

## Mech 3361

### *Chapter 3361: Ves the Crown Maker*

When Ves worked on the crown, he already had a suspicion that it would turn into a masterwork.

No. That wasn't the right description. He just knew it would turn into a masterwork!

It was not because this was his first proper chance to work with first-class materials and production equipment.

It was not because he was working under the threat of death because an ambitious, cold-hearted dwarf put a gun on his head.

It was not because he applied numerous interesting innovations to his crown design.

All of these factors certainly played a role in increasing the special nature of the end product, but they were not the decisive factor that gave Ves a certainty that he had passed the test.

No. The truth was that this 24-hour long pressure test had caused him to develop critical insights about the nature of masterworks and how it tied to his own work and design philosophy.

Ves had undergone an evolution in the way he perceived his products. The insights that he had accumulated up until now had given him a greater glimpse of the nature of masterworks, but it was only by combining them together that he finally managed to grasp a portion of the truth about masterworks!

Even as Ves observed the subtle masterwork transformation that increased the invisible qualities of the crown, he himself was undergoing a transformation.

Both creator and product made substantial gains that caused them to become more remarkable than normal.

Ves didn't actually glean that many insights from witnessing the crown stepping up to the second rung of the ladder.

An insight was defined as obtaining deep understanding in something.

Observation wasn't the only method of developing a deep understanding of a certain phenomenon.

Thinking was another way to develop greater understanding, and that was what Ves had just obtained throughout this experience!

The fruit he obtained from the latter tasted much sweeter than the former. Because he gained out his new insights through reason and deduction, he fully mastered the new understanding he gained!

This was much better than observing an external phenomena and reluctantly comprehending the puzzle pieces that he could understand.

This was why Ves felt he had gained more out of making this crown than making any of his masterwork projects up until today!

In the previous four cases when he successfully fabricated a masterwork mech, these opportunities always came about by chance. Ves hadn't able to exert any meaningful control on the quality of his end products.

Everytime he embarked on another fabrication run, he performed the equivalent of purchasing a lottery ticket.

If he was lucky enough to hold the winning ticket, he would happily be able to add a new masterwork certificate to his name.

Sadly, his luck wasn't that extravagant most of the time. His lottery tickets turned out to be duds most of the time. This was why he failed to turn the Dark Zephyr, the Riot and the First Sword into masterworks.

"I didn't understand back then."

Understanding. It was such a general word, but only when he truly experienced it would he know how precious and sublime it could be. The understanding he gained from this short side project was far greater than he had ever hoped at the start.

This was because Ves gained a key that he could use to unlock the doors that previously blocked his way.

"Maybe... I don't need to buy a lottery ticket anymore in order to win a prize."

Although Ves still had to make a lot more progress to get to that point, he instinctively felt he had made substantial progress.

Ves slowly lifted his hammer. Its comfortable glow felt more attuned to him than ever before. This was a clear sign that he had become a lot more aligned to one of Vulcan's domains.

"Craftsmanship..."

It turned out that this was one of the hidden benefits of making an incarnation out of Vulcan.

Although Ves and Vulcan were actually two facets of the same jewel, in truth there was still a substantial degree of separation in between them. One of the areas in which they differed was their perspectives and comprehension of reality.

To put it in different terms, their domains colored their perception. Ves wore a visor that interpreted reality in terms of life and mechs. This was why he was unable to understand what Vulcan was looking at when he looked at reality with his own visor.

Yet due to their connection to each other, Ves was able to make rapid progress in understanding what Vulcan instinctively comprehended.

He especially benefited from this process when he actually began to make his crown. That was the moment when Vulcan became more active and channeled his domain.

This was another factor why Ves was able to make a lot more progress in condensing his own understanding of craftsmanship.

All of this culminated in what he could only describe as an evolution. The difference between himself 24 hours ago and his current self was too big!

If Rion Aaden had never set a trap for him and forced him to make a crown, he doubted that he would have been able to make this much progress in so little time.

Pressure truly brought out the best in Ves.

Several minutes passed by as Ves became immersed in his own bliss. A supreme sense of accomplishment surged through his body as his new comprehension already altered the way he viewed the cosmos.

It felt as if his senses had received an upgrade that enabled them to become more discerning. The difference was especially big when he viewed masterworks like the crown that he had just made.

When he looked at it, he no longer thought that he was lucky to turn it into a masterwork.

He could partially determine what factors contributed to the elevation of his crown.

Not only that, he felt he could replicate them in order to repeat this feat!

As long as he obtained the same materials and another opportunity to make use of this expensive workshop, he had at least 10 percent confidence that he could make another masterwork crown!

"10 percent is pretty big!"

Previously, Ves would have set his chances at just 1 percent, and that was an optimistic estimate.

The low odds reflected his lack of confidence in his ability to produce masterworks on command. Basically, much of the factors that contributed to that single percentage point was down to luck, happenstance and serendipity.

Now, that 1 percent still existed, but Ves added 9 percent on top of that due to the additional factors based on his own gains!

Unlike the former, the latter was derived from variables that he could consciously control and direct!

This was because he understood a bit of the truth about masterworks.

The basic premise was that they were extensions of their creators.

Because of that, masterworks only came into existence when they encapsulated the best, strongest and most truthful aspects of their creators.

As long as he got excited, as long as he innovated, as long as he took risks and as long as he centered his work around life, he would naturally increase the quality of his end products.

"The truth is actually simple, but understanding it is not as easy as it sounds."

This was a truth that mech designers like Ves could only embrace through their own efforts.

He was pretty sure that if he walked up to Gloriana and explained all of his recent gains, his wife wouldn't actually see any substantial improvements.

"Her perspective is different from mine." Ves muttered. "Since masterworks are an extension of their creators, every mech designer must build up their comprehension from their own foundations."

For example, the assumption that masterworks were extensions of their own creators was an interpretation that fit the way Ves viewed reality. He was a mech designer that constantly used life as a lens.

In comparison, Ketis interpreted her work in a similar but not identical way. To her, her swords sang to her. Ves wasn't able to hear these songs at all and it was futile for him to try.

Currently, only Ves and Ketis possessed the ability to distinguish and comprehend their masterworks in this manner. It seemed as if they were already a step ahead of the rest.

Was it because of their companion spirits?

He suspected that Journeymen like themselves weren't supposed to touch this truth so soon. However, what Ves had done somehow allowed them to skip a lot of steps and put them in touch with higher-level concepts faster than normal!

Ves looked affectionately at his crown. It was not only a fantastic product in itself that would doubtlessly provide a lot of value to its owner in the future, but it was also a sign that he had grown up in terms of his own development in craftsmanship.

Even if he became separated from Vulcan today, he would still keep all of the precious gains he made today!

"VULCAN." Rion spoke with much more respect than before as he slowly approached the work table where the end product rested. He stopped at a fair distance as if he was afraid of breaking the crown if he picked it up too soon. "YOU SUCCEEDED. I HAVE READ ABOUT YOUR MIRACLES, BUT THIS..."

The dwarven crown possessed a strong spiritual presence that was almost irresistible to dwarves. Rion was not an average person but the crown was specifically designed and made to be put on his head. It took a lot of self-control for him to maintain his distance!

Ves slowly turned around. "I got lucky, I guess. I really don't want to know what you would do to me if I failed to make a masterwork."

The dwarven emperor did not speak about it. That was an irrelevant future now that Ves had managed to stave off disaster. There was no reason for the contractor and the client to sour their own relations by talking about ugly matters.

Both of them wanted to pursue the best possible outcome. Now that Ves had succeeded in this challenge, the main source of tension between them no longer existed. Both of them possessed a strong interest in maintaining a cordial if not friendly relationship.

With the existence of the masterwork crown, both Ves and Rion gained a lot more benefits if they continued to work together. It wasn't worth it for either of them to attack each other.

This was why Ves was truly confident he was safe now. The Sword of Damocles that Rion had hung over his head had been lowered without decapitating anyone.

Rion's cybernetic eyes glowed brightly as he took his time to scan and behold the masterwork crown.

"EVEN FROM THIS DISTANCE, I CAN FEEL THE DIVINITY OF THIS CROWN. ONLY A MECH DESIGNER SUCH AS YOU CAN MAKE THIS KIND OF OBJECT."

"I don't know..."

Although Ves was highly pleased with his crown, he did not assume that it was unsurpassed. He suspected that the Five Scrolls Compact or other groups might be able to create something similar by leveraging their own understanding of spiritual engineering.

Since there was someone out there that could make a sophisticated product like the Grand Dynamo, it was not that big of a leap to think there were other spiritual engineers that were able fuse spiritual components into physical products!

Still, Ves did not believe that his distant and unknowable competitors were able to make a crown like this. After all, it was not only alive, but was also connected to a powerful design spirit of his own making!

The crown was a representation of his best work. When Ves looked at it, his thoughts already began to look forward.

Each masterwork mech of his own making was like a crown to him now. The Amaranto was more than just an expert mech. It was the crown which bestowed Venerable Stark with the authority she deserved. The crown also enabled her to draw out her potential and amplify her power so that she gained the strength to enforce her will!

Ves strangely gained a lot more confidence in his ability to turn both the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project into masterworks!

#### *Chapter 3362: Investiture*

Objectively speaking, making a masterwork mech was many times harder than making a masterwork crown.

The two product types were incomparable in terms of scale, complexity and resource investment.

The bigger and more difficult an object, the harder it was to make a masterwork out of it. That was the general rule.

This was also why masterwork starships and masterwork space stations were practically unheard of. While it was technically possible to make them, the fact that the CFA didn't even put any effort into making them was enough proof that it was too impractical to chase after these unicorns.

Then why did Ves possess a lot of confidence in his next two projects?

It was because he was a mech designer.

As much as he enjoyed the process of making a masterwork crown, this was ultimately a side project to him. He did not intend to specialize in making crowns at all. His interest in them would not last forever and it was conceivable that he would quickly lose his passion for crowns over time.

"It doesn't matter if I dabble in other product categories for a time, but I will always return to mechs in the end."

He was already itching to apply all of the gains he made towards his upcoming expert mech design projects. The Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project were both close to completion, but he still had the urge to apply some changes to insert more of his own style into them. He had made too many compromises that reined in some of the more extreme aspects of these designs, and that was not optimal as far as he was concerned.

He could think about that later. First, he needed to wrap up this enlightening session with his host.

After Rion and a couple of other faceless dwarves confirmed without a doubt that Ves had made a masterwork crown that already possessed legendary properties, they all moved over to the throne room.

The decor was still as drab and martial as before. The gunmetal grey bulkheads and the various banners hanging over their heads did not convey a sufficient amount of grandness to the ceremony that Rion insisted on holding.

However, a better venue wasn't available at the moment. The Iron Emperor would be a fool to travel to the Uriburn Province and enter the true throne room of the Vulcan Empire.

With his own state burning all around him, Rion had already made his decision to get away as quickly and quietly as before. He had already implemented plans to evacuate his core group of loyalists from Smiling Samuel a long time ago, so there was nothing tying him down to this wretched state.

As a result, Ves found himself compelled to take part in a shabby but important ceremony.

He had suited up in his Unending Regalia again. His antigrav backpack came online as well in order to help him cope with the heavy gravity that was affecting the rest of the ship.

Saint Yila Mayorka had already flooded the entire dwarven frigate in her domain field again. The ace pilot's omnipresent will and presence paid close attention to both Ves and the crown that he was holding between his gauntlets.

The dwarven emperor's Praetorian Guard all stood at attention as they left open a path to the throne.

"You may approach." One of their officers instructed.

Ves slowly stepped forward. His metal boots clanked softly against the deck as he did so. Even though Saint Yila clouded his spiritual senses with her powerful force of will, Ves could still judge that every single dwarf in this compartment paid close attention to him at the moment.

No. That wasn't quite correct. They were all staring at his crown.

If Ves could straighten his back further, he would have. He felt inordinately proud and satisfied for capturing the imagination of the dwarves. The crown possessed a special charm to their kind that a human like Ves would never be able to experience.

The crown gave the impression that anyone who wore it possessed the unquestionable right to rule over the dwarves. This was a deliberate psychological suggestion that Ves had programmed into the object in order to facilitate Rion's purpose.

It looked as if he did a good job of implementing this idea. Only Saint Mayorka possessed the will and discipline to maintain a sober and even suspicious attitude towards the crown.

When Ves reached the foot of the steps, he stopped because a pair of armored guards had barred the way forward. Their black rifles crossed against each other as if they formed a gate.

Ves looked up at the giant armored form that had seated itself on the throne.

The Iron Emperor looked more dignified than normal. This was an important day to him. Not only did he reunite with 'Vulcan', but also managed to persuade him to craft the symbol of authority that he so desperately needed to change the trajectory of the dwarven species!

"You may ascend."

The crossed rifles retracted, allowing Ves to climb up the bare metal steps as if he was a supplicant.

The journey was slow, silent and solemn. Even though this ceremony was so shabby that Ves didn't see the point in holding it, the dwarves didn't think this way.

They all treated this moment as if it was the culmination of their greatest dreams. Though Rion had secretly been recognized as emperor, the title was largely empty if he didn't rule over a corresponding empire.

No matter how well-spoken Rion sounded like, his naked ambition caused him to make many extreme decisions. His willingness to give up temporal power over the Vulcan Empire said a lot about his determination!

From the moment he found his purpose, Rion was never content with staying in this underdeveloped star sector. Dwarvenkind would never be able to rise within the galactic rim, let alone the backyard of human civilization.

Only by leading the dwarves out of the reach of humanity would he be able to give his subjects a proper home!

The short but important coronation that was about to take place was a critical turning point for Rion. The reason why he and the other dwarves attached so much importance to it was because of the special identity of the person holding the crown.

Which ruler could claim with a straight face that a god had personally crowned them? In order to be able to claim with utmost seriousness that Vulcan himself had invested him with the authority to rule over the dwarves, Rion did not dare to take this ceremony lightly.

"VULCAN." The powerful dwarf boomed.

"Your Majesty." Ves responded in a more formal attitude than before.

"DO YOU SUPPORT OUR CAUSE?"

What a tricky question. Ves didn't really care that much about the dwarves at first. Even though he had awful experiences with the Vulcanites, that was mostly his fault. The citizens of the Vulcan Empire were not representative of the attitudes of other dwarves.

However, that didn't mean that Ves was supportive of the dwarves. Rion plotted to split up a portion of humanity in the name of racial inequality. No matter whether he was able to succeed, such a major event would definitely inflict a lot of damage to human society.

Yet now, he found that his opinions had changed. By creating this powerful crown, Ves became involved in Rion's masterplan. If the Iron Emperor could truly pull it off, then Vulcan would become an indispensable part of the lives of a divergent civilization!

Even if Ves did not intend to meddle with the dwarves, he still found it worth it to insert a nail in a completely separate group from humanity. This nail would become more valuable if the dwarves achieved success.

As a result, Ves did not have to lie in order to provide a favorable response.

"I do." He smiled as he spoke his honest thoughts without reserve... "I support your cause. It shouldn't be this way. Human civilization is supposed to stand up for all

people, even dwarves that were originally derived from baseline human stock. It is a pity that human nature is much more cruel and ignorant than we wish. Every species possesses flaws, and our faults are particularly obvious towards individuals who look differently from us. Dwarves will never gain true acceptance from humans because the latter can't look past our physical differences."

This was a painful admission to make for a modern human. People spent a huge amount of effort over many years to move humanity past the stage where they judged each other on the color of their skin, their gender identity, their parentage, their state and so on. Though most of humanity had definitely made a lot of progress, people had never been able to shake off this ugly side completely.

Rion happened to agree with this interpretation. The dwarf's eyes looked heavy.

"DWARVES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TREATED AS SUBHUMANS BY THOSE WHO MADE US. TO THE MASTERS WHO LOOK DOWN ON US TREAT US AS HUMAN RESOURCES RATHER THAN INDIVIDUALS. OUR WORTH HAS BECOME TIED TO HOW MUCH LABOR WE CAN PROVIDE. AS LONG AS NOTHING CHANGES, DWARVES WILL FOREVER STAY IN BONDAGE TO THE HUMANS THAT DENY US EQUAL OPPORTUNITY."

The Iron Emperor gained momentum as he mentioned the grievance that had motivated him to fight for the dwarves.

The dwarf raised an armored fist.

"SINCE THE BEGINNING OF OUR CREATION, WE DWARVES HAVE NEVER BEEN TREATED FAIRLY. TOO MANY OF OUR PEOPLE THINK WE MUST PLAY THE GAMES OF HUMANS AND INTEGRATE INTO THEIR POWER STRUCTURE IN ORDER TO CHANGE OUR LOT. EACH OF THEM ARE FOOLS. HUMANS WILL NEVER GIVE UP THEIR TOTAL CONTROL OVER THEIR OWN SOCIETY. DWARVES WILL FOREVER BE TREATED AS LESSERS."

"You have decided to take matters into your own hands."

"INDEED. IF THE HUMANS WILL NOT GIVE US JUSTICE, THEN WE SHALL TAKE IT WITH OUR OWN HANDS! WITH THE HELP OF YOUR DIVINE PROVIDENCE, I CAN WAKE UP MY FELLOW DWARVES AND CONVINCE THEM THAT WE MUST UNITE TO FULFILL THE DREAM OF AN INDEPENDENT STAR EMPIRE. IT IS FOR THIS REASON THAT I REQUEST TO BE CROWNED WITH A WORK OF YOUR OWN MAKING. PLEASE BLESS OUR MISSION AND ALLOW ME TO ASCEND TO MY TRUE THRONE."

Ves saw that as a signal to perform the most important act. His face remained utterly serious as he stepped closer.

Since Rion's giant armored form was in a seated position, Ves did not need to levitate himself to place the crown on his exposed bald head.

Slowly but surely, Ves slowly extended his arms. Everyone's breath had stilled as the large and impressive piece of craftsmanship lingered just above a broad and dark-skinned head.

"By my power as the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, I invest you as the Emperor of All Dwarves, the ruler of the Eternal Dwarven Empire and the voice of Vulcan!"

Rion's entire form glowed with the light of Vulcan as soon as the crown finally rested on his head!

Each and every dwarf in the compartment knelt in front of the throne. They solemnly bent their heads in order to convey their allegiance to the leader who promised to lead their race to a brand new future!

Though the Eternal Dwarven Empire didn't even exist, not a single dwarf thought that it would remain that way. As everyone basked in the strengthened presence of the newly-crowned emperor, they each believed with all of their hearts that they would live long enough to step foot in a real dwarven nation!

Ves quietly stepped aside. While he ostensibly held the most noble identity of all, their thoughts towards Vulcan was quite distant and ambivalent.

In contrast, the leader that won over their personal loyalty was the real star of the show today! Seeing Rion fulfill one of his greatest wishes had made them happy for their leader.

The quest to free the dwarves had truly begun today!

#### *Chapter 3363: Crown Conclusion*

Did Ves take part in a grand moment of history or a short-lasting farce?

It remained to be seen whether Emperor Rion Aaden and his loyal following would be able to pull off a dwarven exodus.

The Big Two certainly wouldn't approve of any ethnic group cutting away from human civilization. Even if the dwarven people possessed legitimate grievances about the way they were treated, the precedent of their departure would spur on the departures of many other dissatisfied groups.

Part of the reason why human civilization was so powerful at the moment was because humanity did not fundamentally compete against itself.

That would doubtlessly change once different groups split away from the current consensus and founded their own sovereign star nations.

The collective power of humankind as a whole would become a lot weaker once these independent human nations fought against each other, which would surely happen.

Without the Big Two's restraint, the scale and destructiveness of the competition between nations would easily overtake the petty squabbles between states that happened in the current age!

"We would essentially be going back to the Age of Conquest." Ves muttered. "Soon enough, we'll start dispatching warships against each other again."

According to this predicted outcome, he shouldn't even be cheering on the secessionist dwarves in the first place. As a human, it was in his best interest to support the Big Two's overall stance and prevent any element of human civilization from sparking a regression that would directly put humanity back where it started!

Yet... after taking part in such a significant and exciting event, how could Ves oppose this development? A childish part of him felt privileged to be a part of a potentially massive event that could shake humanity!

"Maybe I've grown tired of messing up individual states." Ves muttered. "Maybe I'm starting to develop a craving for stirring up entire civilizations."

"Meow?"

"Oh, it's nothing, Lucky. Everything is fine." He smiled at his cat.

After Ves finished his performance in the coronation ceremony, the dwarves no longer needed him. Rion generously allowed his guest to return to his fleet and depart from the star system without any further incident.

"Are the dwarves leaving?"

"They are." Minister Shederin Purnesse replied. "According to our sensors, the Olympus Mons and the dwarven frigate are already making their way to the second-closest Lagrange point."

"That's good news." Ves sighed in relief. "Hopefully, we'll soon be out of the effective range of the dwarven ace mech. Even though their leader shouldn't have a reason to kill us all, who knows what goes on in his head. He's anything but a normal dwarf."

He did not dare to say anything more about Rion. The dwarf was planning a grand conspiracy that would definitely provoke the Big Two sooner or later. Ves should be distancing himself from this future revolutionary as much as possible at this point!

The foreign minister was tactful enough to rein in his curiosity. Although he could already fill in a lot of gaps with the help of his intellect, experience and imagination, he was astute enough to smell a lot of danger in whatever happened inside the ship. No average dwarven group would go through such an extravagant amount of effort to employ the Larkinson Patriarch's services!

Just the fact that the mastermind behind this entire trap was able to command a powerful ace pilot was enough to prove that he was not to be trifled with. Knowing too much would only increase the chance of the Olympus Mons turning around to finish the job!

"Meow...?"

Lucky hovered over to Ves' hands and sniffed a few times. His glowing green eyes began to look suspicious.

"Hey, settle down. Just be thankful that we're all heading back with our hides intact. You can't imagine what I had to do in order to save us all! If I wasn't so good at my job, this day would have taken a different turn."

Although a part of Ves thought that Rion was just bluffing and that his threats were just part of an act, the very real losses suffered by the Golden Skull Alliance were not a joke!

The Larkinsons and their allies suffered small but painful losses. Just the Avatar mechs and mech pilots shredded by the deceptively small machine gun module of the Olympus Mons served as a serious warning that the expeditionary fleet had come close to total annihilation!

When the shuttle finally returned to the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim, the fleet slowly began to make its own way out of the Trion Enze System.

The mood of the crew was a lot more downcast than before. No one was happy about how a single ace mech tore down their defenses and exposed the weaknesses of their armed forces.

No matter whether it was the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers or Crossers, none of them performed well enough to keep their heads high after today.

All of the pride and accomplishment they gained from winning the Battle of Fordilla Zentra had disappeared as if someone poked a hole in their balloons.

As Ves continued to make his way up to one of the conference rooms of the Spirit of Bentheim, he couldn't help but grow more depressed at all of the depressed clansmen around him. It became clear that while the clan did not suffer a lot of material damage, the impact on morale was far greater!

"We'll get back up. I'm sure of it. We're Larkinsons. We never keep our heads down!" Ves quietly said to himself.

Time healed every wound, and this was no different. The clan had already grown robust enough to deal with this problem without requiring his personal intervention. Ves was completely certain that General Verle already had a plan in mind to reverse the current malaise.

In the next hour, Ves presided over a tense and depressing conference meeting with the leader of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Suffice to say, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan did not find it pleasant to get caught up in his latest problems again. Ves knew that he would definitely have to make it up to them in order to keep relations cordial within the Golden Skull Alliance.

He especially wanted to maintain good relations with Patriarch Reginald Cross.

This event had underscored the importance of gaining the protection of an ace pilot. Ves had always thought that helping Patriarch Reginald advance to ace pilot was a difficult and unpleasant chore.

Now, he considered it to be a necessity. Even though helping the Cross Clan gain a new ace pilot directly empowered a rival, Ves had little choice but to cooperate. It was too precarious to roam the Red Ocean knowing that there were numerous pioneers out there that had obtained the services of other ace pilots.

It didn't matter anymore if Patriarch Reginald was an arrogant gloryhound who put his own interests before everyone else's. He was the closest friendly potential ace pilot that could offer a lot of protection to the expeditionary fleet. Ves was more than willing to put up with Reginald's excesses as long as he fought as well as Saint Yila Mayorka!

"Well, let's focus on leaving Smiling Samuel first." He spoke when the meeting came to an end. "We need to completely remove ourselves from this warzone before considering our future plans. The dwarves that I have just worked with have promised to prevent any local Vulcanite forces from harassing us as we make our way out, but who knows whether they can deliver on their promises. We should maintain full vigilance and hope that our mercenaries won't resort to another contract clause to excuse themselves from combat."

Although Ves and everyone was pissed as hell at the cowardly behavior of the mercenaries they hired, they had no choice but to keep working with them. The mech pilots for hire were fully in their right to stay out of a suicidal battle against a powerful ace mech.

Once the meeting ended, Ves tiredly returned to his stateroom.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Lucky approached Clixie and curled up next to her warm body on one of their cat beds.

As for Ves, he removed his Unending Regalia and tiredly dropped himself next to his wife on the couch.

Gloriana did not look pleased as she crossed her arms. "You need to stop it, Ves."

"Stop what?"

"You know what I'm referring to. Your incessant habit of leading us right into our deaths!"

"Hey, I had good reason to head to this star system! I can't explain to you what is going on, and I'm sorry for that, but I've mostly succeeded in what I set out to do. I've even obtained a couple of bonuses that will benefit us in the long term. Ultimately, our gains outweigh our losses."

"That's because the dwarves were merciful to us today! What if you made the wrong decision? What if the dwarves were less tolerant of us? The Olympus Mons could have blown us all up and our baby with it! She hasn't even been born yet, Ves! I can't bear the thought of losing our baby before I even have a chance to raise her. She deserves better!"

"Please calm down! I'm not sure whether your stress affects our baby's health, but let's not take any risks."

Ves sidled up closer and gently placed his hand on her bulging belly. His pregnant wife frowned at him, but decided not to remove his limb.

His daughter felt healthier and more alive than ever. Ves even had the illusion that today's experience had impacted his augmented child's budding spirituality!

Ves truly let go of his concerns once he verified that Saint Mayorka's oppressive domain field has not negatively affected his unborn daughter's condition.

"Everything will be okay." He smiled at his wife as he basked in her soft scent. "We aren't going to take any further risks as we depart from the Vulcan Empire. We're not even sticking around in the Fermi Star Cluster any longer than necessary. We're heading directly to the Antilla Star Cluster without any breaks so that we can reach the Tarnished Crown Star Sector as soon as possible. We'll all be safe once we reach the gate system over there. It will take years before we ever come close to encountering these kinds of threats."

"We shouldn't be encountering them in the first place." Gloriana grumbled.

Tarnished Crown was the goal of every aspiring pioneer in the local region at the moment. Ves found it ironic that the star sector just happened to be called this way. Not only did it possess an unfortunate but completely unrelated association to the Crown Uprising, it also reminded Ves of the commission he just completed.

It was as if this entire period of human history revolved around crowns for some reason.

Ves shook his head. This was a silly thought. He did not intend to fabricate any more crowns, particularly because he knew that a certain crown-wearing dwarf would eventually build up a lot of notoriety when he attempted his exodus!

The two mech designers cuddled against each other for a while. Despite her attitude, Gloriana was grateful that her husband managed to return from the scary dwarven ship alive. She didn't want to raise her baby alone.

"Have you thought about how we'll name our first child?" Ves softly asked.

She looked at him as if he was stupid. "Of course I did that. I already started to draw up a list of names just after we met for the first time. You can never start too early!"

"Uhm, what kind of names are you considering?"

"Hmmm... I still have to narrow down my choices. Right now, I'm thinking about Mariana, Shiriana, Liriana, Cynthiana, Coriana, Yiliana, Oriana, Heliana..."

Ves already started to look cross eyed after hearing her suggestions!

"Uhm, those choices sound nice and all, but I'm not hearing enough variety. Did you come up with any names at all that end with something other than '-ana'?"

"...How about Veronica?"

*Chapter 3364: Back On Track*

Several weeks had gone by since the coronation of Emperor Rion Aaden. After the encounter with the Olympus Mons, no one in the expeditionary fleet wanted to stay in the Vulcan Empire any second longer than necessary!

Despite taking a faster but riskier route, the Golden Skull Alliance did not meet any resistance. The navigators had deliberately plotted a route that mainly threaded through star systems that were either far too marginal or had already been subjugated by human forces.

Just like before, none of the regional dwarven military forces came out to take revenge on the expeditionary fleet. The other human groups that had joined the feast in Smiling Samuel still treated Ves and his clan as if they were plague bearers.

Together with the mercenary forces that at least made the expeditionary fleet more troublesome to harass, the cost of attacking the Golden Skull Alliance far outweighed the benefits. With so many rich but vulnerable dwarven star systems that were just begging to get looted, hardly any human forces took the initiative to acknowledge the passing fleet's existence!

This pattern continued even after the Larkinsons and their allies finally put the Vulcan Empire behind them. The alert level finally dropped down to green, permitting everyone to remove their protective suits and return to wearing more comfortable outfits.

The return to normality also restored everyone's morale. It was quite stressful to live in an environment where the odds of encountering threats was small but not trivial.

Most of those worries disappeared when they finally left an active war zone and traveled out of the reach of the fanatical and irrational Vulcanites.

"I'd be happy if we never stumble upon another dwarf in our lives!"

"We're finally back on track."

"I still have nightmares about fighting against the Olympus Mons."

Although the personnel of the expeditionary fleet was still profoundly affected by what had happened during the trip, the damage was in a controllable range. As long as nothing outrageous happened in the short term, the entire ordeal would just become another story that people exchanged with each other while drinking.

"We're currently passing through the territory of the Consolidated Kingdom of Namais." Calabast's projection told Ves when he was at his office. "Namais is one of the many states that have teamed up with the Lost to carve up the Vulcan Empire's territories. Most of the kingdom's mech armies are either deployed to Smiling Samuel or have been stationed at its borders in order to deter incursions from its other neighbors. The threat of getting waylaid by one of their military fleets is almost nil. Namais simply doesn't have the manpower to spare."

It was sad that the Larkinsons even had to make a threat assessment of every state they visited. Still, with their history of coming into conflict with states for various reasons, this was not a redundant precaution!

"What about the rest of the Cin Beta Star Sector? Do you foresee any threats?" Ves asked.

Calabast shook her head. "Unlikely. The mercenaries that we've hired are still worth their money. Their troop strength and the repercussions of attacking them is already sufficient to deter most opportunistic robbers who urgently need to pad their capital ship quota."

"Well at least we're not wasting our money." Ves snorted.

"Once we pass through the Consolidated Kingdom of Namais, we'll mostly be traveling through busy, well-established trade routes that have a relatively high safety index. It helps that we will mostly be passing through the various port systems of different third-rate states."

This was the fastest way of traveling through a star sector quickly. Port systems were easy FTL travel destinations and attracted a lot of space traffic due to their inherent advantages.

Even if the Larkinson Clan had no intention of buying anything from these third-class economies, just the convenience of skipping a week or more of monotonous FTL travel was enough to make the trip worthwhile!

Ves glanced at the projected star map. "It won't take long until we finally enter the Antilla Star Cluster. Tell me about this place. Is there anything I should know?"

"If the Gate Consortium hadn't chosen to set one of its gate systems in this star cluster, most people probably wouldn't have paid any special attention to it. We'll only be traveling through two more star sectors. First, we will be entering the Sticky Pernois Star Sector. The environment is slightly complicated here due to the numerous different second-rate states that occupy this region. They've been known to quarrel with each other, but they have all quieted down as of late."

"Because of all of the traffic passing through their territories, am I right?" Ves guessed.

The spymaster's projection nodded. "Ever since the gate system opened next door, many forces in Sticky Pernois are wary of provoking the prospective pioneers that are trying to reach the gate system. None of the people or groups that can arrange passage through the beyonder gates are average. That said, the pioneers themselves aren't always as restrained."

"I've read in the news that incidents of robberies have increased in Sticky Pernois."

"Correct, but we don't have to worry. The local authorities all pretend to be blind and deaf because it is too much of a hassle to intervene in disputes between notable foreign entities. Still, the overwhelming majority of attacks consists of a stronger fleet bullying a weaker one. There is never an instance where two fleets of equal strength fight a serious battle."

All of these battles revolved around profit, and there weren't many gains to be had if attackers lost half of their troops to defeat their prey!

The Golden Skull Alliance was already strong enough on its own. Its impressive battle record along with the mercenary escort added two more compelling reasons why it should be left alone. Calabast was right to minimize the threat of getting waylaid.

Only state-backed military forces posed a significant threat to the expeditionary fleet at this point, but Calabast judged that none of them should jump out and make trouble with the Larkinsons.

"The only noteworthy detail about Sticky Pernois is that we'll be picking up our capital ship orders in one of its second-rate states."

Ves nodded. "The Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird will finally join our fleet. We've waited a long time for them. At least the recent delays have allowed us to splurge on more upgrades."

The closer they came to entering the Red Ocean, the more they realized that preparations mattered a lot. The more they could invest before they reached the new frontier, the better!

"Right. Once we pass through Sticky Pernois, we'll finally enter the star sector that we have all been waiting for. Tarnished Crown is a central star sector so it has always been relatively stable. The opening of the Red Ocean has profoundly lowered its danger index as the local states and groups find it far more profitable to cater to the demands of the visiting pioneering fleets rather than competing against each other. A lot of new companies have sprung up in recent years. Shipyards, mech manufacturers, supply companies, headhunting offices, you name it, there's probably a business out there that can meet our needs."

"At wildly overinflated prices, no doubt." Ves crossed his arms.

"That's a given. The supply of goods and services is growing, but it simply can't keep up with the meteoric rise in demand. You already know that the wait time to commission a capital ship has surpassed a decade."

No wonder nearby pioneering fleets chose to play pirate this time!

Calabast gave Ves a reassuring smile. "You don't have to worry too much about the risks once we reach Tarnished Crown. It's a much more monitored and scrutinized star sector since it hosts a gate system. Few people are eager to show their ugly side so close to a powerful MTA garrison. The beyonder gate is located in the Opalis Star System, which also happens to house the sector headquarters of the local MTA branch. Ever since the Gate Consortium has set up shop here, the MTA has heavily reinforced its security presence in Opalis and beyond."

A beyonder gate was insanely costly even for the Big Two. There were always crazies out there that wanted to blow up something valuable and the Crown Uprising had increased the risk factor by at least 100 times!

"Are the risks really low here?" Ves looked suspicious.

"Well, the good news is that threats from states, local power players and pioneering fleets are minimal. There are MTA ships stationed in many major star systems, so no one dares to fire the first shot in front of their noses. The bad news is that the beyonder gate is a magnet for a certain kind of trouble."

He already had a good idea what she was referring to. "Crown terrorists."

"Yes. While the numbers are rather fuzzy, hundreds of major terrorist attacks are taking place in Tarnished Crown alone. We're not talking about one-man shuttle kamikaze runs here. We're talking about exploding the power reactors of passenger liners, releasing toxic gasses across entire cities, rogue mechs opening fire at passing starships and so on. Each time, the Crown terrorists have managed to reap a significant amount of lives."

Terrorists attacks like these had erupted in other places as well. The Bardo Star Cluster and the Fermi Star Cluster that the Larkinsons had visited were also affected by similar incidents.

This was different, though.

"The risk of getting caught up in terrorist attacks is notably higher in Tarnished Crown." Calabast seriously warned. "It's not just because the Crown terrorists seem obsessed with taking down beyonder gates. It's also because of the name of the star sector. The mere mention of a crown, any crown, is enough to set off these delusional, brainwashed idiots."

Ves let out a deep breath. "Tarnished Crown is just a label. It's not a literal description of the star sector."

"We all know that, but the Crown terrorists can't be reasoned with. In fact, the original reason why the star sector is called this way is because all five second-rate states and all of the third-rate states are kingdoms. Each and everyone of them has chosen to adopt the feudal model. You can't find a higher concentration of kings and queens in any other star sector."

"I bet those monarchs are all regretting the fact that they wear crowns." Ves chuckled.

It did not surprise Ves at all that the crazy Crown terrorists surged to the Tarnished Crown Sector like moths to a flame. The entire place pretty much did everything they could to provoke the nutty anarchists who kept yelling about returning a stolen crown!

As much as Ves found it interesting to hear about all of the assassination attempts on these monarchs, these troubles didn't matter to migrants like him. As long as the expeditionary fleet remained in the outer systems of the places it passed through, it was unlikely for any terrorists to be able to get close enough to launch a serious attack.

"What about the Opalis System itself?" Ves asked. "Have the terrorists ever managed to launch a successful attack in this highly guarded gate system?"

"The MTA has already maintained tight security in the systems that house their sector headquarters and this is no different. While the heavy patrols cannot prevent every possible terrorist attacks, they can respond extremely quickly and isolate any outbreak with the help of powerful tech. The damage is always confined to a minimum."

Ves became reassured after hearing that. So far, the expeditionary fleet only endured terrorist attacks at the start of the Crown Uprising. After the alliance partners all made use of kinship networks to root out the hidden dangers among their personnel, the galaxy-wide upheaval no longer affected the Golden Skull Alliance.

Everyone in the fleet had been spared from the fear and mutual suspicion that infected other organizations... This was why many Larkinsons grew complacent as they developed the impression that the Crown Uprising was merely a sideshow. This was a dangerous mentality because the terrorist attacks had taken a serious toll on the rest of human society!

## Chapter 3665 No Space

"Have you come up with a final name for the Solid Project?" Ves asked.

Though Sara Voiken looked tired after expending much of her energy into making the first production copy of her new design, she already thought about this matter beforehand.

"Since I designed this mech to cooperate with my brother's Rigid Spine model, I wanted my mech to reflect this relation. I couldn't come up with anything better than Rigid Wall, though."

Ves scratched his head. "Rigid Wall sounds... simple. How many knight mechs have the word 'wall' in their name?"

"Too much." Sara mirthfully said. "I do think that calling it a wall is appropriate for this mech. It is designed to function as one, and it is particularly effective at its job when fielded in larger numbers."

He could easily imagine the sight. As long as more than a hundred Rigid Walls got together, they could block a lot of firepower or hinder the advance of an offensive unit.

Of course, space warfare made it far too easy for spaceborn mechs to maneuver around static mechs. The Rigid Walls therefore had to be employed and positioned in the right manner in order to leverage its defenses effectively.

That either meant that the mechs had to be positioned at choke points or parked extremely close to strategic mechs or starships.

The Rigid Walls should find a lot more use in landbound battles if the Larkinsons ever had a need to establish a presence on land. Ves didn't think those situations would happen too often, though.

As Sara Voiken admired the first mech design she completed on behalf of the Larkinson Clan, she could not get around the unique features that exemplified any Larkinson mech!

"What do you think about my contribution to your work?" Ves curiously asked.

"I would need to see it in action to be sure, but if I look at the results from testing the prototypes, you have definitely added extra dimensions to the Rigid Wall design."

"Indeed. The mech is alive, though that won't be as obvious at first. Our mech pilots will appreciate it, though. Those that have trained or fought with the Bright Warrior in its space knight configuration will be thankful for the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with a receptive mech."

"Its glow is also... different." Sara said. "When you added it to the design, I found that it has given me and its mech pilots all of the right feelings, but doesn't do much else. I thought that optimizing the mech design would make its advantages more apparent, but I haven't noticed much of a difference."

Ves turned to his fellow colleague. "What did you expect from its glow, then?"

"I thought it would give my Rigid Wall mechs a more concrete defensive boost by strengthening their shield generators for example." She responded. "Part of the inspiration for my Rigid Wall design is the Shield of Samar. The glow and living properties of that expert mech are much stronger and more potent. Venerable Jannzi personally explained to me how 'Qilanxo' can actively cooperate with her and her mech to form a stronger energy barrier."

"My design philosophy isn't that exaggerated, Sara. While it can do more with expert mechs, that is because they are built with special materials that react well to my methods such as Unending alloy. There is nothing special about the mech pilots or the construction of the Rigid Wall design, so there is no support for the more advanced applications of my design philosophy."

future update or modification?"

13:53

The female Journeyman looked disappointed. "Is there any way you can change that through a future update or modification?"

"Don't dream about it. That's not what my design philosophy is all about." He said. "I focus primarily on the relationship between the mech and the mech pilot. Glows are a tool that can help the mech pilot adopt the right mentality. As one of my older glow sources, Qilanxo has grown to be quite powerful, but even she would find it difficult to channel a significant portion of her prodigious strength through a standard mech like your Rigid Walls. The only way I can do more is to design a prime mech variant that is suited to be piloted by expert candidates and expert pilots that are still waiting to receive their expert mechs. I can't do that unless I get my hands on more prime materials."

"Prime resonance? Prime materials?"

Ah. Ves remembered that the second batch of Journeyman that joined the Larkinson Clan were still clueless about various secrets.

"They're not immediately relevant at this time. If you want to know more, you can look up the archival data on my prime mechs such as the Valkyrie Prime. We fought a couple of battles where they prominently showcased their capabilities. In truth, our expert mechs are also prime mechs if we go by their definitions. I usually leave the latter part out because hardly anyone notices."

It was also better if the enemy didn't pay attention to this detail either. The prime mech capabilities of his first six expert mechs made them considerably more powerful and effective in battle than anyone could reasonably expect!

Ves found it a pity that the soon-to-be-completed Minerva Project did not possess the qualifications of a prime mech.

He had run out of Unending alloy.

While he could shave off a few kilos from the Shield of Samar's tower shield to free up a bit of prime material, this was not an effective solution.

In order to turn the Minerva Project into a mech that was capable of utilizing prime resonance in battle, he would need to provide it with a lot more prime materials.

So far, Ves made no progress in this area. He already told his clan to be on the lookout for any Galenta Bone, an organic exotic grown by galenta whales, but there weren't any on the market in Vulit, Pellysa and Davute at the time.

If any human forces managed to stumble upon any wild galenta whales during this period, they either kept the spoils to themselves or sold them in more exclusive exchanges.

He placed his hand on Sara's shoulder. "If we can obtain a sufficient quantity of prime materials through exploration or trade, we may one day be able to develop a variant of your Rigid Wall model which possesses enhanced defenses. For now, you should be content with the ordinary benefits of my methods. Don't underestimate how well the Rigid Wall can reinforce the mental defenses of our mech pilots. This is a vital feature that can only firm up the morale of the Living Sentinel mech pilots, but also protect their minds against hostile mental influences."

This was not an important feature against ordinary opponents, but if the Larkinson Clan ever bumped into any dark gods or other strange opponents, the Rigid Wall would be a lot more useful than the Bright Warrior in this scenario!

Sara acknowledged his words. "The Rigid Wall's glow also compliments nicely with the glow of the Rigid Spine."

This was yet another form of synergy between the two mechs.

The spearman mech model was governed by the Solemn Guardian, whose glow provided just as much benefit to any nearby space knights. The mech pilots assigned to the Rigid Walls would become filled with a sense of duty and fight back harder against heavy opposition.

At the same time, Qilanxo was able to extend her mental protection to the Rigid Spines, allowing the spearman mech pilots to fight while enduring less pressure.

Ves already thought of a way to enhance this mental defense line. If he added a third mech model that carried Lufa's glow, then he could leverage its spiritual suppression capabilities to blunt any hostile spiritual attacks before they got close.

The Living Sentinels would truly be able to excel at defending against all manner of extraordinary threats!

Still, it might be better for him to reserve this capability for the Battle Criers. So far, the Living Sentinels were mainly designed to defend against mundane threats while the Battle Criers were supposed to become his weapon against spiritual threats.

He could think about that later.

"Let's test your new Rigid Wall."

The Living Sentinels enthusiastically tested their new defensive mech as soon as the expeditionary fleet dropped out of FTL travel.

The final version of the mech design had not changed all of that much compared to its prototypes, so everyone already knew what to expect.

The Rigid Wall model did not disappoint anyone's expectations. It did not exceed expectations either.

All in all, Sara Voiken's mostly-solo project was a relatively adequate if unexciting addition to the Larkinson Army.

When Ves, Sara Voiken, her brother Dulo Voiken as well Commander Casella Ingvar came together in order to discuss the disposition of the Rigid Wall model, the latter did not look all that happy.

When an expert pilot became unhappy, everyone around the person noticed. Their force of wills pretty much broadcasted their most predominant feelings.

"Why the look, commander?" Ves commented. "The Rigid Wall is a valuable addition to the Sentinel mech roster."

Casella frowned. "You are correct, but only if we can actually field it in large numbers. Just as with the Rigid Spine, it will likely take years before we add enough capacity to field at least several hundred copies of the new mechs. Do you know how frustrating it is to dangle two new useful mech models in front of my troops only to tell them that we don't have the space to accommodate any new units? Just this single Rigid Wall that you've been testing is not enough to make a difference."

Everyone else frowned as well. The Larkinson fleet was still horribly short of combat carriers. While the Diligent Ovenbird had already begun to produce cheap and fragile light carriers, they only added space for 20 or so mechs per hull, which was woefully inadequate!

"We can't do anything about it, commander." Ves tiredly replied. "All of our other mech legions are suffering from the same problem as well. Roping in Murphy & Sons should help, but we will only obtain a single oversized combat carrier for the foreseeable time."

"What if we preemptively scrap our oldest mechs whose performance have fallen below standards? During my tour through the mech legions, I've noticed dozens of machines that are still being used even though they have already had their best years behind them. We can replace them with newer mechs." Dulo suggested.

That was a good suggestion, but Ves shook his head.

"Unless the damage has reached a concerning threshold, it doesn't matter if the mechs perform a bit worse. Our standards are relatively high. When we crossed over into the Red Ocean, we made sure to scrap all of the excess mechs that were already performing worse than normal. Those that we kept don't have as many problems. All of

our mech technicians are well-trained and properly supervised. I'm confident that they can keep our more worn mechs in a relatively good state for quite a few years. It's not worth it to scrap them right away."

In the end, Commander Casella Ingvar had no choice but to go back to her Living Sentinels and tell them that their mech legion would not employ the Rigid Walls in large numbers.

The same applied to the other mech designs that reached completion in around the same time.

Of course, this unfortunate outcome did not apply to the remaining two custom mechs that Gloriana designed for Commander Melkor and Imon Ingvar.

She completed and fabricated the two custom mechs at around the same time.

When Ves visited her personal workshop to view her latest work, the clients for the custom mechs were already present.

Both Melkor and Imon looked impressed at the mechs that were designed just for them. The rifleman mech and swordsman mech both possessed a lot of common elements that Ves had already observed from Vincent Ricklin's B-Man custom mech.

The spearman mech model was governed by the Solemn Guardian, whose glow provided just as much benefit to any nearby space knights. The mech pilots assigned to the Rigid Walls would Casella frowned. "You are correct, but only if we can actually field it in large numbers. Just as with She completed and fabricated the two custom mechs at around the same time.

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#### *Chapter 3366: Cat Collar*

After laying out the most viable and attractive ideas for Gloriana's new companion spirit, Ves leaned back in his chair and waited for her to make up her mind. His wife wanted to perform a proper cost-benefit analysis on each of the options that he had given and had already started to perform calculations.

"Miaow." Clixie softly looked up at him. Her eyes looked especially big and pleading at the moment.

Ves slowly tickled her chin before rubbing the top of her furry head. "Hey, just give her some time. She can be rather... hyper-focused. You don't have to be afraid that she'll abandon you. There are things that you can do that a spiritual cat simply can't. She will

continue to appreciate you once she has gotten over her fascination on her toy and finished giving birth to our daughter."

"Miaow..."

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat didn't look convinced.

Ves petted her back in an effort to comfort her further. "I already told you that you will always be part of our family. I will never push you away, and our family is constantly expanding. Once our daughter and subsequent children grow old enough, you can always watch over them and play with them. Gloriana and I will have so many children that you will never run out of playmates."

"Miaow~"

The cat looked more reassured as she accepted his arguments. Though a cat like her was designed to remain loyal to a single companion for her entire life, taking care of children was also a part of her responsibilities.

Still, what if these kids became obsessed with their own companion spirits? Clixie could not compete against the likes of Lucky and Blinky in utility. The latter two weren't merely cats. They were helpers who could provide a lot of professional assistance. That was something an organic cat such as herself could never match.

"Miaow miaow miaow."

"I told you already. I can't help you grow stronger."

"Miaaaaaow..."

"I really want to, but I can't. I've been trying hard to do the same to people, but so far I have no solution to your specific problem."

Clixie grew more desperate and clung to Ves' uniform as if she was a crying baby!

"Miaow miaow!"

"Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I do have a potential solution. It's based on unsubstantiated guesses, though. I don't expect it will work, but I've been thinking about experimenting with it just to satisfy my curiosity."

"...Miaow?"

"It might be dangerous." Ves reluctantly answered. "Most likely, it won't do anything, but if it is able to influence you in some way, the effect will either be good or bad."

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

"You're that desperate, huh?"

"Miaow!"

"Well, I can respect your determination. No one wants to be in a position like yours. I'll think about it further and whip something up after I am done with Gloriana. I promise you that I will do my best to find a way to make you special."

Trying to impart spiritual potential to someone that did not possess it had always been one of his goals. As long as an individual possessed this crucial starting quality, Ves could employ various means to activate it or make use of it in some way.

However, spiritual potential was rare for a reason. In this spiritually-deficient galaxy, there were far too many life forms that lacked the strength or opportunity to become extraordinary.

Ves had never been satisfied with this. His nature as a mech designer caused him to develop the urge to solve a need that had always remained unfilled as far as he was aware of. Perhaps others might have already come up with a solution to this problem, but if that was so, no one told him. That left him with little choice but to pull up his sleeves.

After messing with so many people's heads and engaging in so much spiritual engineering, he recently came up with two possible ideas that might overcome this intractable barrier.

"If someone is lacking something, why not take it from someone else?"

The concept sounded simple. Since Clixie lacked spiritual potential, was it possible to steal someone else's spirituality and implant it in her mind?

Ves immediately shook his head when he recalled this suggestion. It sounded logical on the surface but was deeply problematic when he actually thought about the nature of spirituality.

The idea basically amounted to harvesting someone's soul before transplanting it to someone else! Ves had already messed with it in his earlier experiments and the outcomes were never pretty.

"However, that was before I gained Blinky."

He was a lot more lacking in terms of theory, solutions and tools a few years ago. Whenever he thought about how he performed spiritual surgery on captives and on William Urbesh, he felt the urge to duck his head in shame.

It was no wonder most of his test subjects tended to suffer from exploding head syndrome!

Yet now that he gained Blinky, he was capable of performing much more precise manipulation on spiritual ingredients. He wouldn't have performed the risky operation of turning Vulcan into his incarnation if he still had to rely on himself to perform the surgery!

Theoretically, if Ves harvested the spirituality of one life form, trimmed it down so that it became as neutral as possible before subsequently implanting it in the mind of another life form, would he be able to empower someone who originally wasn't strong?

As Ves looked down at Clixie, he grew more confident in his solution.

"It's worth a try, but I still have to find a suitable substitute."

The risks were still great. Ves did not dare to subject someone as precious as Clixie to this experiment.

The safest course of action was to find two cats, one with spiritual potential and one that lacked it, and try out his experiment with them first.

The two test subjects in question had to be as similar as possible to minimize the chance of conflict and maximize the chances of success.

"If there is one thing our fleet isn't lacking, it's cats!"

So many Larkinsons had taken over the habit of keeping pets that ships like the Spirit of Bentheim probably hosted over ten-thousand cats!

If Ves needed some feline test subjects, he just needed to head over the 1st deck or the 8th deck and grab a couple of cats.

"Urgh, what am I thinking? They're family as well! I can't do that to our own cats."

Fortunately, Ves did not have much of an objection when it came to experimenting on other animals. Most cat breeds were commodities in the modern market. Ves could easily order a batch of thousand cats and receive his shipment within a few days.

Though most people objected to experimenting on animals these days, that didn't stop scientists and research institutions from continuing the practice.

Still, the more he thought about experimenting on cats, the more he felt uncomfortable.

Nyaaaaaa!

Goldie suddenly materialized beside his head. She bit his arm and hissed a warning!

"Ouch! Okay, okay, I'll stop thinking about it. Are you happy now?!"

Nya!

The ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan swished her tail and disappeared after she got her message across.

Ves grumbled underneath her breath.

"I'll just bring over a batch of mice from the Dragon's Den instead. I know that the Larkinson Biotech Institute is breeding them by the thousands." He decided.

It would take a fair amount of time to conduct this study, though. The chances that it might yield a safe and viable solution was low as there were simply too many dangers with messing with spirituality.

A safer but less optimistic idea was to induce spiritual potential through external exposure.

He was inspired by his experiments on the Angel of Transcendence. Though he had achieved initial success in forcing those with spiritual potential to break through, his attempts didn't provide a solution to those that lacked this advantage.

"In hindsight, exposing test subjects to the full and undiluted glow of the Angel of Transcendence is a bit extreme."

The effect was certainly strong, but it was too overwhelming for most test subjects. It was a good way to force a quick transformation, but the risks were too great.

Ves had already been thinking about potential solutions that could reduce the lethality of this measure. He could make an enormous amount of progress as long as exposure to the Angel of Transcendence glow didn't result in head popping!

He already came up with a fairly simple-sounding solution.

"Instead of dumping its influence on people all at once, what if I tone it down and stretch out the exposure time?"

Ves didn't have to rely on something as strong as the Angel of Transcendence in the first place. He could craft a smaller and weaker totem and see how his test subjects reacted to a lite version of the previously intense glow.

He wasn't very optimistic about its effectiveness, though. Normal breakthroughs came about after short-lasting but intense outbursts. Mech pilots usually turned into expert

candidates after experiencing life-and-death moments in battle. If the pressure wasn't high enough, the chances of breakthroughs occurring was much lower.

"Also, the initial formation of spiritual potential is likely different from normal breakthroughs. Other conditions are required to give people the hope of becoming extraordinary."

That said, Ves thought that this idea was still worth pursuing. Since he intended to bring over a batch of mice anyway, he might as well run a second experiment at the same time.

"Miaow..."

Ves smiled and squished her ears. "Hey, you don't need to feel so insecure. I'll definitely solve your problem somehow. Just wait a few months for me to obtain my initial results. We'll talk about what I can do for you. In the meantime, you might want to see whether your 'daughter' can give you a hand."

"Miaow?"

"Let me fix something up for you. This won't take too long."

Ves moved over to the workshop section of the design lab. While it wasn't as fully equipped as his own full-sized workshop, he didn't intend to make anything extravagant today.

He took some measurements on Clixie and quickly began to design a totem that the cat could easily carry. He initially thought about making a new cat collar before thinking that it should be something a bit more elaborate.

He decided to increase the size of the collar and turn it into a lovely golden ornament that had room for larger symbols.

Ves soon grabbed a bit of Breyer alloy and other materials and quickly crafted the deep metal cat collar. He paid special attention to carving the front of the collar so that it depicted the Golden Cat.

After finishing it, he wrapped it around Clixie's neck and tweaked the fit several times before he was pleased. As Ves took a step back, he admired the way the golden collar caused her to look more sophisticated.

"You look like a magnificent upper-class cat!"

"Miaow!"

There was something missing, though. There was nothing wrong with its weak but gentle glow, but its appearance lacked a bit of dimension.

"Ah. I know. It needs a jewel."

Ves was about to synthesize an ornamental luminar crystal before he suddenly halted. He just recalled that he had another jewel in his possession that might fit the theme of the totem a little better.

He pulled out an old gem from his secret pouch and recalled 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.

"Hm. I'm not designing a tiger mech anytime soon. I might as well use it here and give Clixie a bit of good luck."

If he ever needed it again, he could always take it back.

With that thought, he retrieved the luxurious cat collar from Clixie and quickly modified it so that he was able to set this jewel on top of the carving of the Golden Cat.

The balance of the collar had changed a bit so Ves had to make a few other tweaks before he confirmed that Clixie was able to wear it without feeling any discomfort.

"Are you happy now?" Ves smiled down at the pampered cat. "This might not be the solution you need, but you can keep it even if it doesn't work. It will remind you that you're never alone."

"Miaow~" Happiness welled up from Clixie as she lovingly pressed her head against his hand.

*Chapter 3367: Gloriana's Way*

"Miaow!" Clixie proudly thrust up her collar as she stopped in front of Lucky.

Her upturned tail playfully swished from side to side as she showed off her flashy gift. The sizable golden collar resembled an elaborate necklace that was fit to be worn by an aristocrat.

"Meow...?"

Lucky blinked as he spotted the deep blue gem socketed on the front of the collar. He moved closer and sniffed at it before jumping back in surprise.

"Meow!"

Clixie arrogantly lifted her paw and licked at it. "Miaow."

"Meow meow!"

"Miaoooow."

While the two cats fussed over the new collar, Ves and his pregnant wife stood a bit further away.

"Have you made a choice, Gloriana?"

The woman slowly nodded. "I've weighed all of the options that you've presented me and thoroughly plotted their pros and cons. After careful consideration, I have decided to go with the networking cat."

Ves raised his eyebrows. He hadn't expected her to pick this particular option.

"That's... quite a surprising answer."

"Why? You gave me this choice because you thought it would be useful to me. What makes you think I would have cast it aside?"

"According to my impression of you, I would have thought you would have gone all crazy over adopting a cat that brings you closer to the Superior Mother."

Gloriana shook her head. "To be honest, I did feel ecstatic about getting closer to your mother, but once I calmed down, I realized that I am not worthy to follow in her footsteps."

"Huh?"

"I think you are misunderstanding something about me, Ves. I worship the Superior Mother. I admire the Superior Mother. I look up to the Superior Mother. That does not mean I want to become the Superior Mother. Your suggestion does exactly that, and while I can't say I am unattracted to obtaining a pet that is a lesser version of your mother, I realize that I am different."

This was an important realization that anyone had to make. It was all well and fine for people to yearn to become their role models, but everyone was different. Imitation had its limits and truly successful people learned how to put their hero worship aside when it began to hinder their growth.

Gloriana bloomed with confidence as she explained her ambition to her husband.

"I want to become a Supreme one day as well, Ves. I want to become a Star Designer and wield similar powers to the Superior Mother, but aligned with my own strengths. The main identity of the Superior Mother is a nurturer of children. My overarching identity is a mech designer. I'm already treading a different path. So no, Ves, I don't want my companion god to embody a Supreme because I will one day be able to stand at the same height as your mother!"

This close, Ves could feel the burning desire and ambition within her. He was happy for her. She had not lost her way as her mech designer in pursuit of power.

"What of the second option I presented to you?" He curiously asked.

"The craftsmanship cat? I rejected it for a similar reason." She answered. "The impact it will have on my own development is not something that I can ignore. You were correct in saying that taking shortcuts will only undercut my own development. Even if my decision will make it harder for me to climb up Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship, at least I will be able to master all of the rungs I've ascended!"

Her rationale made a lot of sense to Ves. Technically speaking, he was the one who had chosen to take a shortcut. While the existence of Vulcan had helped him progress his own insights in craftsmanship by at least two decades, skipping much of the hardships and lessons in between might cause him to develop deficiencies in his later career.

However, this was not an insurmountable problem. While it was true that Ves relied on plenty of external assistance in order to boost and accelerate his career, he still accomplished a lot of work by himself.

He experimented with new and unknown phenomena all the time. While he might not be able to understand their rules and mechanisms at the start, he was always able to figure them out over time.

As a mech designer who was accustomed to innovating his way out of his problems, he long understood that as long as he was clever enough, he didn't always have to pay the full price for his actions. Cheating processes and bypassing the negative consequences of his actions was his bread and butter!

Therefore, the downside that Gloriana was worried about did not concern Ves that much. If Vulcan truly hindered his progression in the future, then he had already thought up at least three possible solutions to mitigate this issue.

"Hm, the craftsmanship cat isn't necessary anyway." Ves spoke and raised his hammer. "We can always consult Vulcan if we need a little help. That's why I made him. Compared to the craftsmanship cat, the networking cat provides us with an undeniable advantage."

"That's why I went with this option. A companion god that is based around connecting people together is the best compliment to my own capabilities and ambitions. At first glance, she doesn't offer any of the exciting new abilities and boosts of the other alternatives. This choice only makes it so that I can spread my vision and perspective to other mech designers and vice versa. Yet that is exactly what I've been missing this whole time. All of those times we've worked with Blinky really opened up my eyes to how little everyone understands each other."

Ves understood exactly what she was complaining about. "Collaborations are never easy. Both of us have worked together long enough to understand the gist of our design philosophies, but that only reduces the friction. We can never remove it entirely unless we become identical to each other."

This was not a unique problem to them. Every mech designer and every working professional who had to work in teams or groups encountered a lot of friction, misunderstandings and misalignment. Managers existed for a reason but even they couldn't put out all of the fires.

"During our previous collaborations, there were too many times when you or our assistants got in my way because you didn't understand my approach." Gloriana frankly said. "With a design network that can potentially last for days instead of hours, we can cooperate and collaborate much more effectively with each other. While there is a risk that we might become too dependent on what we share with each other, we can limit the side effects as long as we limit it to critical design or fabrication sessions."

They had already been making less use of Blinky's design network. If they wanted to, they could borrow the companion spirit's amazing ability for at least a handful of hours every day. Yet a mech designer didn't actually need to know that much about what their other colleagues were doing.

Both Ves and Gloriana had to make a tradeoff whether they wanted to maximize the quality of their output or whether they wanted to prioritize the development of the mech designers taking part in a project.

Some projects were so important that they had to be maximized at all costs.

Other projects were less critical and could serve as a useful learning opportunity to the mech designers involved.

The Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project happened to fall in the first category.

"I don't want to hold anything back when we perform our upcoming upgrade job." She told him. "The Shield of Samar is a huge mech and upgrading it to an expert mech is far more challenging on a technical level than fabricating a new one from the ground up. I can't do all of the work by myself, but I just know that people like you will drop the ball too many times to count. With my new companion god, I can constantly keep an eye on

your work while you can draw from my expertise to make sure your work doesn't interfere with mine."

Of course, Gloriana would also be able to borrow a greater portion of Ves' unique advantages. Although she was already able to do that to an extent with the help of her ring and the spiritual fragment in her mind, once they linked up to a design network, the bandwidth and the depth of knowledge passing through the temporary connections increased substantially.

Ves even theorized that it was possible to create a design network that was so strong and deep that two different mech designers could actually fuse into a single super designer!

This hypothesized super designer was so powerful that it could exercise two different design philosophies at full strength with zero friction!

It sounded similar to what rational mech designers were trying to accomplish by themselves. They comprehended the design philosophies of others in order to be able to leverage all of them at the same time.

Though it sounded like a great idea, Ves wasn't overly impressed at the results so far. Emulation always had its limitations. Not even Master Willix was able to express someone else's design philosophy at 100 percent effectiveness.

As far as Ves was concerned, two heads were always better than one! The biggest hindrance was that there was too much separation in between the heads. If a powerful design network was capable of lowering or removing these boundaries, then the outcome should be drastically better!

"Let's do it now." She said.

"Are you sure?"

"I've already made up my mind, Ves! I don't need any further time to consider my decision. I know what I want. With the help of a networking cat, I can finally become more relevant again!"

Her eyes shone at the thought of how her position within the Design Department would change. The power that Ves had promised to her would not only grant her an advantage that almost no other mech designer possessed, but would also turned her into an indispensable asset in the Larkinson Clan!

Sure, Blinky was able to generate his own design network, but it only lasted for two hours before he needed to rest. This interval was far too short and it always posed a significant hindrance to the flow of any critical fabrication run.

Ves brought his wife out of the design lab and led her down to his personal workshop. He took time to gather his ingredients and inspect his wife's condition to make sure that nothing was wrong.

"I need you to stay as calm and composed as possible. Don't spike your emotions or think too much. The calmer you are, the less complications I have to deal with. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "I understand. It's just like fabricating a mech. You need a stable and controlled workplace in order to perform at your best."

"Good."

Ves had already created numerous companion spirits before. He was confident enough that he could pull it off without negatively affecting his wife or their unborn daughter.

"Blinky, come out. I need your help again."

Mrow.

As Blinky got ready to perform spiritual surgery on Gloriana, Ves turned around and lifted a P-stone. He gazed at it with a complex look.

So far, he hadn't done much with the design seed that he had managed to salvage from Lady Aisling Curver's mind. Its condition was not as good as before because Ves had already chipped a few fragments from the core.

Though Ves could have continued to fragment the design seed many more times, he didn't want to hold back this time.

"Do it, Blinky."

Mrow!

With numerous empowered spiritual strikes, Blinky struck the damaged design seed! The hard seed already exhibited vulnerabilities so the spiritual cat simply targeted them in order to create a bigger opening.

The attacks continued until the design seed finally split in half!

Blinky quickly took one of the halves while Ves deposited the other half back into its P-stone.

It was a bit exaggerated to use up a whole design seed as the main ingredient of a new companion spirit, but Ves predicted that half of it should be tolerable for his wife!

### *Chapter 3368: The Queen Cat*

Though Ves instructed Gloriana to remain as calm and composed as possible, she couldn't help but smirk when she sensed the ingredient that her husband was processing.

Ves had never hidden the source of this so-called 'design seed'. He thought that she would grow angry and blow up at the suggestion of borrowing the strength of one of her former enemies.

He was wrong. Gloriana did not dislike it. It was the opposite. She loved the entire notion!

She hated Aisling Curver back when the Fridayman mech designer was alive. The woman had the temerity to invade someone else's territory and steal a possession that did not belong to her! It was only right for Master Huron's student to fail and die, especially when she teamed up with Venerable Ghanso Larkinson.

"Aisling never stood a chance against a superior woman." Gloriana grinned. "I've conquered her dreams, her future and her love. Now, I'm about to take her strength for myself!"

She did not consider it a sign of weakness to absorb the advantages of her enemies. She was merely claiming her rightful spoils.

Despite the unknown implications of grafting a new life form based on a portion of another mech designer's design philosophy onto her mind, she was confident she could suppress any remnant of Aisling that might cause problems.

Besides, Ves had already assured her that these risks were unlikely to happen.

Gloriana completely relaxed as she lowered her mental defenses to allow Ves to work. Though she could feel Blinky fiddling in her mind in an increasingly more profound and disturbing way, she forcefully clamped down her instinctive reactions. She completely trusted her husband to do what was best for her and their future children.

Her hand softly caressed her large belly. She could feel her daughter kick. Did her baby girl feel what mommy was going through at the moment?

At first, Gloriana dismissed this silly notion. Yet as Ves and Blinky continued to shape her new cat, she became a bit more capable of understanding her baby.

Was her daughter... truly aware?

Before she could think about anything else, her mind convulsed as a brand new presence came to life!

"It's done!" Ves proudly said as he and Blinky drew back in order to behold the latest life they created.

The red spiritual cat that they had molden from Gloriana's spirituality was fairly strong but not very versatile.

Compared to Vulcan, the new companion spirit consisted of much less ingredients, and the potency of each of them was much less extravagant. The challenge of making the new cat was not a big deal for that reason.

To Ves, the purity and specialization of Gloriana's new living spiritual augment mattered more than its raw power. Companion spirits grew alongside their human partners anyway so even weak ones would eventually become formidable over time.

He decided to keep this job simple by basing the new main ingredient around a single main ingredient.

The design network that Gloriana wanted to form with the help of her new companion spirit had to be as strong in order to make it worth it. Ves deemed it was not worth the cost to load up her new cat with other major influences.

Gloriana's spirituality only possessed a limited amount of capacity, so rather than diluting one primary function with another primary function, Ves preferred to concentrate his resources on one of them. That was the best way to produce a strong spiritual ability.

Another reason why Ves kept it simple was because he did not want to take too many risks. Gloriana's mental resilience was not as strong as that of Ketis or himself.

Due to special reasons, both Ves and his student had exercised their minds and spirits a lot more often and they had withstood a lot of powerful external pressure. They became much more capable of enduring drastic changes in their minds and spirits.

As for Gloriana...

"She's closer to a typical Journeyman." He concluded.

Given her relative fragility and the fact that she was also bearing a baby inside her body, Ves decided to take it easy and avoid overcomplicating this procedure.

Combining multiple different powerful ingredients together allowed Ves to create spiritual products with drastically different strengths and abilities that he did not have access to before.

However, the results were less controllable and the original abilities of the ingredients might become lost in the process.

While Ves made use of other ingredients, he kept their proportions small in order to prevent them from overshadowing the main ingredient.

In total, he used up his own spiritual energy, a tiny shard of the Unending One and another tiny fragment of the Golden Cat.

He topped it all off with 10 percent of the universal life energy stored in one of his high-grade life-prolonging treatment serums. While this was a much more powerful ingredient than the other ones, it was entirely used to upgrade and accelerate the growth of the spiritual product so that it started off on a stronger footing.

After all of this effort, a charming and beautiful red cat that was only a bit weaker than Blinky at the start came to life!

Gloriana became entranced as lots of new sensations overtook her mind. The birth of her new companion spirit not only caused her to gain a permanent friend that was essentially a facet of herself, but also allowed her to sense spiritual energy and spiritual life forms to a significantly greater degree!

Of course, she could only do this by borrowing the perception of her new cat, and it was not as attuned as that of Ves. She also gained the ability to manipulate spiritual energy through her cat as well, but since this wasn't her original strength, she couldn't do much with it. At most, she could cooperate with Ves a little more effectively now that she could better track his own work.

"Wow." She said as a red spiritual cat emerged out of her mind. "So this is what I've been missing all this time."

The mature cat that emerged from her mind immediately displayed an imperious and arrogant attitude. The cat directed a loving gaze at Gloriana and her belly but turned up her nose at everyone else, including her own creator!

Maow!

The red cat flew around for a bit before she lowered herself so that Gloriana could hold her new companion spirit in her arms.

It was strange to hold a cat that was not actually solid. Gloriana had already learned the trick to doing so by playing with Blinky, so her new companion spirit did not pass through her arms.

Both human and cat looked at each other with loving and admiring gazes. It was as if they were looking at the most charming and beautiful partners in their lives!

Ves was aware of how wondrous it was to gain and meet a companion spirit for the first time, so he initially did not find their behavior remarkable.

He gradually became more disturbed as three straight minutes went by without any change.

"Uhm, Gloriana?"

His wife finally snapped out of her daze. She grinned as her companion spirit climbed up to stand on her shoulder like a vigilant owl.

"I've decided."

"What did you decide?"

"Alexandria."

"Alexandria?"

"My new cat." Gloriana raised her chin. Her companion spirit raised her feline chin as well. "A perfect name for a perfect companion god!"

"Oh. That's... quite a mouthful."

Both his wife and the red cat threw a contemptuous look at Ves.

"My cat is not as immature as yours. She's a queen of cats and deserves to be treated as one." Gloriana claimed.

Mrow.

Blinky curiously approached Alexandria. The latter did not acknowledge the former.

Mrow mrow.

Maow.

When Blinky came closer, Alexandria grew annoyed and swiped her claw at the Star Cat!

Mrow!

Maow maow maow!

Ves frowned. It seems that Alexandria wasn't as easy to get along with as his other spirits.

It took a bit of time for Gloriana to settle down and draw herself away from admiring Alexandria and exploring her new capabilities.

"Thank you for this precious gift. Only you could have given me such a beautiful, unique and powerful cat. I'm truly glad you've finally shared this benefit with me. You certainly took your time."

She was also peeved that others like Ketis obtained a companion spirit before herself. It took a lot of nagging to finally push Ves into action!

"I did it because I love, Gloriana." He sincerely said. "I don't plan to grant companion spirits to many people, but you definitely deserve to possess one. Take good care of Alexandria. She will continue to grow alongside you. The way you interact with her and leverage her abilities will shape her evolution."

"I love you too, Ves. You're the best husband I could ever have."

The two cuddled for a while as Gloriana recovered from her partial exhaustion while Ves explained the basics about companion spirits.

Mrow. Mrow.

Maow!

Meanwhile, Blinky constantly tried to approach the new cat, only to get rebuffed. Eventually, his pride couldn't take it any longer. He jumped at the new cat and tried to wrestle her into submission!

Mrow! Mrow!

Maow! Maaaooow!

As the two cats rolled into a violent ball, the older cat quickly gained the upper hand.

Blinky wasn't only older, but Ves also invested significantly stronger ingredients in his creation. Whether it was the Unending One or the Illustrious One, each of them could hold their own in a fight.

In contrast, Alexandria mainly consisted of half another Journeyman's design seed. She was not designed for combat and did not possess any advantages in this aspect.

Her only main advantage centered around networking!

Aside from that, the minor shard from the Unending One allowed Alexandria to increase her endurance and speed up her recovery, but not much more. Ves withheld the ability to absorb and digest heterogenous spiritual energy like Blinky due to lack of capacity and an unwillingness to give his wife a dangerous ability.

Ves did not trust anyone else with certain powers! This was why Blinky and Vulcan were the only spirits that could fully devour other kinds of spiritual energy. They were different facets of himself so he did not have to worry about betrayal!

Once Blinky made his point, Alexandria flew back to Gloriana and complained about her treatment.

Maaaaoow! Maaaaoow!

"Ves! Tell Blinky to stop bullying my beautiful cat!"

"What?"

"I forbid you from allowing Blinky and our other cats to push Alexandria around!"

Ves looked exasperated at his wife. Alexandria was another aspect of Gloriana while Blinky was another aspect of himself. He was quite glad that he managed to get the upper hand this time. It was not fair his wife wanted to shield her companion spirit!

"This is what cats are like, honey." He said. "What cat doesn't wrestle against other cats?"

"Alexandria is a queen, not a boorish warrior!" Gloriana insisted!

"Let's move on to exploring her new capabilities. If my expectations are true, your cat should be able to form a design network that is much more effective than what we have experienced before."

Gloriana was curious about Alexandria's capabilities as well, so she instructed her companion spirit to activate her main ability.

Maaaaoow!

Alexandria might be a newborn spiritual entity, but she already knew what to do. She didn't even need to approach Ves in order to form a connection.

The new companion spirit's eyes glowed as a spiritual connection extended from her body and snapped onto Ves' mind!

Soon enough, both Ves and Gloriana became a lot more aware of each other. They were not only able to share their perspectives on a deeper level than before, but also comprehended many new insights that ordinarily would have eluded them even with the help of Blinky's design network!

Ves lit up his eyes as he looked around his workshop. He was able to experience his wife's perspective in a way that made it seem as if he was her disciple.

The same went for Gloriana. She was able to gain a much deeper appreciation of the wonders of life when she looked at Ves, Blinky or Alexandria.

Their eyes met each other. Due to the strong bond between them, they already knew what the other was thinking about.

"This will definitely change the way we approach our next fabrication runs!"

*Chapter 3369: Core Concepts*

Maow.

"Miaow...?"

From the first moment Clixie laid her eyes on the red cat, she knew what had happened. The organic cat's ears drooped as the spiritual cat flew over.

Maow.

"Miaow..."

Maow maow.

Miaow...

Alexandria nodded in satisfaction after seeing that Clixie didn't intend to challenge her superiority. The spiritual cat turned around and returned to Gloriana's shoulder.

Ves happened to observe this interaction. He had hoped that Alexandria would get along with Clixie since they were both cats. He even wished that his wife no longer ignored Clixie's fear of being replaced by a 'better' cat.

Sadly, despite her beautiful new cat collar, the only feline that Gloriana was paying attention to was another part of herself!

"Come here, Clixie." He coaxed.

"Miaow."

As Ves held Clixie in his arms, he nuzzled his face against her head. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat relaxed and basked in his affection.

"Gloriana."

"Yes?"

"I understand you're happy about Alexandria, but don't forget about Clixie. Can you see how much she yearns for your attention? She's family, Gloriana. There is no reason why you can't love multiple pets at once. Each of them are worthy of our attention just like each of our future children deserves an equal amount of love."

His wife drew her gaze away from her beautiful new companion spirit and looked down at Clixie.

"Miaow."

"What's up with this new collar? You made it, right? You should have consulted me. I could have made this collar a lot more fashionable!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. "You're only finding out about this now? I already gave her this collar a while ago!"

"Oh."

"Look, if you're serious about raising a good family, then you need to act as a responsible parent. Clixie might not be able to provide as much utility as Alexandria, but that should never be a requirement to determine whether a family member is worthy of your attention. Now can you please act compassionately for once and make up for neglecting her distress? You hurt her quite a bit, you know."

His wife finally showed remorse. Her expression softened as she moved closer in order to take Clixie from his hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry, girl." Gloriana kissed the top of her first cat. "I've been a bit too distracted lately. Can you forgive me, Clixie?"

"Miaow~"

Ves smiled once he saw that Gloriana finally deigned to spend some time with Clixie. He just hoped that it would last.

Alexandria didn't look too pleased that Gloriana directed her attention away from her majesty.

Maow!

The new companion spirit arrogantly huffed before entering her human partner's mind.

The next day, Ves and Gloriana came together in the design lab again in order to get ready to realize the Bulwark Project.

"Meow?"

"Miaow miaow."

Maow.

Mrow.

Meanwhile, Alexandria already started her quest to gain the allegiance of other cats. She imperiously approached Lucky and lifted her chin.

Maow.

"Meow?"

Maow maow.

"Meow!"

"Maow!"

Lucky jumped at Alexandria and quickly taught her a lesson! The new companion spirit stood no chance against a seasoned fighter and killer.

MAOW! MAOW!

Mrow.

"Miaow."

Of course, Blinky and Clixie looked pleased that Alexandria was forced to press down her head in front of Lucky.

"Ves! Your cat is bullying Alexandria again!"

"Your cat was asking for a fight. Did you really think she could act like a queen when she can't even beat up anyone?"

"Stop gaslighting my beautiful cat!"

Ves threw up his hands.

"Lucky?"

"Meow?" The gem cat temporarily paused in his attempt to force Alexandria to admit defeat.

"Could you please be more considerate towards our latest cat and give her the respect that she deserves?"

Lucky stared silently at Ves for a moment before resuming his efforts to bite and press Alexandria into submission.

"Meow meow!"

Maaaoooww! Maaaoooww!

"Damnit, Ves!"

Gloriana interrupted her discussion with Ves in order to rescue Alexandria from her predicament. The aggrieved red cat looked pitiful as she eagerly entered the safe and comfortable confines of her human partner's mind.

"I'll talk to you later, Lucky!"

"Meow?" Lucky innocently blinked.

Ves had a feeling that antics like this would happen more often. This wasn't even the end of it. Once their daughter was born, yet another companion spirit would join their family.

Now that they got this distraction out of the way, Ves and Gloriana turned their attention back to surveying the latest iteration of the Bulwark Project.

Both of them had made a couple of last-minute changes with the help of the insights they gained from Alexandria's greater design network.

They didn't feel the need to apply greater adjustments, though. They had already worked on this project on and off for a fairly long time. This not only allowed the Design Department to refine and optimize the design to a significantly greater degree, but also allowed the Journeymen to apply the lessons they learned in recent months.

The Battle of Fordilla Zentra and the confrontation against the Olympus Mons had profoundly changed the mentality that Ves, Gloriana and the other mech designers held towards mechs.

To Ves, the insights and realizations he gained from the failed attempt to defeat the Olympus Mons directly prompted him to perform significant changes to both the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project. He was quite grateful that this wakeup call came before he had completed the final two expert mech design projects of the Larkinson Clan.

As for the previous four mechs, Ves resolved to upgrade them at a later date. He already intended to do so once he reached the Red Ocean and gained access to better tech, materials and methods.

Compared to the previous iterations of this design, the latest and most refined version of the Bulwark Project possessed a slightly more defined identity!

"One of the most striking aspects about the Olympus Mons is how strongly it embodies its themes." Ves said as he admired the way their latest adjustments made it more cohesive. "Previously, I've always thought of expert mechs as superpowered versions of normal mechs. Now, I've taken the Cross Clan's words to heart that expert mechs are preparatory versions of ace mechs."

The two outlooks differed quite a bit. Previously, both Ves and Gloriana tended to get lost in all of the new possibilities that they could add to their expert mech designs.

While it was a lot more complicated to design an expert mech, it was pretty much a dream to work on one. Many of the constraints that mech designers chafed at such as limited design budgets, lack of piloting skill and lower capacity no longer bothered them as much.

As a result, all of the Journeymen applied every viable solution they could think of to stuff their mechs with greater power. While their intentions were good, their design approach was not yet fully divorced from the one they adopted when they designed regular mechs.

It was only after surviving an encounter against a genuine ace mech in battle that Ves and the others truly woke up. The design concepts applied by the dwarven Master from the galactic heartland differed remarkably from the Masters based in the galactic rim. The Olympus Mons reflected a design approach that was meant to compete against more powerful and extravagant competitors.

The most direct reflection of taking over parts of this different and arguably better design outlook was how little compromises the mech designers had made for the Bulwark Project.

This sounded strange at first. In the previous battle, the Olympus Mons displayed a great amount of versatility. It not only possessed numerous defensive methods, but also carried multiple effective weapon systems. Its speed was also not to be trifled with as it was fast enough to catch up to most light mechs.

However, this was just the surface appearance. The Olympus Mons was actually highly specialized, but its opposition was too weak to make its weaknesses apparent. The ace mech's offensive and defensive power was too crushing against weaker machines.

Against other ace mechs, the Olympus Mons no longer held a crushing advantage. Its defense was much less capable of withstanding the attacks of other ace mechs and its mobility was downright bad compared to its peers!

Yet despite these significant shortcomings, Ves had no doubt that if it ever got close enough to an enemy ace mech, the Olympus Mons could crush any tough machine. Not even ace space knights would be able to last long against the Mountain Hammer!

"One of the traits that truly make the Olympus Mons stand out is how much it embodies specific concepts." Ves continued. "Hammers, physical force and mass. The ace mech doesn't contain any elements that aren't related to one of these concepts. By narrowing its design to Saint Mayorka's greatest strengths, there are hardly any mechs that can channel her will and power better than her current machine!"

There were many other aspects about the Olympus Mons that earned his appreciation. Unfortunately, they weren't relevant to the Larkinsons at the moment. They all had to wait until their expert pilots came close to advancing to ace pilot.

Gloriana became more passionate as she imagined the performance of the upgraded Shield of Samar. "In terms of defense, Venerable Jannzi's expert mech will become the unquestioned leader in our clan. The Cross Clan's Amphis will definitely pale in comparison to our own space knight!"

Even though they hadn't upgraded the Shield of Samar as of yet, both Ves and Gloriana were absolutely certain that their work would surpass the Amphis in almost every dimension.

That didn't mean that the expert mech piloted by Venerable Linda Cross was weak. It was a proper mid-tier expert space knight that possessed relatively balanced specs for its mech type. It was a resilient machine that possessed decent mobility and a powerful trick that augmented its offensive power.

The Amphis was an expert mech that was completely optimized for duels against other expert mechs.

This didn't surprise Ves at all when he thought about the martial culture of the Garlen Empire. Back in the Cross Clan's former home, the skirmishes and battles that took place in the powerful second-rate state mainly centered around the clashes between expert mechs and occasionally ace mechs.

The powerful leaders of the respective clans and tribes decided the outcome of a battle.

In contrast, the regular mechs mostly served as cannon fodder and background soldiers. Their priority was low. They were merely expected to do their jobs well and nothing more.

This explained why the Cross Clan's standard mechs tended to be fairly boring but also solid performers. Its expert mechs weren't expected to babysit them. Instead, the expert pilots fully invested their attention towards bashing in their enemy counterparts!

The Bulwark Project was designed with a different idea in mind.

Its design concept was not diametrically opposite to that of the Amphis.

Sure, the Bulwark Project was a lot slower and a lot less capable of proactively fighting against other expert mechs.

It was not weak or incapable of fighting against equal enemies, though!

The concepts that Ves and Gloriana had chosen as the overarching design directions of the Bulwark Project were toughness, shielding and gravity.

Toughness was both a literal description of the Shield of Samar's ability to withstand damage and also a more figurative description of its ability to withstand heavy pressure.

Shielding described the predominant value that the Bulwark Project was meant to provide in battle. It possessed a variety of powerful shielding solutions that could reinforce its personal defenses or offer strong and crucial protection for other friendly units.

Gravity defined the special charm of the Shield of Samar. The design elements that Master Willix applied to the Bulwark Project allowed Venerable Jannzi to leverage wide-area gravity phenomena to change the space around her expert mech.

These were the main strengths of the Bulwark Project. Ves and Gloriana made certain that the Bulwark Project strongly embraced these three concepts, even if it came at the cost of other performance standards!

The reason why Ves thought that it would work out in the end was because he believed that strongly emphasizing these core concepts would more than compensate for all of the Bulwark Project's other weaknesses!

#### *Chapter 3370: Defensive Powerhouse*

The projected performance of the Bulwark Project exceeded the estimates of the other Larkinson expert mechs.

It performed well in each of the concepts that its design centered around.

As a dedicated defensive mech, its ability to withstand damage was incredible. The core of its physical defenses lay in its armor system, which was predominantly made up of

Unending alloy. The mech was also clad with supplementary armor layers that were mostly geared towards absorbing concussive blows.

Even though the other Larkinson expert mechs were clad in Unending alloy as well, the Bulwark Project was an entirely different beast. It dedicated more capacity than anything else to increase its ability to resist both physical and energy attacks.

Not even the Amaranto's maximum-powered shot should be able to penetrate the defenses of the Shield of Samar in a single round!

This was an essential requirement as extreme ranged threats such as the Gauss Baron weren't all that uncommon in space battles. Without the capital to resist powerful strikes, the Larkinson Clan might fall victim to the kind of rampage that Venerable Stark once unleashed on the Ferril Provincial Army.

"The defenses of the Bulwark Project not only encompass its exterior."

The expert mech iteration of the Shield of Samar featured a completely redesigned internal architecture. Different from its prime mech incarnation, the space knight featured a true high-end internal arrangement that was heavily reinforced and was packed with damage mitigation systems.

Its compartmentalization also stood out. Since the mech designers didn't have to allocate a lot of capacity to strengthening the Bulwark Project's offensive capabilities, Gloriana meticulously designed a scheme where any internal damage would be contained in a limited volume of space.

In other words, the Shield of Samar essentially performed like a zombie. It was tougher than it looked and it could keep fighting long after enemies pierced through its external layers!

There were only two major weaknesses to the Bulwark Project's defenses.

First, it was considerably less effective at mitigating energy damage. Although the expert space knight was not bad at resisting laser beams or positron beams, it did not have a good solution to off-load excess heat damage that was conducted through its Unending alloy armor layers. The only way to slow it down was to set it on a starship or solid ground so that it could transfer away a substantial amount of heat energy through its legs.

Second, the expert mech version of the Shield of Samar inherited the same gap in protection as its current version. The limited supply of Unending alloy gave the mech designers no choice but to cover up the rear of the expert space knight with second-class armor layers.

Sure, the alloys used to protect its rear were superior to Breyer alloy, but it still fell short to Unending alloy.

"Once we get to the Red Ocean, we can slowly work towards plugging this defensive gap with true first-class defensive alloys." Ves helplessly decided.

In truth, he could have chosen to deconstruct the Shield of Samar's massive tower shield and use up all of that freed up Unending alloy to cover its rear sections.

However, that would weaken its frontal defenses which Venerable Jannzi had to rely on the most.

Either way, this was a difficult decision, but Ves and the other mech designers still thought it was better to retain the current scheme. It was not that easy to attack the Shield of Samar's relatively weaker rear and Venerable Jannzi never fought alone.

The second major emphasis of the Shield of Samar was shielding.

More specifically, projected shielding.

This was actually one of the Bulwark Project's less powerful concepts, at least for now. The Larkinson Clan was unable to procure a powerful resonating material that met its requirements. It had to be both highly compatible with Venerable Jannzi yet at the same time produce a limited amount of interference with the other exotics integrated in the expert mech.

"Oh well. We'll just have to wait until we find a suitable material elsewhere." Ves sighed. "There are lots of new and interesting exotics and alloys available in the Red Ocean."

That said, the Design Department was still able to integrate weaker shielding-oriented resonating exotics into the design. The effect they produced was relatively weak but Ves had higher hopes than most mech designers.

This was because the Bulwark Project was also a prime mech!

By borrowing the power of Qilanxo, Ves believed that Venerable Jannzi would be able to generate a far stronger resonance barrier than normal!

"If that doesn't work out, it also possesses a powerful shield generator."

Just like the original Aurora Titan design, the latest iteration of the Shield of Samar allocated a lot of internal capacity to its shield generator. The high-end defensive system was designed specifically for expert knight mechs and it was capable of projecting an extremely resilient close-ranged energy shield and a more wider-area energy barrier.

Naturally, the larger the surface area of the energy shield, the weaker it became.

Ves had high hopes for this defense measure. From the very start, the Shield of Samar always centered around similar systems. Though its reliance on energy shielding had lessened over time, the living mech had grown so accustomed to it that it could probably leverage it better than any other defensive machine.

"What's important is that we can always upgrade its shield generator at a later date."

The latest iteration of the Shield of Samar was by no means its final one. Ves never minded the limitations of the Bulwark Project because it was never static. Many of its present weaknesses could clearly be addressed by upgrading or overhauling discrete parts and systems, similar to a modular mech.

Ves even believed that shielding would become the defining strength of Venerable Jannzi's expert mech in the future!

"The initial expert mech version of the Shield of Samar is just the starting point. There is still a long road of development ahead."

The final strength of the Shield of Samar was its ability to manipulate gravity.

This was a new capability that the mech did not possess before. Venerable Jannzi had no experience with wielding this concept and would have to start from the beginning in order to master this advantage.

However, as long as she was able to wield the gravity abilities of the Bulwark Project in a proficient manner, Jannzi's ability to affect the battlefield would rise meteorically!

"The Shield of Samar is different from the Amphis and the Gatecrasher." Ves sighed. "The latter two expert space knights are decently fast and can keep up with other expert mechs. Our own defensive mech is far too slow even with all of the upgrades."

While it was possible to speed the Shield of Samar up, that would entail using up valuable capacity that had already been allocated to priorities. There was no way that Ves wanted to reduce the Shield of Samar's other advantages especially with its entire design centered around extreme defense.

It was for this reason that the Shield of Samar opened up a new dimension by incorporating gravity manipulation capabilities.

Based on Master Willix's own expertise in gravitic systems, the Bulwark Project integrated a substantial amount of GT-535, a resonating material which she had developed by herself. The expert mech also integrated a few assisting systems that were meant to facilitate the operation of gravity manipulation.

Currently, the Bulwark Project was able to express this new feature in two different ways.

By resonating with GT-535 in an all-round manner, Venerable Jannzi would be able to generate a large gravity well that attracted any nearby objects. Depending on the resonance strength of the expert pilot, it was possible to attract or distort the trajectory of projectiles and mechs!

"In the future, the Shield of Samar should also be capable of bending energy beams!"

This was extremely difficult to accomplish at Venerable Jannzi's current level of strength. Ves estimated that she needed to become a high-tier expert pilot before she possessed the raw strength that was necessary to distort reality and curve space to such a degree!

Fortunately, Master Willix also added a second resonating ability that expressed the expert mech's gravity manipulation capabilities in a more concentrated manner.

By focusing the extraordinary gravity attraction in a narrow angle, the Shield of Samar was capable of latching on to individual mechs and pulling them closer as if they had been harpooned.

Although the effective range and strength of this ability was much greater than the earlier one, there were still limits due to how quickly gravity force weakened over greater distances.

Even so, it was still strong enough for the Shield of Samar to lock individual expert mechs in place, especially if they flew close enough!

"This solves the greatest weakness of the Shield of Samar in space combat." Ves muttered. "Enemies won't be able to bypass it so easily anymore."

Although there were still plenty of ways to avoid falling into the Shield of Samar's gravity trap, they all required enemies to restrain their behavior.

"A defensive mech doesn't actually need to block attacks or stand in the way of enemy machines to serve its purpose. If the Shield of Samar can deter enemies from approaching its location, then that is also useful."

This way, the Shield of Samar could be used to protect important assets such as the Spirit of Bentheim or the Vivacious Wal. Not even enemy expert mechs will want to approach these ships if it meant getting caught in Venerable Jannzi's orbit!

Ves was only a bit concerned whether the expert pilot would be able to embrace the gravity aspect that he and his mech designers were about to introduce to the Shield of Samar.

Although this feature complimented Venerable Jannzi's piloting style, it was not her primary focus. She would have to spend a lot of effort into molding her will to embrace gravity force. Only then will she be able to resonate with GT-535 on a deeper level.

"Well, it will probably be fine, I think. Master Willix specifically proposed and designed these solutions."

Venerable Jannzi was a lucky expert pilot this time! She really couldn't have turned to a better mech designer to incorporate gravity manipulation in her mech. Aside from Star Designers, hardly anyone could design better gravity systems than a notable MTA Master that specialized in this field!

This was also why Ves thought that even if the Bulwark Project wasn't the strongest expert mech of this design round, it was certainly the most extravagant!

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Master Willix never told me how much GT-535 costs, but it is certainly not cheap, especially since she developed its formula herself."

Combined with the greater size and mass of the Bulwark Project, it was unquestionably the most expensive expert mech out of the batch!

All of the expense was worth it, though. The Dark Zephyr simply couldn't come close to the expert mech version of the Shield of Samar in terms of withstanding attacks.

Overall, the Bulwark Project's current parameters already put it on the upper end of a mid-tier expert mech. As long as the Larkinson Clan addressed its various shortcomings and upgraded a couple of important systems, it might very well turn into a high-tier expert mech that could stand equal to Venerable Orthox's Gatecrasher!

Ves frowned. "It will certainly be difficult for the Chimera Project to exceed the Bulwark Project in overall performance."

He wasn't willing to admit defeat, though. The Chimera Project was his passion project and his personal playground. He had incorporated a lot of new and unproven features that could propel the performance of this unconventional expert mech to new heights!

"Cost isn't everything. It's how you use the resources at hand that really determines the value of a machine!"

Though the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project were both part of a new breed of Larkinson expert mechs, their roles were vastly different, which made direct comparisons a bit difficult.

Still, Ves had great confidence that the Chimera Project would definitely be able to achieve a far greater impact on the battlefield than any of his other expert mechs!

