could be extremely helpful, but Gloriana obviously wanted to enjoy this state longer.

"Is there any way for you to shorten this recovery period? Have you tried feeding him with more energy?"

"It's not that simple. Blinky is not a machine that you can refuel whenever he runs out of juice. He's a living construct and his abilities wear him down on a mental level."

This was one of the downsides to working with living constructs as opposed to lifeless and static ones. The latter only existed to serve their purpose and nothing more. Since normal machines weren't sentient and didn't think, mental exhaustion simply didn't apply to them. Instead, their wear and tear came in different forms.

Eventually, Gloriana had no choice but to abide by Blinky's restrictions. The wheels already started to turn in her head and she briefly interrupted her work in order to pull out the work schedule and shift around the work tasks.

It took several minutes for her to hastily move around the different tasks so that the more difficult ones were all concentrated in two-hour blocks while the less critical ones were shoved in the longer four-hour blocks.

It would have been a lot harder for her to reconfigure the schedule if she insisted on keeping to her original detailed schedule. Fortunately, Ves succeeded in persuading her to exhibit more flexibility.

"There!" Gloriana grinned. "That should do. Let's start right away!"

The pair briefly notified Ketis and Juliet of the changes before they allowed Blinky to perform his magic.

His glowing eyes shone brighter as his tail poked through the heads of the four Journeymen. As soon as they became connected to Blinky's newly-activated design network, they immediately felt more attuned with each other.

Now that the network was no longer burdened by the presence of over fifty assistant mech designers, the four Journeymen were able to connect to each other with less dispersion and more attention.

The four mech designers all smiled at each other as their thoughts and emotions partially blended with each other. They each donated a small but noticeable portion of their greatest advantages to each other.

Ves shared his sensitivity to life and his unique perspective towards the living aspects of the Disruptor Project.

Juliet shared her love for speed and her affinity for the mobility aspects of the expert mech they were trying to create.

Ketis shared her dedication to swordsmanship and her will to hone the expert light skirmisher into a swift and sharp weapon.

As for Gloriana, she contributed the most important factor that was relevant to the fabrication run. She not only shared her sensitivity towards flaws, but also passed on her passion for perfection.

These two elements were exactly what the other three needed to handle their assignments better. The difference it made was very obvious as soon as the network came online.

The parts they produced at their respective stations increased in quality and exhibited much fewer issues.

Their pace sped up as they no longer had to pause so long in order to figure out how to overcome a difficult issue. The solutions to these small but technically-challenging issues became a lot clearer as the three were able to leverage Gloriana's detail-oriented mind.

The clear improvement and continuous successes lifted everyone's morale and caused them to adopt a wonderful mood. Everyone's minds gradually shifted into an indescribable zone where they were able to employ total concentration and access a portion of each other's talents whenever it was helpful.

Since Gloriana's perspective was the most useful in a fabrication run as difficult as this, she came under greater burden than the others.

However, she seemed immune to the pressure. The added gains they made along with the reduction in problems was like music to her ears. She practically floated on clouds as she rapidly produced precision part after precision part at close to perfect quality.

Unfortunately, the party gradually came to an end.

In order to prevent the Journeymen from crashing from their highs, Blinky slowly shrank the connections over several minutes until it faded away entirely. His glowing eyes and streaking star patterns had dimmed considerably at this time, which showed that he was not ready to activate his design network anytime soon.

Mrow...

Ves reached out to pet Blinky's head and back. "Good job, Blinky. Take a good rest and devour as much spiritual energy as you need. We will need your help again in four hours."

Mrow mrow...

Though four hours was not enough for Blinky to enjoy a full rest, he was still a tough kitty.

The mech designers fell into a lower mood after they no longer enjoyed the previous benefits. Gloriana had become a little duller and the output of the other three Journeyman declined in quality.

However, this drop did not bring the overall quality levels back to the old level. Ves, Ketis and Juliet had immersed themselves in Gloriana's perspective long enough to learn some of her tricks and knowledge.

Ves was already accustomed to this due to possessing a fragment of Gloriana and collaborating with his wife on a daily basis, so his output did not vary as much.

The two other women exhibited much greater lingering differences. Juliet's permanent improvement was rather moderate as her Hexer education had already made her diligent.

Ketis exhibited the most improvement. She had been a Journeyman for the least amount of time out of the four. Her approach to mech design was also a lot sloppier than the rest. The opportunity to see her work from a completely different perspective, if only partially, had taught her so much that she couldn't go back to working in ignorance!

"Now that all of these flaws are so obvious, I can't ignore them anymore." She muttered with a frown.

On the one hand, this new awareness of hers slowed her down and forced her to revisit some of her old work.

On the other hand, the quality of her weapon components were becoming noticeably better, which would doubtlessly increase the performance of the expert mech once it was completed!

Gloriana soon perked up again when she observed all of this. She turned to Ves with a hungry expression.

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Give me a cat like Blinky. Since you have managed to make such an amazing cat once, you can make one again! Be sure to make it female this time!"

"Uhm, let's talk about this later. We still have a project to complete."

Clixie had been watching the mech designers at work while lying next to Lucky. As soon as she heard Gloriana's request, she became distressed again.

"Miaow!"

