

## Mech 3371

### *Chapter 3371: Greater Design Network*

The time to realize the long-awaited expert mech upgrade to the Shield of Samar had come.

After simulations had confirmed that the latest round of tweaks did not produce any negative impact worth noting, Gloriana finally chose to complete the expert mech design project.

Everyone in the Design Department felt enormously relieved now that they had finally put this cumbersome project past them. Out of all of the design projects, the Bulwark Project definitely ranked at the top in terms of work. Its greater volume along with its large amount of parts made it a pain to make any adjustments.

Since the Larkinsons had already made sufficient preparations to fabricate the mech, the Journeymen could start performing the upgrade process straight away.

The four Journeymen of the Design Department had gathered at Gloriana's workshop after resting for an entire day.

The expert pilots had come as well, of course.

"Your wait is finally over." Venerable Joshua said. "I'm so jealous of you, you know. From what the mech designers have told me, I have to wait for at least several more weeks before I get my turn."

Jannzi crossed her arms. "You don't have to feel so bad. I've heard that the Patriarch went all-out when it came to designing your expert mech. You're his golden boy, after all. The Chimera Project will likely set a new standard for living mechs."

Joshua couldn't help but grin like a kid. Since the Chimera Project was designed especially for him, he was regularly apprised of its progress. The expert mech design was incredibly ambitious and fit his talents incredibly well.

His only complaint was that he had waited way too long to get his hands on it! Venerable Tusa and the other early Larkinson expert pilots had gained such an enormous head start that it was unlikely for him to catch up to their progress. He would probably remain the runt among the current crop of expert pilots for a long time!

"You should follow Joshua's example and take some sword lessons from us." Venerable Dise spoke as she observed the projection of the completed Bulwark Project. "Even though your Shield of Samar is too slow and cumbersome to perform any sophisticated sword moves, that makes it even more important that you thoroughly master the basics. The Heavensworders have mastered several basic sword styles that can thoroughly

strengthen your fundamentals and increase the coordination between your sword and shield."

Venerable Jannzi shook her head. "I've already considered it before. The Heavensworder sword styles are interesting, but that is all. None of them are a complete match to my inclinations. I prefer to develop my own fighting style."

This was the conventional choice of many expert pilots. At their level of skill and strength, they were more than qualified to develop their own styles based on their strengths and the strengths of their expert mechs.

Since every expert pilot and expert mech was different, it was generally recommended for every powerful individual to branch out from established methods in order to develop a unique approach that could be improved over time.

Although the power and effectiveness of self-developed fighting styles were not that impressive at first, the expert pilots that developed them completely mastered them. Their compatibility with their creators was also high.

Once people like Venerable Jannzi became a high-tier expert pilot, their combat effectiveness would shoot up enormously as they became capable of empowering each and every move with their domain attributes!

Dise understood what Jannzi attempted to accomplish and respected the younger expert pilot's decision.

"You don't have to adopt any existing sword styles. You can follow my example and reference them instead in order to help you develop your own techniques. You've seen the power of our offensive techniques. With a slow and heavy expert mech like yours, you urgently need to increase your lethality. Even Joshua has received lessons from Swordmaster Ketis."

Jannzi did not look as hesitant as before. "I'm open to exchanges. I'm not a swordswoman and I can never dedicate my life to the sword as much as you, but I don't mind receiving some tips with regards to my own fighting style."

The sword was just a tool to her and the Shield of Samar was no different.

If Jannzi ever advanced to ace pilot, she would definitely be able to increase her attack capabilities by an enormous margin. That would take a long time, though.

She didn't really mind. Her main purpose in battle was to stall, threaten and deter enemy expert mechs. Killing them was the job of other friendly expert mechs. She threw a respectful look at Venerable Stark.

"They say that we will cooperate much more closely with each other once your Shield of Samar is brought up to standard." The older woman said. "We will have to train often together in order to develop a greater accord in battle."

The Amaranto was the ultimate offensive mech while the Shield of Samar was the ultimate defensive mech. Teaming them up made a lot of sense, especially when they were specifically designed to mate together!

Gloriana approached the expert pilots a few minutes later. She proudly and openly carried Alexandria on her shoulder. Clixie followed after her footsteps but the trailing cat hardly drew any eyeballs.

Every expert pilot could sense the special nature of Alexandria. She would have attracted a lot more attention if she was the only spiritual cat of her kind. Joshua and the rest were already familiar with other spiritual entities aligned to Ves and the Larkinson Clan. An incorporeal red cat hardly looked strange.

Maow.

"We're about to start, Jannzi. This is a complex, difficult and time-consuming upgrade session so we will likely remain occupied for 9 whole days."

"I am already aware that it will take longer to upgrade my mech. I still have enough patience to wait this long."

"You're not sitting on the sidelines this time." Gloriana said. "We need you to become an active participant in the process. We're trying out a new method that will likely yield better results."

All of the expert pilots looked surprised. What did the mech designers have in store?

"How?"

"You'll see. We're not demanding much from you, Jannzi. Come with me. We have already prepared a place for you. The more you cooperate, the more we can improve the final product."

When Gloriana brought Jannzi back to the other three Journeymen, they were close to starting.

Both Gloriana and Juliet had already made their prayers to the Superior Mother. Ketis also looked eager to start working. Even though the Shield of Samar wasn't strictly a swordsman mech, it was still a melee mech that wielded a sword, if only reluctantly.

Venerable Jannzi looked around the workshop and grew puzzled. "That's strange. The last time you fabricated an expert mech, you organized an entire spectacle. Why leave out the public this time?"

"It's not necessary." Ves replied. "The results of our previous attempt were rather mixed. I don't think the crowd has affected the quality of the First Sword all that much. What actually determines the output is the state and mood of the participating mech designers. Holding repeated ceremonies becomes routine after a while."

Ves hadn't obtained as much insights on craftsmanship back then and still assumed that making masterworks depended on luck and other difficult variables.

He decided to dispense with the theatrics now that he had become more enlightened. Relying on tricks was much less reliable than developing a more consistent approach.

Besides his own gains, he had a lot of expectations for Gloriana.

"Let's start." Gloriana grinned. "Please relax your minds and don't resist. Alexandria, bind us together!"

Maow!

The red spiritual cat concentrated her energy and began to generate several strong spiritual bonds. These bonds quickly connected to the minds of Ves, Ketis, Juliet and most surprisingly Jannzi as well!

Venerable Jannzi reacted with surprise at the unexpected intrusion. Of course, with a mind as thick as hers, there was no way for Alexandria to force a connection.

"Please let us in, Jannzi."

The expert pilot frowned. She didn't object to joining this so-called design network, but she didn't want to bare too much of herself to others.

Her eyes pointedly rested on Ves. She especially didn't want to read his odious thoughts!

Gloriana reached out to caress Alexandria's back. "You don't need to be worried about sharing irrelevant thoughts and emotions. My cat has a high degree of control over the data that passes through her design network. I promise you that I will respect everyone's privacy. I'm only interested in upgrading your Shield of Samar to its best possible form. Will you share your sentiments of your bonded mech to us? Whatever you pass on will help us understand your machine from your unique perspective."

The attraction of this offer was too great. Jannzi quickly acquiesced. "I will open my mind and will to you, but I will do my best to limit my thoughts."

Jannzi slowly lowered her guard, allowing Alexandria to forge a solid connection.

The moment everyone became connected, they each became enthralled by the flood of new input.

"This design network is much stronger than that of Blinky!" Ketis gasped.

Maow.

Alexandria proudly preened as she heard that. Unlike Ves' companion spirit, Gloriana's new pet specialized in maintaining a design network. She was hardly under any strain and could easily regulate the small number of connections for an extended period of time!

What was also different this time was the participation of Venerable Jannzi!

Ves wouldn't have dared to include an expert pilot in the design network before. He was afraid that Blinky might not be able to cope with the addition of a strong force of will.

The birth of Alexandria opened up a lot more possibilities. The companion spirit's greater design network was much stronger and more robust. Its bandwidth was significantly greater and was easily able to accommodate Venerable Jannzi's powerful will!

As Ves and everyone else began to get used to sharing their thoughts, emotions, insights and perspectives to a greater degree, they spent a few minutes fine tuning the new design network.

"You need to tone it down a bit, Gloriana. It's like we're yelling in each other's ears."

"You need to put more effort into filtering out irrelevant thoughts. I don't need to know you're craving a cup of coffee."

"You need to open yourself up a bit more, Jannzi. Part of the reason why we are adding you to the design network is because we want to get more in tune with your strengths."

Once Alexandria made the necessary adjustments to her design network, the Journeymen finally went to work.

They immediately experienced the difference. Even as they began to fabricate the many parts needed to refit the Shield of Samar, every mech designer felt as if they were hosting multiple design philosophies!

Of course, this was just an illusion. Ves only gained a fraction of Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis' understanding of mechs. The difference was that the degree of improvement was a bit more substantial!

Juliet and Ketis gained more from this sharing of insights and understanding than others. They were excellent when they worked on tasks that were relevant to their area of expertise but their output was a lot more average when they performed other tasks.

With the help of the design network, someone like Ketis could assist with fabricating power transmission systems without botching the job as much! She could draw upon enough of Gloriana's expertise to know how to keep the quality of her work consistently high!

At the same time, Ves was able to lend his sensitivity and understanding of life to his colleagues.

Gloriana and the other Journeymen became capable of making their work alive, which not only saved Ves a lot of effort, but also enriched the life of the entire mech!

It was as if every Journeyman became as good as an Apprentice Mech Designer in their borrowed fields of expertise!

*Chapter 3372: Insightful Jannzi*

"So this is what it is like to make a mech." Jannzi whispered.

The four Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan were already accustomed to the effects of a design network. Even if this time was different, they already connected to Blinky's network enough times for the novelty to wear off. As soon as they became used to the deeper and more intimate connections, they cast aside all distractions and focused solely on their respective work assignments.

It was different for Venerable Jannzi. Even though Alexandria heavily limited how much data the expert pilot received, the sharing of comprehension was not completely cut off on this end.

Gloriana believed it was best if Venerable Jannzi gained enough input to understand the gist of what the mech designers were working on. This allowed Jannzi to share her thoughts on what she thought about particular parts and systems such as the armor system or the flight system of her mech.

However, when Jannzi finally gained a peek of what went on in the heads of the Journeymen, she quickly became lost in all of the technical insights.

Just because the design network allowed for the sharing of different perspectives didn't necessarily mean that the recipients were capable of understanding them! Though Jannzi possessed a huge amount of understanding on how to pilot a mech, that was radically different from knowing how it worked!

"I feel stupid." She frowned.

Despite her enviable strength and capabilities as an expert pilot, she felt utterly dwarfed by the sheer intellect and knowledge accumulation exposed by the Journeyman.

Even Ketis, who was arguably the 'stupidest' of the four, possessed a wealth of knowledge on science and engineering that was equivalent to a chief engineer!

Jannzi found it incredibly novel to get a taste of what it was like to view reality like an engineer. When she shifted her sights to a rack of tools, she vaguely became aware of what each and every complicated technical gizmo was supposed to do. There was no way for her to operate these tools proficiently, but just knowing what they did was illuminating!

When she observed the projection of the latest design of the Shield of Samar, she obtained a flood of hints and associations, most of which completely surpassed her own comprehension!

She felt as if she was back in the mech academy where she struggled to keep up with her basic physics classes. Every mech pilot had to learn at least a bit of science in order to be proficient at piloting a mech, but no mech cadet liked to be stuck behind a desk performing boring calculations!

Though an expert pilot such as Jannzi gained a boost in learning capabilities and was expected to master slightly more advanced knowledge, even mech technicians were able to school her on how mechs worked and how they were put together!

Even so, understanding just 0.01 percent of all of the input she received was enough to deepen her shallow comprehension of how the Shield of Samar worked!

She became more fascinated by the scraps of knowledge that she was reluctantly able to understand. She gained a much better estimate of how much damage different sections of her mech was able to resist, how much heat her mech was able to accumulate and how far she could push the new shield generator.

Though she already possessed a certain degree of understanding of how her expert mech was supposed to perform, her comprehension easily doubled after just a short time of connecting to the design network!

"How much will this stick, though?" She questioned.

This was a good question. Much of her current improvement was supported by the brainpower shared by the connected mech designers. Once Jannzi lost access to them, her ability to interpret and understand technical knowledge would take a nosedive.

Even so, she would still be able to keep the overall insights and conclusions that she made. That was enough to optimize her piloting style and boost her combat effectiveness by as much as 10 percent!



Further away, Ves briefly threw a glance at her. Due to the design network, he and the other Journeymen became aware of what the expert pilot had gained.

"A design network is much more useful than I thought!"

They should have added mech pilots to the networks sooner. Although it wasn't strictly necessary for them to know how a mech worked in order to pilot them effectively, a greater degree of technical understanding and proficiency was always helpful and rarely caused any harm!

Of course, aside from gaining basic technical comprehension from the Journeymen, Jannzi also gained a taste of their design philosophies.

If she was able to understand 0.01% of the general science and engineering knowledge of the mech designers, she was able to understand even less of their respective specializations!

All of the accumulated theories, assumptions, data and insights that distinguished one Journeyman from another was far out of the reach of a general Novice or Apprentice.

How could a mech pilot possibly grasp all of these secrets?

As a result, Jannzi was only vaguely capable of understanding the generalities of everyone's design philosophies.

For example, when she looked at the projection of the Bulwark Project, she gained an appreciation of its surprisingly sharp sword, its highly optimized and customized technical structure, its stable and incredibly resilient flight system and above all how much life it possessed.

She focused specifically on the latter. Though Jannzi never made her dislike for Ves a secret, she never looked down on his ability to design mechs.

Now that she gained an opportunity to get a peek on what made Ves so good at his job, she eagerly immersed herself further in how Ves thought and how he viewed his mechs.

"It's... not what I expected." She whispered.

Every mech designer possessed vastly different perspectives. Ketis actually stood out the most because of her extreme obsession for swords and the strength of her will, which was actually as strong as Jannzi's own will!

Yet Ketis' perspective did not interest Jannzi at all. Every expert pilot developed their own principles and obsessions and never showed much interest in what other peers valued.



This was why Ves was much more interesting to Jannzi. Not only did Ves possess a much deeper understanding of living mechs like the Shield of Samar, he also possessed a different and arguably greater perspective on Qilanxo.

Venerable Jannzi fell silent as she parsed new facts and insights on the design spirit she was bonded with for a long time.

Unlike Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise, Jannzi had never served with the Flagrant Vandals or Lydia's Swordmaidens. She never had the opportunity to meet and interact with Qilanxo back when the design spirit was still a giant lizard.

"So she looked like this." Venerable Jannzi's eyes lit up. "All of those depictions were wrong."

What fascinated her more was how Ves viewed the design spirits he worked with and where they came from. Some were natural like Qilanxo and others were artificial such as the Illustrious One.

Jannzi had no idea how he could even make such amazing god-like entities. That was something that Ves kept tight to his chest, among many other secrets.

Yet even the basics she was able to obtain from Ves was enough for her to gain a brand-new perspective on living mechs!

As an expert pilot, she was already able to sense much of the special traits of living mechs, but it was only now that she gained the context needed to understand what Ves' design philosophy was truly about.

Living mechs like the Bright Warrior and the Valkyrie Redeemer complimented their mech pilots in different ways. Not only that, but they were also capable of growing stronger and more compatible to their respective mech pilots!

Venerable Jannzi and many other Larkinson mech pilots already guessed or deduced some of these phenomena. However, now that she was able to get a glimpse of how Ves viewed his work, she realized that his efforts into designing living mechs was much more extensive than she thought.

This was especially the case for expert mechs and unique machines like the Shield of Samar!

She understood that her sole machine had already undergone a huge amount of growth. Compared to newer expert mechs such as the Dark Zephyr and the Riot, the Shield of Samar enjoyed an enormous head start in terms of growth!

This conveyed Jannzi's personal mech with greater advantages. Not only was it easier for Ves to add extra functionality to the Shield of Samar, but the mech was also able to offer additional assistance.

"So this is how Ves views an ideal relationship between a mech and a mech pilot."

After all of these revelations, Jannzi became a lot more confident in how she should develop her relationship with the Shield of Samar. It was truly worth it to bare a part of her mind and will this time!

Naturally, Jannzi wasn't the only person to obtain a substantial harvest.

Though Jannzi possessed a large amount of really weird and outright wrong ideas about the Shield of Samar, her piloting approach and her specific thoughts on the performance of her expert mech provided greater direction to the mech designers.

What Ves truly valued was how Jannzi developed her domain attributes. Her force of will embraced the concepts of defense and shielding in a unique manner and gaining an insider's look on them was invaluable!

The guidance provided by Jannzi steered the work of the mech designers in a way that allowed them to produce a more cohesive mech.

Together with other influences such as Ves' design philosophy, every part produced by the Journeymen became more in tune with Venerable Jannzi.

Ves even suspected that Venerable Jannzi would be able to resonate with the upgraded Shield of Samar to a substantially greater degree!

There were many other benefits that were too numerous to count. What gratified the mech designers a lot was that Alexandria was capable of keeping up her design network all day.

Maow.

Alexandria yawned as Gloriana and Juliet chose to take a break this time.

Just like before, the Larkinson mech designers opted to rotate their shifts a bit so that at least two of them remained busy.

Gloriana frowned a bit as she held her large belly. She had to take breaks more often due to concerns about her pregnancy.

What she worried about the most was her water breaking while she still had work to do! Dr. Ranya had already given her a couple of treatments that were meant to delay such an occurrence, but human bodies weren't as predictable as machines.

"Just wait for a bit, alright?" She whispered towards her child.

Her daughter kicked in her belly as a response.

As Gloriana took a well-regulated rest, Ves kept working as he fabricated the internal components of the Shield of Samar. There were a lot of them due to the size of the expert mech and it would take days to fabricate them all. Many of them were so intricate and complicated that Ves even had to discard some of his finished parts.

"Ugh, this is the downside of adopting Gloriana's design philosophy. Some of my work doesn't meet my standards anymore!"

Ves wasn't too bothered though. As he continued to work, he became more satisfied with his output and the output of his colleagues.

Though none of the mech designers entered into an inspired state, the mood between them was excellent and they were running ahead of schedule.

The only consideration he was uncertain about was determining the timing of borrowing Vulcan's power.

Ves lifted up his hammer and hesitated whether he should whack himself over his head.

He shook his head. "It's not necessary now, and maybe I should reserve this for Gloriana. She'll be fabricating the parts that contain GT-535 tomorrow. This resonating material is critical to the performance of the Shield of Samar and it will be interesting to see how well Gloriana can make them when she is in a false inspired state."

Tomorrow would definitely be a critical day!

### *Chapter 3373: Borrowing Power*

The Shield of Samar was almost being completely renewed from inside out. The mech designers only intended to retain a few inconsequential parts of the current prime mech.

Naturally, they also planned to reshape much of the Unending alloy armor plating. The contours and physical dimensions of the prime mech and expert mech versions of the Shield of Samar differed substantially. New techniques, more refined methods and different physical requirements demanded a complete overhaul of the structure of the entire mech.

This presented Ves and the others with an interesting challenge on how to actually reform the mech.

In order to keep it alive, they had to keep the existing expert mech as intact as possible. On the other hand, if they wanted to upgrade it as comprehensively as possible, they had to swap out as much of its components.

These conflicting goals could only be solved by only partially disassembling the Shield of Samar. Just like the Ship of Theseus, the Journeymen chose a cumbersome approach where they did not completely disassemble the entire prime mech but kept parts of it whole at all times.

This was a time-consuming and labor-intensive endeavor that imposed higher demands on the mech designers. Yet this was the only way that Ves could think of to retain the original identity of the Shield of Samar while slowly elevating it to the standard of an expert mech.

During the planning stage, Gloriana and the others didn't fully understand why Ves insisted on working in such a roundabout manner.

The most thorough and efficient way to perform a complete upgrade and refit of an existing mech was to disassemble it completely.

It was only when Alexandria's powerful design network allowed Ves to convey a part of his perspective to the others that they understood why he cared so much about keeping the Shield of Samar as whole as possible.

They truly understood now why Ves insisted that his mechs were alive. Though this special quality was a lot more flexible than organic life, they agreed that it was best to treat it as close to a living body as possible.

This resulted in a change in mentality where Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis each approached their work as if they were doctors attending to a heavily-injured patient. The change in mentality and the greater care they showed towards the Shield of Samar was remarkable and something that Ves hadn't expected.

Together with the influence that Gloriana's design philosophy brought to them, all four Journeymen collectively treated the Shield of Samar and the parts they were fabricating with great respect.

Maow.

Alexandria proudly and contently rested on Gloriana's shoulder as she continually maintained her powerful design network. She might not be able to get the better of Blinky or Lucky in a scrap, but none of them were capable of boosting the effectiveness of mech designers like her. Any mech designer would be lucky to have her attention!

As her upturned tail continued to swish in contentment, she continued to regulate and filter the transmissions that flowed through her network. It was quite amazing that she

was able to maintain the strong spiritual bonds much longer than any of the other spiritual networks that Ves had made.

Part of it was due to the strong mental and spiritual strength of the people participating in the network. Another part was due to the limited number of connections for this session.

However, it was undeniable that Alexandria's own strengths and talents played the biggest role in making it all possible! Gloriana adored her new pet so much that she regularly reached out her hand to caress the red cat's back and head.

"You're so cute, Alexandria."

"Such an amazing cat."

"I'm so lucky to have the best cat in the multiverse."

"You could probably win the best awards if you participate in one of those Rubarthan cat shows."

"Are you hungry, Alexandria? What do you eat, anyway?"

"I should get Ves to design a collar for you as well."

Although her constant fawning of her new companion spirit was a bit annoying to the others, everyone who was a part of the network could not deny that Alexandria had boosted the quality of their output by a noticeable degree.

What was even better was that Gloriana's mood continued to rise as she became more entranced with Alexandria's incredible value.

She was definitely right about one thing. Other mech designers deeply wished they had access to Alexandria's greater design network! With this amazing feature at their disposal, they could combine the strengths of different mech designers in a much more integrated fashion. Not even Masters would be able to resist such a killer advantage!

All of this was thanks to Ves processing half of Aisling's design seed into a new spiritual life form. Gloriana grinned as she reminded herself that she gained this capability by stealing the essence of one of her enemies.

She even entertained thoughts of hunting down other mech designers in order to add more useful cats to their collection!

Fortunately, Alexandria did not transmit these irrelevant thoughts throughout the design network, or else Jannzi would have become horrified at Gloriana's immoral attitude!

In any case, Gloriana's growing optimism and contentment not only led to a noticeable improvement to herself, but also to others as the design network was also capable of spreading her positive emotions.

The other three mech designers were able to block this input if they wished, but they chose not to. Everyone was aware that a better mood could substantially improve the outcome of this upgrade session, so they eagerly embraced Gloriana's rising sentiments.

Ves did not think that this and other emotional factors was enough to turn the Shield of Samar into a masterwork, though. None of the four had entered into an inspired state or any other special mood.

In this case, the only chance they could make a masterwork was to rely on other, more controllable factors. Ves drew on his recent insights on craftsmanship and thought about all of the innovations that he and the others integrated into the expert mech design.

This caused him to gain a strong sense of purpose towards the Bulwark Project. With everything that he and the other Larkinsons invested into it, Venerable Jannzi's mech possessed all of the opportunities it needed to reach a greater tier of quality.

They just had to find a way to push through the barrier and realize everyone's dream for this unique mech.

This was why Ves held the Hammer of Brilliance after his wife returned from her rest. He looked conflicted as he tried to decide whether he should actively borrow Vulcan's power or stick to the current status quo.

He looked across Gloriana's workshop.

Stacks of recently completed parts rested on the side. None of them were set aside for too long as bots frequently lifted them up and moved them over to the assembly section where Jannzi's mech was already being changed before everyone's eyes.

The most striking aspect about its current appearance was that her armor system had been stripped off its frame. All of the Unending alloy armor plating needed to be reprocessed and reshaped, and removing them early granted the mech designer easier access to the internals.

Right now, Juliet had flown to the front of the partially-disassembled Shield of Samar so that she could supervise the process of removing outdated parts. She installed temporary support elements in order to avoid excessive strain and prevent the mech frame from collapsing.

"We're already doing quite well for ourselves." Ves judged as he continued to grip his hammer.

Was it necessary for him to draw this card this time?

He was confident in his own abilities, but he couldn't guarantee that the Shield of Samar would turn into a masterwork at the end. After all, he was far from reaching the level where he could completely control the variables that determined whether a product reached the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder.

He became conflicted for a while.

If he actively utilized Vulcan's power, then he would gain a guaranteed improvement for a number of hours.

The problem was that it would taper off over time. Ves had already experimented on it earlier and determined that the false inspired state would only last for around 5 hours.

The only way to extend it was to convert this temporary condition into a more enduring one. Ves believed that this was possible in theory, but he had never seen it happen in practice.

"Hm, why am I being so conflicted?" He frowned. "A tool is a tool. Using it makes life more convenient to me. As long as I get my rewards, what does it matter if I've taken a shortcut? With another increase in mech affinity, I will be able to build my accumulation further, which will help me stand out further from other Journeymen."

Ves briefly glanced over at Venerable Jannzi who looked entranced as she stared at her partially-disassembled mech.

Though the woman could be rather annoying at times, she was a crucial asset to the Larkinson Clan. Ves never thought about doing less than his best when he worked on this upgrade project.

Perhaps it was politically more advantageous for him to drag his feet this time, but Ves was not a politician. He was a mech designer who did not want to betray his principles so easily. He suspected that he would never become worthy to make another masterwork mech if he held any improper thoughts towards his core work responsibilities.

Besides, everyone else was working so earnestly that he couldn't stand the thought of betraying their expectations.

What ultimately convinced him to make use of his hammer was the need for greater strength.



The Larkinson Clan could not afford to be weak. The previous battles had already revealed several major shortcomings, and the lack of strong and effective expert mechs was one of them. The addition of a decent expert mech was definitely helpful, but if the Larkinsons gained another masterwork mech like the Amaranto, then the benefits would become much greater!

Ves grew more excited as he thought about all of the potential rewards he could earn.

"Unlike the Amaranto, the Bulwark Project isn't a Superpublished design."

This was an important observation because turning the Shield of Samar into a masterwork would definitely earn him a fantastic reward from the System!

"The MTA will also shower us with merits!"

The prospect of earning all of these fantastic rewards increased his enthusiasm for this project to such a degree that his excitement had caught up to that of his wife!

Gloriana even turned to him for a moment. "What's the matter, Ves?"

"Oh, nothing. I think we should just kick into higher gear."

He briefly considered who he should whack with his hammer. He could only empower one person at a time.

"Honey, would you like to obtain a blessing?"

She briefly weighed the choice. "I don't need it. I'm already doing well for myself. You should try it out yourself. You're more familiar with it than myself and you primarily created it to improve your own capabilities."

"You're right."

Ves did not hesitate much longer. He was afraid of losing his momentum if he stalled any further.

Whack.

He softly tapped the flat end of the hammer against his head. As the strike induced him into a false inspired state, he suddenly gained a bunch of new insights and ideas about the Bulwark Project.

There was a remarkable difference between entering this state while he was sitting behind a terminal and entering this state while he was in the middle of working on an actual mech!

Vulcan's power flowed through his head as Ves began to work with greater certainty and direction!

Not only that, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis also worked a bit more efficiently than before. It turned out that Alexandria was also capable of spreading a small degree of Vulcan's power through her design network!

"So the Shield of Samar can be built like this!"

#### *Chapter 3374: Gradual Metamorphosis*

The influence of Vulcan primarily affected Ves. Whatever power flowed to the other Journeymen only gave them a fraction of the boost.

Yet this relatively minor change granted the female mech designers another perspective that was mainly based around craftsmanship.

How Vulcan perceived the quality and the intrinsic nature of objects was radically different from that of any human. Though Alexandria's design network wasn't able to convey much of this, what little it managed to pass on was enough to open their eyes.

The most important impact of this change on them was that they became faintly aware of certain higher-level variables that were normally out of reach for mech designers at their level.

All of them gained a crucial amount of clarity on the importance of sticking to specific themes when they work on their mechs. The Bulwark Project was designed around the concepts of defense, shielding and gravity. In order to make sure it embodied them to the best possible degree, they all needed to perform their work with this awareness in mind!

By maintaining a cohesive mindset towards their work, the mech designers infused their specific interpretations of these concepts into their work. In practice, the difference it made was relatively minor. They were still Journeymen and needed to progress a lot more to yield greater results.

The current effect was already sufficient, though. The direct improvement was rather small but just a change in mindset was enough to make their work more cohesive!

As Ves immersed himself in his false inspired state, he tried to make the most of it by fabricating crucial and critical components such as the shield generator and some of the parts that incorporated GT-535.

The reason why these parts stood out from the rest was because they were strongly associated with the themes of the Shield of Samar. Venerable Jannzi would definitely

depend heavily on these systems in the future and Ves wanted to maximize the fit and compatibility between the expert pilot and expert mech as much as possible!

What amazed Ves was that he was able to do this a lot better than before due to Venerable Jannzi's participation in the design network.

Her influence had already affected him and the other mech designers by drawing upon her thoughts and ideas on piloting her Shield of Samar. The benefits the Journeymen gained was akin to a highly relevant Mastery experience.

Since Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis never directly accessed the mind of a mech pilot before, they gained a lot of eye-opening insights.

Ves already had a couple of Masteries under his belt, so his gains were more marginal.

What he truly valued was how he was able to directly attune Venerable Jannzi's force of will to the parts he was making. This not only increased their compatibility to the expert pilot, but also warned him of any discordant elements that might make it more difficult to resonate with the final product.

"This is actually quite amazing!" Ves eyes lit up as he realized the implications of this discovery.

The compatibility between Venerable Jannzi and the Shield of Samar was already insanely high. The two practically grew up together. Not only that, but Jannzi experienced each of her breakthroughs while piloting the same mech, which not only made it stronger, but also brought them closer!

One of the persistent concerns that Ves possessed was that the mech would diverge from its pilot due to replacing most of its old components.

Yet by actively drawing upon Jannzi's presence in the design network, he was able to prevent this negative outcome from happening.

"I can even increase the attunement between pilot and mech!"

Such a direct improvement excited Ves beyond words! His design philosophy centered around man-machine symbiosis, so this solution was extremely relevant to him. The same applied to Gloriana!

As the mech designers continued to overhaul the Shield of Samar, Ves made more interesting discoveries. Not all of them were significant, but each sign of progress increased his motivation.

However, increasing the fit between Venerable Jannzi and the Shield of Samar was only one of the factors that could help elevate the latter into a masterwork. So was making sure the mech embodied its core concepts.

Excellent craftsmanship encompassed a lot more ground, but the most critical factor was to consistently produce high-quality parts that were adapted to their specific circumstances.

This was much more difficult to accomplish and even Gloriana could not meet this standard much of the time.

Yet with the help of Vulcan's direct influence, Ves was temporarily able to bridge over this gap and improve the quality of his output. He immersed himself in his false inspired state and even hoped that he could gain even greater inspiration that could prolong his improvement.

However, borrowed power ultimately had to be returned, so after five hours of intensive work, the effects of Vulcan's boon had finally receded for the most part.

Ves only retained a fraction of the special state by actively leveraging his permanent bond with his own incarnation.

This was an exhausting process, though. Ves accelerated his mental strain whenever he tried to embody his design spirits, and this time was no different.

Vulcan had already increased his grasp over his own abilities over the past few months, but he was still far from mastering his full power. The amount of help he could provide to mech designers was still limited.

"It's enough, though." Ves murmured as he looked at the current state of the Shield of Samar.

The skeletal frame already exhibited a lot more renewal than before. The crucial internal frame that supported all of the other components had already been swapped out. Other new parts had been installed as well. They looked quite incongruous when they were placed next to the older and more worn parts of the prime mech incarnation of the Shield of Samar.

Still, throughout this extensive operation, the Shield of Samar not only retained its full identity, but actually seemed to undergo a gradual metamorphosis.

The drastic changes of structure actually sparked an evolution in the life state of the living mech!

"An expert mech is a lot different from lesser mechs." Ves recognized as he made yet another new discovery. "The Shield of Samar has actually been restraining itself for all this time.

It was quite amazing how many new discoveries and insights that he and his fellow Journeymen harvested so far. This was the fifth expert mech design project they were completing, but their current gains made it seem as if they were just making an expert mech for the first time!

All of this led to a comprehensive rise in mood that persisted for multiple days. Optimism remained high as everyone became more engrossed in their own work. The novelty of the discoveries and insights they gained this time caused the Journeymen to feel as if they were breaking new ground and making an expert mech that was unprecedented by any other machine!

Ves felt more clearer that the Shield of Samar was a transformative expert mech that not only exceeded the value of the Dark Zephyr, Riot and the First Sword, but also came closer to catching up to the Amaranto!

"We're doing great!" Gloriana grinned. "Venerable Jannzi will definitely be happy with her new Shield of Samar regardless of what happens. We only have four more days to go. Let's strive to elevate our work further so that we can increase our chances of success!"

More time passed by. Though the mech designers no longer made any drastic new discoveries, they were still in high spirits and hardly made any slips.

Everyone was trying their utmost to make the Shield of Samar their best mech to date. No one wanted to disappoint the expectations of the others, especially when their connections to the design network let them know how much everyone cared about succeeding.

As they neared the end of their run, the mech designers already had a lot of reasons to be satisfied with this experience.

Each of them harvested so many new insights that they would be able to upgrade their design and fabrication approaches once they digested their gains.

However, that was something to consider for the future. Right now, they still had a responsibility to complete the Shield of Samar to the best of their abilities!

Venerable Jannzi had stayed in the workshop as long as possible. Her presence in the design network was crucial and her absence was clearly felt by the mech designers.

She had taken stimulants in order to reduce her sleeping hours. She constantly kept her mind focused on the Shield of Samar and her experiences in piloting it. Above all, she conveyed her love and trust towards her chosen mech.

"Please." She whispered. "Give my Shield of Samar a chance to rise."

The stakes were high for her. After witnessing how much a masterwork expert mech strengthened Venerable Stark, Jannzi wanted one as well.

She wished she could do more to improve the Shield of Samar, but she was ultimately an expert pilot, not a mech designer.

As for Ves, he was holding his hammer yet again. Enough time has passed for Vulcan to regain his ability to induce a mech designer into another false inspired state.

At this late stage of the upgrade process, the value of entering this condition was much greater than before. The mech designers had already fabricated and installed most of the new and powerful internal components. They were mostly working on the external parts such as sensors and armor plating.

When Ves was considering the current state of the Shield of Samar, he did not believe that putting himself in another false inspired state would yield much of a difference.

He had already maximized the compatibility, fit and alignment of the expert mech due to his earlier discoveries. He seriously doubted that he could apply his design philosophy much better this time.

Ves looked towards Gloriana.

"It's fine, Ves." She said. "I'm already happy with my improvement. If you really want to boost someone, go seek out Juliet. Installing the new flight system on the Shield of Samar is a crucial step."

"I'll do that."

When Ves presented this option to the Penitent Sister mech designer, she was open to trying it out. She had already felt how much Ves had improved when he whacked his head with his hammer a few days ago.

When Juliet's head glowed with Vulcan's blessing, her perception and ability to discern the deeper properties of the Shield of Samar jumped a lot!

As a mech designer that specialized in mobility, her boost was different from that of Ves. To her, an excellent mech was a machine that was able to do its utmost to squeeze more speed, acceleration and agility from its frame!

Juliet became engrossed in tweaking and perfecting the parts that were relevant to her design philosophy. Although the Shield of Samar was never meant to be swift, the Penitent Sister did not want to play a marginal role in the design and creation of the expert space knight.

"Even a small improvement in speed can save more lives!"

Although Juliet's improvement was less applicable to the other Journeymen in the design network, they became infected by her elevated passion and enthusiasm.

This ensured that they ended their 9-day upgrade program on a high note!

When Gloriana put the finishing touches on the large and exquisitely assembled space knight, its completed form already exuded a vastly stronger vibe than before.

Venerable Jannzi became more intense as she stood next to the waiting mech designers. Her eagerness and anticipation flooded through the design network. Her force of will blended with the strengthened glow of the expert mech.

"Is it..." She trailed off, as if worried that her words might interrupt Gloriana's final effort.

"Just wait. It will all become clear in a few minutes." Ves softly said.

When Gloriana finally completed the last step, the completely renewed Shield of Samar seemed to come alive!

Its glow became more active as the mech seemed to celebrate the end of this crucial transformation!

As Gloriana quickly floated away from the upgraded machine, the Shield of Samar finally completed its metamorphosis!

For a moment, the shadow of a giant lizard hovered above the large and heavily-armored expert space knight.

"Qilanxo!" Ves gasped.

The sacred god unleashed a silent roar that reverberated across the entire workshop. At the same time, Shield of Samar seemed to undergo a second and more drastic transformation.

It was a change that delighted Ves, Gloriana and Venerable Jannzi! Each of them had been working hard and trying their best to reach this outcome!

"The Shield of Samar... is truly worth its name now..." Ves reverently said. "From today onwards, defense will have a new meaning in the Larkinson Clan!"



### *Chapter 3375: The Value of Accumulation*

In the end, Ves' confidence in the Bulwark Project was not misplaced.

It was far from guaranteed that he and his team would succeed in turning the Shield of Samar into a masterwork expert mech, but there were simply too many factors that triggered this crucial evolution.

As Ves and the other Journeymen closely observed the invisible changes that qualitatively lifted up the Shield of Samar to the second rung of Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship, they each collected another batch of insights.

Each of them felt closer and more attuned to not just the Shield of Samar, but also other mechs as well. This was the clearest indicator that their affinity for mechs received another bump.

This time, both Ves and Gloriana played a pivotal role in elevating the Shield of Samar into a masterwork mech.

They already improved their mech affinities before and were able to reach the second rung of the ladder much more proficient than in the past.

Their chances of turning the Shield of Samar into a masterwork would have been lower if not for their previous successes.

Ves guessed that only entering into a genuine inspired state would have allowed them to turn the Shield of Samar into a masterwork.

"We didn't need it, though."

This success taught him that it wasn't necessary to chase after this rare and mythical state of mind in order to make a masterwork.

His previous assumption might be wrong. Before, he thought that better mech designers gained the ability to put themselves into an inspired state on demand. This was why these renowned Masters were able to pump out one masterwork mech after another.

Now, Ves believed the truth was much less dramatic. A greater mech affinity, a greater comprehension of the nature of masterworks and a personalized method of improving the quality of a mech also made a difference!

Just recognizing that masterwork mechs were actually extensions of their makers gave Ves a massive advantage. Now that he found a solid direction, he could apply all sorts of targeted solutions to increase his chances of success.

Ves concluded that as long as he continued to improve those aspects, he wouldn't even need to rely on his hammer to climb up the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder!

"The Shield of Samar has become so beautiful now." Gloriana sighed.

For once, she did not complain about the flaws and imperfections of her work. Despite breaking through the masterwork threshold, the Shield of Samar was not a technically perfect mech.

A masterwork was never equivalent to a flawless mech. It was much more about increasing the sum of its parts and improving its effective performance beyond the limitations of its design.

A large part of why the Shield of Samar became so much better was because of how closely its components and its assembled whole aligned with the three key concepts behind the mech. This deliberate change in approach had made a far greater difference than Ves thought.

He was truly grateful for the dwarven Master who designed the excellent Olympus Mons for teaching the Larkinson Clan how a truly powerful mech should be developed.

When Ves recalled the expert mechs he encountered before, he realized that some of them were developed along similar lines. Particularly noteworthy expert mechs such as the Charlemagne, the Bolvar Rage, the Erin Tear and the Gatecrasher all possessed shadows of the same emphasis on themes.

It just wasn't obvious to him at the time. Patriarch Reginald viewed expert mechs as diminished versions of ace mechs, and their relatively lower power level made it difficult to distinguish their more subtle traits.

The differences only became abundantly clear when Ves confronted an actual ace mech up close.

Would he have been able to make this realization without falling into Emperor Rion Aaden's trap? Probably, but it might have happened decades later.

In fact, learning this crucial insight shouldn't have been relevant to him as he wasn't qualified to design an expert mech in the first place. If he hadn't made a deal with Master Willix, he wouldn't have learned so much about high-end mech design throughout the entire year!

What gratified Ves a lot was that he could apply many of his gains in his other work. They remained relevant even if he went back to designing standard mechs.

He already grew eager to start the next round of design projects! His upcoming solo projects were great opportunities for him to perform new experiments and validate his theories!

While Ves continued to immerse himself in his improvements, Gloriana continually showed her appreciation for her new spiritual pet.

"You're the greatest contributor to our success, Alexandria. Without your persistent design network, we would have never been able to share so many benefits with each other. You are the queen of the cats!"

Maow~

The tired cat enjoyed the pampering. All those lengthy sessions of maintaining the design network with only a few hours of rest in between had taken a toll on her as well. She soon returned to Gloriana's mind in order to enjoy a well-deserved vacation.

Her mind already became filled with hopes for the future. She already valued the gift from her husband highly, but the actual results were far more optimistic than she hoped! The ability for mech designers to share so much during their work sessions produced a greater amount of synergy that significantly improved their results!

Gloriana felt a lot more valued now. Alexandria's existence provided the Larkinson Clan with a crucial and enduring advantage.

"Hehehe... I don't have to worry about being sidelined with my new pet." She grinned.

Aside from feeling grateful about her cat, she also internalized all of the lessons she learned in the last nine days.

What stood out the most to her was the challenge of upgrading an existing mech. Her work on the Shield of Samar was akin to giving the former prime mech a second life. She still hadn't been sure whether it was even possible to turn the Shield of Samar into a masterwork through this convoluted process, but the unique mech's metamorphosis provided conclusive proof that it could be done!

"What is even more important is that we don't have to wait to become a Senior or a Master in order to accomplish this feat!"

This gave her a lot of hope that she would be able to upgrade the Dark Zephyr or the Riot to a masterwork mech too one day.

Of course, the Larkinson Clan might opt to start from scratch and supply its expert pilots with brand new expert mechs instead. She could think of a couple of scenarios when this was a more appropriate choice.

Maybe someone stole the expert mechs. Maybe they shattered into pieces in a ruinous battle. Maybe the expert pilots changed so much that their older expert mechs no longer fit their inclinations.

"Even so, I can just focus on turning their new expert mechs into masterworks."

She already collected three masterwork certificates and would soon be awarded with another one. With so many successes, it would become easier for her to make subsequent masterwork mechs. Whether she created them from scratch or upgraded an existing one, it hardly made any difference as long as she continued to continue her string of successes!

Different from the mech designers, Venerable Jannzi didn't think about making other masterworks.

All she cared about was the fact that one of her dreams had finally come true today. She had experienced the optimism and the enthusiasm of the Larkinson Journeymen, but she didn't dare to hope that her Shield of Samar would finally be able to stand on the same level as the Amaranto until her partner finally unleashed its victorious outburst!

"Congratulations." She smiled towards her mech.

Her happiness was indescribable. She always thought her Shield of Samar deserved to be a masterwork a long time ago, but technical limitations had long held it back. Now that it had swapped out its prime mech frame for an expert mech frame, her living mech finally received the opportunity to unfold its true power.

She wanted to take the reborn Shield of Samar as soon as possible. In fact, she would have wanted to take it out for a spin straight away, but she knew that the others needed a good rest before they were ready to preside over the initial testing sessions.

"Just wait." She whispered to her mech. "We will show our new capabilities soon enough."

The living mech seemed to reach out and respond to Jannzi's hopes.

Once the mech designers internalized all of their gains, they all woke up and cleaned up the workshop. The old and replaced parts of the Shield of Samar were no longer useful, so Ves ordered the clan to transfer them to the Graveyard so that they could be fused to her hull.

"It's over." Ves said as he turned to his cats. "We can finally go back to our grand stateroom and enjoy a good night of rest."

"Meow." Lucky yawned.

"Miaow." Clixie lazily blinked her eyes.

Unlike Alexandria, the two older cats could do nothing but act as mascots during these sessions. They were more than willing to leave this boring place.

Just as Ves headed towards the exit, an alarm suddenly sounded by his side.

Gloriana paused in her steps and began to utter a brief cry. She held her belly as if she was suffering from a cramp.

"Ves!"

"What is it?!" He worriedly replied as he rushed to her side.

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

The two cats instantly became alert as well!

"My water... my water is breaking!"

"Huh?!"

Ves was stunned for a moment. He quickly grabbed her wrist and checked the info screen projected by her comm.

According to the readings of her physical condition, she was truly about to go into labour!

His mind completely froze as he had difficulty shifting his thoughts from internalizing his latest mech design insights to realizing that his first child was about to be born!

"Ves!"

Before he could turn sensible again, the bodyguards along with a team of doctors on standby had quickly approached the woman in labor.

"Quick, put her on the floating stretcher!"

"Inform the specialists on standby if they haven't already been alerted!"

"Clear the route to the prepared delivery room!"

Ves still stood rooted on his feet as the prepared team of Lifer doctors efficiently placed his wife and rapidly moved her out of the workshop.

"Congratulations, Ves!" Ketis impishly smiled and patted his shoulder. "You're about to become a father!"

"The Superior Mother will be pleased to become a grandmother." Juliet offered her own congratulations.

"I need to get out of here!"

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Ves set aside everything related to his work and completely became obsessed with greeting his upcoming daughter! He exited the workshop and chased after his wife.

Soon enough, he reached the entrance to a medical bay on the same deck. Ordinarily, this compartment was meant to treat work-related injuries as there were many fabrication halls in the vicinity.

However, the doctors already anticipated that Gloriana was close to giving birth. They had prepared a number of compartments like these to provide the best possible birthing facilities that the Larkinson Clan could provide under the circumstances.

The only location that was more ideal for Gloriana was the Dragon's Den, but it would take far too much time to move her over to the bioresearch vessel.

It didn't matter too much. Unless truly unexpected complications took place, the facilities aboard the Spirit of Bentheim were more than adequate.

A large team of doctors constantly studied and monitored Gloriana and her unborn child's condition to anticipate or prevent any unfortunate circumstances from arising. The Larkinson Clan hardly spared any expense to ensure the coming delivery proceeded as smoothly as possible!

"My child... my first child will soon be born!" Ves nervously uttered as the magnitude of this event sank in. "I'll soon be able to hold my own daughter!"

#### *Chapter 3376: Two Pieces of News*

Two pieces of shocking news spread throughout the Larkinson Clan and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance!

"Our mech designers have upgraded the Shield of Samar into a masterwork expert mech!"

"The patriarch's wife is about to give birth!"

Just one of these sentences was enough to shock the entire expeditionary fleet. The fact that two of them came out at the same time completely exploded the atmosphere in the Golden Skull Alliance!

Aboard the Hemmington Cross, Patriarch Reginald Cross momentarily looked shocked. He quickly schooled his expression though.

"Interesting. I did not expect you to make a second masterwork expert mech. It is worth it to gain your favor."

Although the Cross Clan had built up a bit of resentment towards the Larkinson Clan for getting embroiled in the latter's troubles, these were small matters to the Cross Patriarch.

A good mech designer was hard to find. The opportunity to befriend one with great talent and unique capabilities was priceless! Even if Ves was just a Journeyman right now, his Amaranto and now this new masterwork expert mech fully put him in Reginald's sights!

Elsewhere on the Hemmington Cross, a certain Senior Mech Designer interrupted his design work.

A hint of envy overtook Professor Benedict Cortez. As an experienced Senior, he was no stranger to making masterwork mechs.

However, it was a bit embarrassing that Patriarch Ves already made more masterworks than him! So far, Benedict only fabricated two masterwork mechs back when he was still an upright citizen of the Friday Coalition.

After his exile to the frontier and subsequent return to civilized space, he had to start over from the beginning. The two valuable masterwork certificates he used to show off with pride had long been discarded.

As a result, his current record did not mention any masterwork certificates!

Dark thoughts surged within his powerful mind, but he quickly clamped down on them. "I don't need to compete with kids."

Becoming a Master was all that mattered to him. The feats of other mech designers did not detract from his own interests. In fact, it was the opposite. A stronger allied mech designer provided more interesting opportunities to collaborate and exchange with each other.

Benedict was rational enough to acknowledge that his jealous streak was merely a primal reaction that had no place in the modern age. Humans had long elevated



themselves from ancient times where chest beating and clubbing rivals over the head was the best way to achieve reproductive success!

Ultimately, the professor was happy that his neighbors took a substantial step further in their careers. The more they neared his level, the more they could team up to tackle ambitious projects such as Patriarch Reginald's next expert mech.

The older man steepled his hands in front of his face.

"Their talent and opportunities are greater than mine back when I was their age." He quietly judged. "It's good that they're catching up to me, but I can't let these fresh-faced brats overtake me too quickly. I can't remain complacent despite my enormous head start. I need to put more effort into breaking through my bottleneck!"

His sense of urgency grew stronger. All of the innovations unveiled by the Larkinson Clan were helpful but also overshadowed most of his work. He needed to accelerate his timetable and perform more experiments in order to reinvent his design philosophy and put himself on a stronger footing!

Thinking about the challenges before him put him in a difficult mood. "I can't proceed with half of my experiments without suitable volunteers. How can I attract enough test subjects?"

As Professor Benedict continued to scheme about starting up more ambitious experiments, over at the other side of the fleet, the Glory Seekers all reacted with jubilation at the news!

Unlike Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict, the Hexers did not really pay that much attention to the emergence of another masterwork expert mech. The Larkinsons had already shocked them once before with this feat so the second time was much less dramatic.

What they truly cared about was the upcoming birth of Ves and Gloriana's child!

Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Venerable Brutus Wodin requested permission to visit the Spirit of Bentheim. As soon as the Larkinsons granted their request, they quickly boarded a shuttle that brought them over to the Larkinson fleet under escort.

Venerable Brutus deeply yearned to embrace and protect his new niece. "This shuttle is moving too slowly!"

"Calm down, Brutus." His distant aunt pressed his shoulder. "Your sister will be fine, and so will her child. The Larkinsons have excellent doctors and medical specialists at their disposal. These biotech experts originally came from the Life Research Association, after all. With how much money the clan invested in their designer baby, there is almost no chance of complications."

In these times, childbirth was generally safe and sometimes even painless. There were many technological advancements that could ease the process of delivery, but Brutus knew his sister well enough to know she would want to deliver her baby in the most traditional method possible.

He didn't understand women at all. Why were they so eager to go through so much pain?

Ariadne Wodin smirked at the expert pilot's befuddlement. "You will be an uncle soon. Your younger sister is ahead of you now. You must do your duty to the Wodin Dynasty as well and start a family with a proper woman. Although it is a pity that we cannot match you with the fine ladies back in our home state, there are plenty of candidates in our organization. I shall send the list to your mother Constance and let her choose a woman of her liking."

"I see. I'm not in a hurry, though." Brutus said without much resistance.

He had already been prepared for this long ago. Hexer males never chose their own partners at their own accord. Their mothers or the closest female authority figure always handled these important life decisions on their behalf.

It didn't matter if he was separated from his mother by hundreds of thousands of light-years. Even if he was an entire galaxy away, as long as direct communication still remained possible, Constance Wodin still had the right to rule over his life decisions!

The older woman threw an intrigued look at the young expert pilot. "Your mother and I have grown closer as of late. We correspond frequently over the galactic net. If you are open to this option, I can suggest Constance to consider matching you with a Larkinson."

Brutus looked up at his aunt in surprise. "I have never considered this notion."

"It is too early for me to say whether you should, but in my opinion it is the most strategic choice we can make." Marshal Ariadne calmly said. "It is not that hard to deduce that the Larkinson Clan does not have much affection for us. Patriarch Ves' dependence on our support and the support of the Hexadric Hegemony was initially great, but that has changed now that he has erected his own power base. The bonds between us have grown weaker, and Gloriana alone is not enough to convince the Larkinsons to value our people."

Politics was never one of Brutus' strengths. He was raised to serve women and fight on their behalf. Although his high birth allowed him to see further than many other Hexer boys, it was not proper for him to issue his own opinions on important matters.

He bent his head. "I am at your disposal. I shall accept any woman that my mother approves of. Whether my spouse is a Hexer or a Larkinson is of little consequence to me, though I hope the marriage will help my sister in some way."

"If you start a relationship with a Larkinson, you can get closer to your sister." Ariadne smirked. "Family is everything to their clan."

"Will a Larkinson even want to enter into a relationship with me?" Brutus questioned. "The tastes of foreigners are different from Hexers."

"There are all sorts of women in the galaxy, Brutus. There are almost 200,000 members in the Larkinson Clan. There is bound to be a woman among them who will find you attractive. You are an expert pilot, a handsome boy who has been impeccably trained and a scion of a Hexer dynasty. Any Larkinson would be lucky to gain control over you. In addition, I do not believe their clan will reject the opportunity to forge a closer bond with another expert pilot."

Both sides had too many reasons to encourage this kind of matchup. The only serious question was which woman among the Larkinsons would be able to claim Brutus Wodin.

The marshal already came up with a few notable names.

Legion Commander Casella Ingvar was a prime candidate. She was not only an influential leader of one of the mech legions of the Larkinson Clan, but also possessed an aristocratic background. She was clever, exhibited good etiquette, possessed proven leadership capabilities and was part of the upper ranks.

Even though she used to be a third-rater, so were other powerful members of the clan such as Patriarch Ves and Venerable Joshua. The Glory Seekers had long stopped looking down on people of humble birth after witnessing the meteoric rise of the Larkinson Clan first-hand.

It also helped that Casella was an expert candidate. She wouldn't have been in consideration if she had broken through to expert pilot, but as long as she was not a demigod, she was a lot more pliable and open-minded.

If Commander Casella wasn't open to starting a relationship with Venerable Brutus, then there were always other options. The Larkinson Clan was not lacking in women that may not be Hexers but possessed enough of an attitude to appreciate Brutus' personal qualities.

If necessary, they could even try to match him up with Juliet Stameross.

Though the Glory Seekers had many reasons to dislike the Penitent Seekers, the animosity between the two groups had lessened over the years. They had fought

alongside each other many times. With so many powerful external enemies, their past disagreements weren't a big deal anymore.

As a crucial Journeyman of the Larkinson Clan, Juliet Stameross wielded a substantial amount of influence in the clan. By working alongside Ves and Gloriana, it was practically certain that she would have a bright future ahead of her. If the Brutus could renew her bond to the Hexers, then the Glory Seekers would have a stronger tie to the impressive Design Department of the Larkinson Clan!

While Ariadne Wodin continued to come up with suitable matchups for Brutus, back in the Spirit of Bentheim a lot more people started moving.

Ves' comm received a flood of congratulatory messages from his clansmen. It became so much that he had outright blocked the incoming flow. He was under no mood to address anyone else while he kept his wife company as she was being cared for by a host of medical specialists.

Outside the hatch that led into the prepared medical bay, a growing number of clansmen had gathered.

Venerable Jannzi had arrived first. Other clansmen who were in the vicinity gathered next. Joshua arrived ten minutes later while the other expert pilots were still on their way.

Security officers soon began to force the bulk of the curious and happy clansmen back due to the increasing congestion in the hallway. Only the most notable and higher-ranking clansmen were allowed to stand close to the entrance.

Dignitaries such as Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson, Minister Shederin Purnesse, Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai, Legion Commander Taon Melin, Juliet Stameross, Ketis Larkinson and so on had all gathered together to witness this important occasion.

Other notable leaders such as General Verle, Commander Casella and Commander Melkor were also on their way!

In fact, so many people requested to visit the Spirit of Bentheim that the clan had to reject most of them for fear of exceeding the limits of the factory ship's life support systems!

It was not surprising that so many people wanted to get close to this occasion. They were aware that the Larkinson Clan was about to change forever... The heir of their most important leader was about to be born.

### *Chapter 3377: Succession System*

While a growing number of Larkinsons gathered in the hallway outside of the crucial compartment, a nervous-looking Ves stood in a waiting room.

"Miaow~"

"Meow."

Both Clixie and Lucky hugged and pressed their bodies against him in order to calm his tensions and distract him from his concerns.

Dr. Ranya Wodin in her customary lab coat emerged from an examination chamber.

"Sir."

"How is she doing, doctor?"

"Her condition is normal at the moment." Gloriana's cousin calmly replied. "We have been monitoring your wife and the fetus non-stop and nothing has given us cause for concern so far. While there are a few wrinkles in the data, they are all within tolerance. Not just our doctors, but also the renowned medical professors retained by Witshaw & Yeneca agree on this. Designer babies are healthier and more resilient than their normal counterparts. They are also meant to impose less of a burden to their mothers. In short, we have the situation completely under control. Neither your wife nor your upcoming child are at risk."

Ves grew a little more optimistic after hearing this, but he still hugged Clixie close to his chest in order to comfort himself.

His upcoming child was not a regular designer baby. Witshaw & Seneca might know a lot about the biology of its products, but the highly reputable biotech company had no idea that Ves experimented on the fetus!

Although Ves never sensed that his attempts to give his unborn daughter a powerful spiritual boost led to any danger, who knew whether spiritually empowering his child would produce any complications during this stressful moment!

This was the first time that he had done anything like this. In hindsight, his actions were reckless to the extreme, but his love for his child had compelled him to take action. If his attempt worked out, then his new daughter would start off her life at a much higher starting point than almost every other human in the galaxy!

All he had to do now was to stay close and be ready to intervene if his baby's abnormally powerful spirituality produced any adverse reactions.

Even though Ves knew little about childbirth and medical science, he considered himself to be a decent spiritual surgeon. No one in the fleet was more knowledgeable and experienced than him when it came to operating on other people's spiritualities!

"How long do I have to wait until my wife starts to push out our baby?" Ves asked.

"It depends. Your wife has accepted only light treatment to shorten and accelerate the early labor phase, so she has a long ordeal ahead of her. Once we have completed our deep scans on her body, we will move her to a comfortable space where you and a select number of guests can keep her company if she accepts visitors."

Dr. Ranya imparted a lot of additional information to Ves. There was a lot involved when it came to delivering babies and he did not pretend to know anything about it. His wife was experiencing regular contractions that would only grow more frequent and painful as the important moment neared.

"Natural childbirth is a marathon, not a sprint." She told him. "Gloriana might not want you to be around all the time, especially when she is in an embarrassing position. Make sure to be available if she demands your presence but give her the privacy she needs if she doesn't want you around."

"Understood."

The following hours passed slowly for Ves. In this stressful and happy occasion, he felt almost completely helpless.

It was strange for him to be in this position. He could design, build and repair all kinds of huge and powerful mechs. He effectively controlled a powerful clan organization that controlled assets worth trillions of hex credits. He was also able to create powerful spiritual products that were sometimes mistaken as gods!

Yet for all of his authority and might, he could do little to alleviate the birthing process. Unless any spiritual complications emerged, he would remain as powerless as any father in this circumstance!

Ves kept his wife company for an hour. It was too bad that Gloriana wasn't a good conversation partner at this time. Aside from talking about how to name their baby and how to raise her, her frequent pain along with growing mood swings caused her to become increasingly more prickly!

"Get out!"

"What? Why?"

"I want to take a bath!"

Ves scratched his head. "That doesn't mean I have to leave your side."

"I SAID GET OUT!"

After Gloriana essentially booted him out of the medical bay, he came face to face with a large number of waiting Larkinsons.

Ves noted that many of the clansmen were originally stationed on other vessels such as the Graveyard or the Vivacious Wal. They had all transferred over as soon as they received word.

There were other guests as well. Glory Seekers such as Marshal Ariadne Wodin, Venerable Brutus Wodin looked even more eager than Ves to greet the new baby!

Interestingly enough, neither Patriarch Reginald nor Professor Benedict of the Cross Clan opted to pay a friendly visit.

It wasn't necessary for them to do so and Ves did not really mind their decision. The Cross Clan showed enough consideration for sending a small delegation of officials that were already being received by Minister Shederin.

Ves first opted to join the circle of expert pilots. Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Orfan, Venerable Dise and Venerable Brutus had all gathered together to discuss the baby and other topics.

He distinctly noted that Venerable Stark was not present, but he had already expected that. She was not a Larkinson so she did not have a direct stake in the succession of the clan. In addition, her tragic experiences left her heart devoid of love and affection. Not even the sight of a baby could make her smile!

"Hello, fellows. Welcome to the Spirit of Bentheim, Brutus."

The pilots all saluted or greeted him. Their different wills all gave hints of what they thought about this important event.

Not surprisingly, Brutus cared the most about what was happening. The other Larkinsons weren't close family to Ves and Gloriana so their interest in the upcoming birth was more general.

"How is my sister?" Brutus impatiently asked.

"She's doing well as far as I know." He answered. "There are so many doctors looking after her and our baby that nothing will get past their sight. For now, we should just wait and disturb the people inside as little as possible."

"Can I get inside?"



"I'll pass on a notification to Dr. Ranya. She will let you in if Gloriana is in the mood."

Once Ves placated Brutus, he turned to his own expert pilots.

"You don't need to stay so close. We're not about to fight a mech battle or anything."

"We can't help but stay and see what happens." Venerable Joshua responded. "I mean, the two of you are our best and most important mech designers. If anything happens... who knows whether I will ever get my own expert mech."

Ves placed a hand on Joshua's shoulder. "Hey, you will get your next expert mech soon. I promise that. No matter what happens today, I will always fulfill my duties as a mech designer. The Chimera Project is already at an incredibly advanced stage. Even with the distraction of a baby, you will get your long-awaited machine within a month."

He did not promise to deliver a masterwork expert mech, even though he was optimistic about his chances.

It was true that Ves invested a lot in the Chimera Project. It was also true that he intended to apply his latest insights on the expert mech design.

However, even with the help of Vulcan, masterwork mechs were never guaranteed at his current stage. He had not yet reached that point and he wouldn't be for a long time.

After talking to the other expert pilots, Ves left them be and approached the gathering of chief ministers.

Magdalena Larkinson, Novilon Purnesse and Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson wielded the most power other than Ves. In practice, they pretty much ran the clan on a day to day basis.

Once they exchanged greetings and well wishes, the Purnesser among them brought up a serious topic.

"Have you ever made any considerations about the succession of the Larkinson Clan?" The only native second-rater among the chief ministers asked.

Both Magdalena and Raymond were caught off-guard. This was not a light subject. As trueborn Larkinsons, they were unaccustomed to the kind of succession and dynastic politics that produced a lot of conflict in other organizations.

Ves frowned. "Should I?"

"You should." Chief Minister Novilon replied. "It is better to decide upon these matters early rather than later. You need to decide whether your position of patriarch is

inheritable or whether it is decided by appointment or election. Right now, our statutes don't provide any clarity on this subject."

"That's by design. To be honest, I haven't made a decision yet. That's why I want to stall this issue until I know what I want." Ves remarked.

Novilon didn't look surprised. "Let us help you make your decision. In my opinion, it is best for the Larkinson Clan if the highest office is an elected position. It is the fairest, most equitable and most expected manner to determine our leader. You can decide whether the patriarch should be directly voted in the office by our clansmen or whether the patriarch must be nominated by the Larkinson Assembly."

If he had to make a choice between the two, Ves preferred to give every clansman an equal voice. Leaving the decision up to the Larkinson Assembly tended to concentrate more power to the elites, though the wise men and women in the legislative organ were unlikely to put idiots in charge.

Yet the prospect of letting other people decide who got to be the patriarch did not sit well with Ves. This was his clan. He held most of the shares of the LMC, which pretty much funded all of the expenditures. Why shouldn't he have the greatest voice?

Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson raised his eyebrow. "Are you thinking about turning the Larkinson Clan into your own kingdom, Ves?"

Ves frowned. "I'm not a fan of feudal systems. They're antiquated and unnecessary."

"Don't be so quick to discount them. They are still popular in this day and age. You see, they provide the greatest justification for transferring power to your descendants. If you treat our clan like a possession, then it is in the best interest for you to groom a competent heir that will take over your throne one day."

A part of Ves felt repulsed by this. Another part of him is deeply craved to implement such an arrangement. He did not want his clan to fall into the wrong hands. Only someone absolutely trustworthy such as his own children should be allowed to lead the clan that he had painstakingly built!

He took a deep breath. "I can't make a decision now. I'll think about it and give you a reply when I have made up my mind. For now, I just want to be a new father today. Whether my daughter is slated to inherit my clan or not is a discussion for another time. I don't intend to go anywhere, so there is no point in deciding early."

Chief Minister Novilon nodded and accepted this answer without any resistance. He knew when he should advance and when to retreat. He was already content that he had inserted the idea in Ves' mind. As far as he was concerned, the succession of the clan remained a huge vulnerability unless it was properly addressed!

"Will we all call your daughter a princess someday?" Raymond mirthfully asked.

"I don't know. I won't mind if she really insists on becoming a princess."

"You shouldn't spoil your daughter so much." Magdalena warned. "Love her all you want, but make sure to set firm boundaries."

"Hey, my mom is the Superior Mother. I know exactly how to raise a child! My daughter will grow up to become the best-behaved woman in the clan!"

#### *Chapter 3378: Wonder of Nature*

Talking to other people helped distract Ves and pull his thoughts away from all of the doom scenarios in his mind.

The downside of having an overactive imagination was the tendency to entertain too many negative thoughts. There were many ways that anything could go wrong and thinking about them naturally made him feel more concerned.

In that sense, talking about completely different matters helped purge his mind of unnecessary or detrimental distractions and helped ground him to reality.

He didn't know how much time went by. Even though he felt mentally worn out after working continuously on upgrading the Shield of Samar, there was no way he wanted to leave at this time!

Ves only took a few breaks in order to sate his hunger and quench his thirst, but that was all. Just thinking about what his wife must be going through at this time puts his own situation into perspective. He wasn't the one who was enduring all of the painful cramps and the other physiological changes that women had to go through in their lives.

At some points, Gloriana invited Ves, her brother Brutus and various other people to keep her company.

In order to minimize any dangerous transmission of germs, everyone was forced to go through decontamination before being led into a sterilized compartment.

Everyone aside from Ves also had to wear at least a thin, isolating suit that reduced the chance of undesirable transmissions even further. This applied especially to Clixie, much to her dismay.

"Miaow! Miaow!"

Cats weren't supposed to wear vacsuits, not even one sized and fitted for their species. Clixie disliked the way the suit pressed onto her body and prevented her from smelling the scents in the air or grooming her own fur.

Lucky was given a pass as he was a mechanical creature that did not inherently play host to any germs. He just had to endure an extra long decontamination session before he was led inside.

"Ahh! I can feel it. I can feel her." Gloriana painfully groaned as she leaned back onto her cushioned seat. "I don't think it will take much longer. AAHH! I should have decided to undergo more extensive treatment. This pain is starting to become unbearable! AAAAAHH!"

Ves became concerned. He held her sweaty palm and felt her grip his flesh.

"You're doing alright, Gloriana. I'll be at your side all the time."

"AAH! THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY! YOU'RE NOT THE ONE SUFFERING THROUGH ALL OF THESE INFERNAL CRAMPS! WHY DON'T YOU PUT YOURSELF IN MY POSITION SOMETIME?! AAAAAHH!"

Her contractions gradually got worse and worse. At some point, the doctors moved her to the delivery chamber that they had especially prepared for the occasion. The clan even transferred over a whole suite of medical machines from the Dragon's Den in order to address almost every possible medical emergency that might occur during this time.

Most of the guests that had kept Gloriana company were asked to leave. The last thing the doctors wanted was to crowd the pregnant mother with too many familiar faces.

Even Brutus had to wait outside.

In the end, only Ves, Lucky and Clixie were allowed to stay with Gloriana as she was undergoing her most difficult time to date.

Screams constantly escaped her throat as her body seemed to be nearing a critical threshold. All kinds of projections showed drastic fluctuations. More and more medical professionals entered the chamber in order to assist in the birthing process or remain on standby until their expertise was needed.

"Meow..."

"Miaow..."

Ves caressed both of his cats. "We can't do anything for Gloriana. We can only wait for her to overcome this hurdle."

Time slowed down more than ever for him. Each and every scream uttered by his wife made him feel pained. Yet with each spike of pain, her mind and spirit became more alive in a way that Ves had never seen before.

What amazed him even further was that his baby's spirituality began to grow active as well!

It was as if mother and child became in sync. Strange and subtle spiritual interactions occurred that flew completely over Ves' head. He grew worried about what was happening when the spiritual activity of his child began to spike even further.

Each time Gloriana experienced another painful sensation, the baby inside her belly seemed to share in her distress!

"Calm down, please!" Ves softly whispered.

Unfortunately, there was little he could do. He was completely clueless and did not dare to reach out to his daughter.

"Wait a minute. Maybe my mother can help!"

Ves reached out to the Superior Mother. As soon as he conveyed his request, the delivery chamber welcomed a powerful presence!

Many of the doctors abruptly paused as a giant, translucent hand briefly materialized into existence! Its index finger lightly poked Gloriana's belly.

Soon enough, the baby's spiritual convulsions toned down a bit. While they hadn't quieted down entirely, Ves no longer felt as concerned. He trusted his mother and did not believe she intervened without a reason.

The Superior Mother's giant hand soon disappeared from sight, but the presence hovering above everyone's heads still lingered to a degree.

Various people reacted to this unexpected phenomenon in different ways.

The Lifer doctors became interested in what had changed. The Hexers became more pious and worshipful after witnessing the descent of their Supreme. Others became paralyzed or shocked at what just happened.

"Resume your duties!" Dr. Ranya ordered. "A baby still needs to be delivered. Focus on your immediate responsibilities. You can satisfy your curiosity after Gloriana has given birth!"

This strange event turned into a small interlude that everyone eventually threw into the back of their minds. Though Ves and Gloriana clearly sensed that the Superior Mother was still paying a lot of attention to what was taking place, they did not reject the snooping.

In fact, they welcomed her presence!

"I really hope mom knows she is about to become a grandmother today." He whispered.

If not, there was still a way for him to pass on the good news.

With the Superior Mother watching over her, Gloriana became a bit more reassured. She endured the pain as best she could and followed each and every instruction whenever possible.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

What happened in the next moment seemed to pass by in an instant. It took much longer for Gloriana to complete the delivery, but to Ves every unique moment began to blur together.

He and his cats became completely irrelevant as they stood out of the way while all of the doctors efficiently performed their individual tasks.

Blood and other fluids flowed out only to be removed a short time later.

Soon enough, Ves heard a magical cry.

"...waaaaaaahhhh...!"

Actually, Ves heard two cries!

...mmiiiiieeeeewwww...

Some of the doctors briefly froze when they encountered a completely unexpected situation, but Dr. Ranya and the other Larkinsons who were already used to witnessing weirdness quickly urged their colleagues to continue their duties.

Ves became entranced as the tiny presence that usually resided quietly inside his wife had unfolded in a way that became completely unforgettable to him. His eyes didn't even register anything to him as he had completely immersed himself in his spiritual senses.

"A new life..."

A lot of different thoughts swirled through his mind as he processed the genuine miracle that had taken place before his eyes.

If he already thought that his baby was remarkably strong in spirit back when she was growing inside Gloriana's belly, then the way his daughter sparked to life like a blooming flower was completely precious!

Ves had always thought that his unique ability to create new spiritual life forms was already a wonder in itself.

Yet compared to the spiritual products he made on a frequent basis, none of his attempts at creating them was as impressive and magical as a real child being born in an old but effective process.

It turned out that nature was the most impressive creator of life. Pretenders like Ves still had a long way to go before they could match nature's glory!

While Ves gained a whole different perspective on the wonder of creating new life, the Superior Mother acted as well.

Power seemed to flow from the ceiling and poured into the baby. The fluctuations were more subtle this time, but an exhausted Gloriana was still able to sense a part of what was happening.

She never entertained the notion that the Superior Mother was doing anything adverse to her new baby. She had complete trust in the autonomous ancestral spirit, especially when there was a strong family relation!

The Superior Mother radiated both contentment and maternal affection as she finished showering her new granddaughter with her blessing. Nothing much seemed to have changed, but whatever happened must have been good.

It was only later that Gloriana and more people noticed that the baby did not come out alone. Hints of a small white kitten poked out of the tiny head of the baby. This initially caused a lot of concern among the doctors, but all of the sensor readings showed that the baby was healthy and that her condition closely matched their expectations.

Gentle hands slowly cleaned the baby and wrapped her into a blanket. Slowly, Gloriana was allowed to hold her child in her arms for the first time.

"She's... so tiny." She hoarsely said as happiness flowed through her body.

The smile she directed towards her little baby was so tender and motherly that not even Ves could believe that she could be so gentle!

Tears of happiness already streaked her imperfect face. Gloriana had already poured out a host of emotions that not only relieved her pain, but also bonded her closer to her own offspring.

The same went for Ves. He slowly walked up and looked down at his exhausted wife and child.

"You're right... she's so small."



Though a newborn never exactly looked pretty from an objective standpoint, both husband and wife completely disregarded this as they both thought that their daughter was the most beautiful baby in the galaxy!

The bonds of love between the three grew stronger and more intimate. Even though Ves did not sense the establishment of any new spiritual connections, to him the bonds of love were much stronger and more permanent than in any spiritual network!

"Can I... hold her?" Ves carefully asked.

His utterly exhausted but relieved wife looked as if she was about to say no, but she reluctantly decided otherwise.

"Just... for a moment."

A light weight pressed down his arms as Ves directly looked into his pure and innocent child. His daughter seemed completely oblivious at everything. Yet when he carefully touched her spirit, he got the sense that she was just starting to get accustomed to all of her new sensations.

What was more noteworthy to Ves was the appearance of his daughter's permanent companion.

Just as designed, the companion spirit seed that Ves had implanted in his daughter a long time ago had finally activated. What appeared to be a small, white kitten had emerged. She looked similar to a tiny persian cat.

Unlike his daughter, her infant companion spirit was a lot more aware of herself. The cat looked a little bit lost and maybe even hungry.

"Gloriana?"

"Yes...?"

"You should bring out Alexandria."

"Are you sure...?"

"I think it would be helpful."

Ves carefully took their daughter back to his wife, who soon began to breastfeed the little baby for the first time.

At the same time, Alexandria had emerged as well, though she kept her immaterial body invisible. The red cat quietly hovered close to the baby and somehow found a way to feed the latest cat to join the family.

The entire delivery chamber quieted down. Many medical specialists had quietly left as their services hadn't been needed.

Ves fully relaxed as he saw his daughter and her companion spirit looking as healthy as he could hope!

"Gloriana?"

"Yes?"

"What shall we name our child?"

The tired but incredibly happy mother thought for a moment. The two had already talked extensively on this topic. They had narrowed down their list of suggestions but hadn't entirely been able to settle on a single choice.

Now, as Gloriana quietly looked down at her beautiful baby girl, she could think of only a single name.

"Her name is..."

*Chapter 3379: Slide to Monarchism*

The entire Larkinson Clan spontaneously celebrated a holiday of sorts.

It was strange. Plenty of children were being born in the fleet. The entire fleet had gained enough population to turn into a moving city, which presented a host of new problems.

Yet the joy of welcoming new children and raising them in a comfortable environment was worth all of the effort. With a fantastic ship like the Vivacious Wal in the Larkinson fleet, the clan was able to offer a standard and mode of living that emulated life on planets as closely as possible.

The abundance of facilities and the family friendly policies set by the clan administration encouraged a lot of Larkinsons to start new families. More and more couples tied the knot and new babies were being born every passing month.

However, the appearance of one particular baby attracted the attention of every Larkinson.

The founder and current leader of their clan had finally produced an heir!

The happiness and jubilation that surged from the clansmen was unexpectedly great! Although the Larkinson Clan technically wasn't a monarchy, the behavior exhibited by

the rank and file was reminiscent of the reaction of citizens living in a well-liked monarchical state!

Everyone acted as if Ves was their king and sovereign and that it was already set in stone that his children would inherit his leadership position one day!

Some of the more sober, higher-ranking leaders recognized what was happening. Their thoughts on the phenomenon were rather mixed.

On the other hand, Ves effectively built the clan from the ground up. Even if plenty of other competent and talented Larkinsons rose up and excelled in their own duties, no one discounted the pivotal role that their patriarch played in pulling their clan up to the same height as other powerful second-class organizations!

Despite the occasional setbacks and near-ruinous disasters, his success was undeniable. The Larkinson Clan was still heavily reliant on his accomplishments to this day.

Since so many Larkinsons not only witnessed but participated in the endeavors that enabled the clan to rise, they developed a great appreciation for the principal person that made it all possible.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, their regard for their patriarch became so strong that they treated him as if he was their king.

The ironic part of all of this was that neither Ves nor the clan administration explicitly pushed this stance. It just spread organically among the clansmen as their own experiences effectively indoctrinated them into putting Ves up a pedestal.

This had many consequences, one of which was celebrating the birth of a specific child even though it seemed irrational to single out a specific baby!

Technically, the daughter of Ves Larkinson and Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson was just an ordinary newborn clan member. The baby girl did not possess any more rights or privileges than any other baby born into the clan.

Yet everyone assumed the child was special. From the extravagant amount of money spent to breed a designer baby to the support of two of the most important people in the clan, there was no doubt that even if the girl was not a princess, she was effectively royalty in the clan of her birth!

This was a good development to those who believed in Ves' vision and leadership. Friends and loyalists such as General Verle, Venerable Joshua and Calabast each saw more advantages than disadvantages in this development.

"We need strong leadership."

"We need continuity."

"We must retain the status quo."

There were other Larkinsons that held the opposite view. There weren't many of them, but people like Venerable Jannzi, Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse and other concerned Larkinsons became profoundly worried at the current direction of the clan.

"Our clansmen deserve a voice."

"How can we stop the abuses of our patriarch?"

"Will our clan continue to descend until it turns into Ves' personal kingdom?"

These people strongly maintained the ideal that the Larkinson Clan was not solely the property of its founder. Though the patriarch had indeed gone above and beyond to turn it into a thriving family organization, the interests of all of the other people that make up the population should be met as well!

In truth, the division that was just starting to emerge was not unique in the clan. Since humanity ascended to the stars, questions of rights, ownership and power continued to plague the colonists that settled on different planets.

These conflicts usually resulted in two different outcomes.

When the sponsors, funders, owners or entrepreneurs that organized and led the colonization effort won the power struggle, they usually set up kingdoms and empires that solidified their power.

One of the defining traits of these feudalistic states was that the right to rule was intricately bound to inheritance. Bloodline and parentage were the principal factors that determined whether someone held authority.

Such states tended to concentrate much of their wealth and power to the ruling class. The major downside to this was that commoners who worked harder or possessed more talent often did not earn the status and rewards that they deserved.

States could go in the other direction as well.

When the masses of a colonized planet successfully wrenched power away from the original founders, they formed republics where leaders were either voted into office or decided through other means.

The central assumption of these kinds of states was that no one should possess a greater right to rule than others. Just because the parents were rich, smart or powerful didn't mean that their children automatically got to be in charge!

In theory, the most competent leaders who earned the greatest public support held office.

In practice, it rarely worked this way.

Different people had different definitions of what constituted a good leader.

Sometimes the people were so misled that they no longer had the ability to discern what was actually good.

Competing factions pushed different visions and sometimes came to blows because of their disagreements.

While all of this was happening, plenty of self-serving grifters wormed their way into the political structure. They either harvested donations while pretending to do something useful or misused public resources to fulfill their own private interests!

All of these outcomes happened in every corner of human space. There was so much dysfunction in human space that the galactic community never settled the debate on whether republicanism or monarchism was the better model of a state.

From the behavior of the overwhelming majority of Larkinsons, Venerable Jannzii had a sinking realization that the clan was already sliding in an undesirable direction.

A fierce scowl appeared on her face. "Do these idiots even know who they are idolizing?! This is the same guy that has flung our clan into battles where we have lost half of our mech pilots not once, but several times!"

It boggled her mind how a couple of joyous and celebratory events such as the Miracle Couple's marriage or the birth of their first child could make so many clansmen forget about the tragedies they suffered.

Jannzi never doubted that Ves could be brilliant sometimes. His successes were undeniable, but the way he disregarded the human cost he incurred was galling. The Larkinson Clan could be so much more than a vehicle of his personal ambitions if the clansmen just woke up to the truth!

"I just need... to open all of their eyes." She whispered to herself and she raised her fist.

She gazed up at her renewed personal mech. The Shield of Samar, now transformed into a powerful masterwork expert mech, beckoned to her like an old lover and trusty partner.

It did not escape the fact that she owed much of her own success to the current patriarch as well. It was practically a dream for any expert pilot to receive a powerful

expert mech, and a masterwork at that, but Ves had managed to do the impossible as a Journeyman once again.

She did not feel entangled over the issue. To her, developing mechs and leading the clan were entirely separate matters. One could be good in one area and detestable in another area.

"Ves should just stick to what he is best at and leave the running of the clan to other Larkinsons!"

The reactions of all of the Larkinsons around her made her realize the urgency of her mission. Too many people in the clan were oblivious to the dangers of putting all of their trust in their current leader.

"If the father is already a disaster, what of his children?" Jannzi asked.

She feared the child that had just been born even more than her parents. At least Ves grew up in simpler times as part of the original Larkinson Family. No matter how depraved he turned out later on, he still possessed a shred of decency and honor in his heart.

As for his daughter, Jannzi was not as optimistic. The humility and restraint of the old family was replaced by greed and ambition. All of the bad habits might pass on from father to child, especially when they were both so powerful and privileged.

In case her fears about the daughter came true one day, Jannzi needed to be ready to shield the innocent from the damage inflicted by the future tyrant.

"I'm going to need your help. Shield of Samar." She softly asked her mech. "Let's see what we can do now that you've finished your transformation."

Soon, she suited up and hopped into the cockpit of her mech. What stood out from her was how everything had changed, yet remained familiar as well. The entire interior of the cockpit had been upgraded, but the layout and the structure still resembled the old one in many important ways.

"You're good to go, Venerable Jannzi." Ketis told her over the communication channel. "We don't know what to expect from your first activation, but just in case, we will be towing your expert mech out into space first before you can interface with it for the first time. Please remain patient."

"Understood."

Both Ves and Gloriana had become so besotted with their new baby girl that they were completely unavailable to supervise the initial testing sessions of the new Shield of Samar.

It did not matter too much. Ketis and Juliet could undertake this responsibility just as well. Both of them had already tapped into the telemetry of the Shield of Samar so that they could pay careful attention to its performance.

While the Design Department already came up with a certain estimation of the Shield of Samar's performance, all of the modeling and simulation results only applied to a normal expert mech.

No one was able to guess how much better a masterwork version of the finished Bulwark Project performed.

If the Amaranto was a good indication, then Venerable Jannzi ought to be able to exert a disproportionate amount of power compared to other expert pilots!

When the large and heavy mech was finally towed into a zone of space that was surrounded by a large and active interference field, Ketis finally allowed Jannzi to activate her new expert mech.

Just seconds after the initial systems warmed up, the entire Shield of Samar blazed to life in a strong and exuberant fashion!

The entire Shield of Samar glowed in welcoming blue as it spontaneously resonated with its only partner. Despite the complete overhaul of the entire mech frame, the identity of the mech still remained the same. Not a single sign of incompatibility or unfamiliarity emerged during the entire interfacing process!

To Venerable Jannzi, it was like coming home after a long day of work. The only difference was that her abode changed from a single house into a sprawling mansion!

The new Shield of Samar was so much greater that Jannzi felt as if she could properly propagate her power for the first time since she advanced to expert pilot!

"This... this is what I have sought for all these years!"

Not only that, but her Shield of Samar also gained several powerful new enhancements that enabled her to exert her willpower more easily in specific ways!

Her eyes opened up as she and her expert mech eagerly activated one of the new functions.

"My mech is as heavy as a planet! My will is as dense as a black hole! Gravity Well!"

In an instant, the masterwork expert mech generated a strong attraction around its frame that already began to pull in some of the closer bots!



### *Chapter 3380: Her Name*

While Venerable Jannzi explored the capabilities of her reinvented Shield of Samar for the first time, two happy parents were enjoying their parental leave in their grand stateroom.

"She's so cute." Gloriana impishly smiled at the baby sleeping against her chest.

"Miaow~"

Clixie wondrously looked up at the baby. Even though she wasn't a human, the cat felt the strong urge to watch over the newborn.

Rubarthan Sentinel Cats were originally developed to protect and accompany rich little girls. While bots could perform the same job as well, the difference was that cats were capable of displaying genuine love and affection.

At this moment, her genetic programming already came into force. As long as her presence wasn't unwelcome, Clixie would always be there to banish the girl's loneliness!

The only problem was that the new baby didn't appear to be alone.

Maow.

Alexandria, who rested on Gloriana's shoulder, issued a special cry.

A moment later, a smaller and softer cry emerged from the baby.

...Miew...

A small white Persian spiritual kitten emerged from the baby's head. The little intangible puffball wobbled in the air as she tried and failed to reach the older red cat.

Maow maow~

Gloriana's companion spirit shook her head and flew forth to clutch the white kitten in her paws. Alexandria then proceeded to give the kitten she considered to be her own child a bath!

...Miew miew!...

Clixie's tail drooped at the sight. She couldn't do what Alexandria could do. She was the only cat that was 'normal' in the family, and that came with more downsides than upsides.

"It's okay, Clixie." Ves picked the furry cat up and rubbed her head. "You'll be allowed to cuddle with our baby soon enough. Her immune system is already strong since she's a designer baby, but it's best to wait for another week until her resistance to germs kicks into gear."

"Miaow."

As a designer baby, Ves and Gloriana's daughter was doomed to live an abnormal life. The extensive gene modification regime commissioned from Witshaw & Yeneca did not end at the moment of birth.

The new member of the family would continue to receive highly-targeted injections, medication and genetic treatments throughout her entire youth and adolescence.

Each of them had a purpose. Whether it was activating latent genes or suppressing problematic ones, even the growth of a designer baby had to be controlled.

If designer children did not receive targeted adjustments for an extended amount of time, then the odds were great that they would develop serious or even fatal defects. Due to their highly altered genetic profile, they were never supposed to grow up like normal children!

However, all of this effort was worth it in the end. Once the designer children grew up, they became smarter, healthier, more observant and maybe even more long-lived than their average counterparts.

This was one of the main ways families and dynasties remained successful and in power from generation to generation. They invested a disproportionate amount of money and resources into raising talented and excellent offspring.

It didn't matter whether all of their talent and ability were manufactured. As long as it was possible to make a son or daughter more impressive by spending lots of money, there were plenty of parents who would go into debt just to give their descendants a better future!

As Ves and Gloriana sat next to each other in order to gaze lovingly at their new baby, neither of them thought about the price they paid to Witshaw & Yeneca. As far as they were concerned, they would have spent ten times the money just to give their baby a marginally higher starting point!

"Look. Aurelia has your nose." Gloriana softly cooed as she rocked her sleeping baby.

"I can already tell that she will grow up to be a bright young woman one day." Ves said as he embraced his wife.

Aurelia Wodin-Larkinson. That was their baby girl's name.

A lot of heated and contentious discussion preceded the official naming of their child. Ves and Gloriana both held different ideas on how their first daughter should be called.

For some reason, Gloriana strongly favored names that followed the same pattern as her own name. Whether it was Viviana or Mariana, her baby had to carry a name that ended with -ana in order to make her perfect!

Ves heavily disagreed with this naming scheme. He didn't want Gloriana to treat their daughter like a miniature version of herself!

"Your mother Constance didn't bestow you with a name that ends with -ance." He pointed out at the time. "So don't tell me this is a sacred tradition or something. Our baby deserves to have a name that befits her unique identity. She is my daughter as well as yours, you know."

His suggestions skewed away from anything that resembled the name of his wife. He came up with suggestions like Celeste and Katerina that were supposed to be both classy and distinct.

It took a lot of effort, but Ves had succeeded in winning this argument. The final list of names they eventually settled upon did not contain any names that ended with -ana.

This was how their daughter became Aurelia.

As a concession to Ves getting his way, Gloriana insisted that their daughter's last name be known as Wodin-Larkinson.

"She doesn't need a compound name, honey. She's a Larkinson and nothing else!"

"She's my child as well, Ves, and I do not want her to forget where the other half of her bloodline comes from! I don't want her to grow up thinking that she doesn't have any other family besides other Larkinsons. Our baby has two grandmothers!"

Ves eventually acquiesced to this demand. In practice, it didn't matter as long as their daughter was solely raised in the clan. With the strong institutions and culture of the Larkinsons, he had no worries that his wife would succeed in turning their daughter into a Hexer.

Aurelia was an elegant and sophisticated name for a girl. To Ves, it fit well for a woman that was being groomed to become a leader. The name managed to hit the right balance where it sounded classy enough without becoming too pretentious.

"Oh, her little snowball is cute as well! Alexandria will take excellent care of Mana, hihihi!"

It turned out that Gloriana did get her way, eventually.

She might have missed the opportunity to bestow her baby with a name that ended with -ana, but she didn't let go of the chance to name the infant companion spirit that was born from Aurelia's spirituality!

Thankfully, unlike with her own companion spirit, Gloriana kept the name of Aurelia's life-long spiritual cat short and succinct.

She didn't even ask Ves where Mana came from. Perhaps she already suspected the truth or perhaps she thought that Alexandria's creation automatically meant her baby gained a cat as well.

Whatever the case, the new mother had become far too obsessed about her child to waste her time on other distractions.

Soon enough, Mana flew back into Aurelia's tiny head to rest as well.

In fact, whether it was the baby or her companion spirit, both of them slept for the majority of time since their birth!

Little Aurelia only woke up long enough to cry and feed before she slept again. This pattern repeated frequently, and Gloriana personally attended to the baby's needs each and every time.

This was both an exhausting and fulfilling process. Gloriana enjoyed feeding Aurelia the natural way. Ves could clearly see their bonds of love deepening with each session.

Sometimes, Aurelia had to be fed with an artificial, custom-made solution formulated by Witshaw & Yeneca.

Gloriana's body wasn't able to provide the special nutrients and other organic substances a designer baby needed to grow in a special way.

For some reason, their little daughter always noticed the difference. They already tried to have a nanny bot feed Aurelia, but she continued to cry until an actual human held her and soothed her to sleep.

"What a fussy girl." Ves exasperatingly said.

Changing diapers was never a problem, much to his relief. Aurelia wore outfits that incorporated a handy waste management system that pushed all of the output into a small canister that bots could automatically replace when filled.

There was little the parents could do about the crying, though. Even though their girl slept most of the time, she had to be served whenever she woke up! It started to drive Ves crazy and they only had their daughter for a few days!

The love and fulfillment that he and his wife gained from Auralia made up for it, though. All of their exhaustion and irritation meant nothing as long as they could keep their baby happy and healthy!

After Gloriana had her fill of holding her new baby, she moved over to a new chamber in their grand stateroom. She personally overhauled the interior until it turned into a miniature paradise for young ladies.

The new room featured pink walls, pastel decorations, a ceiling with twinkling stars, a soft, high-tech crib and hundreds of toys suitable for children of various ages.

Ves was particularly impressed by the stuffed animal bots and immense dollhouse.

The former were toy bots with a soft and fluffy exterior. They could act cute, move on their own and hold conversations depending on their model. Ves made sure that their programming and construction didn't contain any risk factors.

As for the dollhouse... that was Gloriana's handiwork.

He didn't know how she managed to squeeze the time to design and fabricate something so disturbingly intricate and life-like!

The dollhouse was modeled after an imperial palace. It featured an imperial throne room where the tiny empress was meant to hold court in front of dozens of ministers and high officials.

What was even more absurd was that the empress had 6 consorts and 36 children!

Ves knew them quite well, because his wife demanded that he make each and every AI-driven doll by hand.

He was supposed to give the characters more life so that his daughter would have more fun playing with the extravagant dollhouse.

Of course, it would take some years before his baby was even ready to play with the dollhouse.

"I should make my own toys for our girl." He grumbled.

Once Gloriana finished with laying Aurelia in her crib, she and Ves quietly left their daughter's room.

Neither of them worried too much about their baby. She was the most guarded child in the fleet. Not only did her room contain a whole suite of security and detection measures, a team of loyal Kinner honor guards constantly kept watch.

Clixie had opted to stay in the room as well. Ves had already issued an alarm device to her. The cat took her duty seriously and would rather die before letting anyone harm the baby!

The couple tiredly sat down again.

"I wish my mother was here." Gloriana said. "So far, she was only able to greet her grandchild by projection."

Ves frowned. "At least your mother Constance can talk and look at Aurelia whenever she wants. My mother on the other hand..."

That was a bit of a weird topic. Technically, the Superior Mother was around all the time, but she was a distinct and autonomous existence most of the time. Cynthia remained inaccessible most of the time.

Ves had attempted to let his mother know about her new granddaughter if the Superior Mother couldn't pass on the good news. He had made use of the Xona Communication Crystal that his clan had once picked up in the Nyxian Gap and used the brief interval of time to transmit a message.

He hadn't received any answer, but it took a few days for these cumbersome alien crystals to get ready to receive or transmit signals again.

Ves wasn't even sure whether the transmission reached its destination. Distance likely wasn't a factor but the extreme space distortion of the anomalous region probably warped every signal!

He truly hoped his mother learned that her son had become a father.