

## Mech 3611

### *Chapter 3611 Jannzi's Contrition*

Moments before the revived and altered spirituality of Titania reached out to Ves, two different expert pilots talked among themselves.

"So you finally decided to commit to Ketis." Jannzi transmitted to Joshua through a private communication channel.

"I did." Joshua warily answered. "What of it? Do you disapprove?"

"No. I'm happy for you, actually."

"What?"

Jannzi frowned. "Why do you react this way? Can't I wish you well?"

"Well, I thought..."

"Just because I disagree with your stances doesn't mean that I dislike you as a person. We just weren't cut out together. Though we're no longer a couple, we are still Larkinsons and fellow comrades-in-arms. I will defend you against enemy threats just as much as other clansmen."

"That... is welcome to hear. I... will do the same for you. Our clansmen matter the most. Whatever we had between us shouldn't get in the way of defending our people."

The air of tension that had always existed between the two clansmen faded to an extent. Though they were anything but friends, they were more than willing to trust each other with their backs.

The force of wills they emanated from their mechs no longer generated as much friction as before. This was the clearest sign that the two expert pilots were willing to tolerate each other's presence to a greater extent than before.

IT WAS ABOUT TIME YOU MADE UP WITH YOUR FORMER LOVER, JOSHUA.

"Everchanger! Stop butting into my personal life. You're a mech, not a gossiping aunt!"

GAINING CLOSURE ON YOUR FORMER RELATIONSHIP IS A NECESSARY STEP FOR YOU TO MOVE FORWARD. YOU DO NOT NEED A MAN IN YOUR LIFE.

Jannzi gritted her teeth. "Joshua is right. Please don't meddle into my private life. You may be my battle partner for life, but you are not my spouse!"

OHHHH... LOOK AT OUR PILOTS. ARE THEY NOT ADORABLE?

AT LEAST YOUR HUMAN PARTNER FOUND A NEW LOVER. MY JANNZI IS SO STUBBORN THAT SHE NO LONGER THINKS ABOUT BOYS AT ALL THESE DAYS. FOR ALL OF HER PROFESSED LOYALTY TO THE LARKINSON CLAN, SHE ISN'T TAKING ITS MOST IMPORTANT VALUE TOO SERIOUSLY. HOW CAN SHE CALL HERSELF A TRUE LARKINSON WHEN SHE DOESN'T INTEND TO START HER OWN FAMILY?

"SHUT UP!" Venerable Jannzi burst out. "Sometimes I question why Ves made mechs like you alive in the first place! Mechs used to be much simpler when they just did what pilots wanted and nothing more."

YOU DO NOT TRULY MEAN THAT, JANNZI. LIVING MECHS ARE YOUR FAMILY IN THE SAME WAY THAT OTHER LARKINSONS ARE YOUR FAMILY. OUR CLAN WOULD NEVER BE AS WORTHY OF YOUR PROTECTION WITHOUT OUR EXISTENCE.

The Shield of Samar was right, but Jannzi still felt uncomfortable about being lectured by her own mech. She was the human here. Mechs shouldn't be smarter and wiser than her, particularly when the Shield of Samar hadn't been alive as long!

MECHS AGE IN A DIFFERENT MANNER. DON'T USE YOUR HUMAN MODELS TO MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT OUR MATURITY.

"Can the two of you mechs take your remarks elsewhere for a moment?! I just want to have a personal talk with Joshua here! I don't need the two of you derailing our talk!"

Once the living mechs no longer bothered the humans, Jannzi could finally get back on track.

She took a deep breath. "Joshua, let me get this off my chest before something else interrupts me again. After a lot of self-reflection, I realize that I was too harsh on you. Years ago, we got along a lot better. It was only after all of the changes that we began to diverge from each other. Though I don't regret breaking up with you, I do wish we parted on friendlier terms."

"..."

What was Joshua supposed to say here?

"Look, don't misunderstand me. I don't want to break up your engagement with Ketis and turn back the clock. We went our separate ways and I'm fine with that. I just think we should get over any hard feelings that still remain and try to become friends again."

"Oh." Joshua succinctly responded. "I... I'm sorry, I still need to adjust to this. It's hard for me to imagine the two of us joking around or going out to watch an arena match together. We hardly did any of that stuff anyway when we used to be a couple."

"I know." Jannzi sighed. "I'm trying to change, and this is part of the process. While I have not changed my stance that our clan needs to change its course, I realized some time ago that I have become so abrasive towards everyone that I was getting increasingly more out of touch with my fellow Larkinsons."

"...Who are you and what have you done to the real Jannzi?"

"Ha. Ha. Very funny, Joshua. I'm being serious here. I readily admit that I haven't been acting right ever since I advanced to my current rank. I can't explain why I acted the way I did after becoming an expert pilot. Maybe the power just got to me. The moment my life took this turn, I realized that I could become strong enough to change all of the wrongs and injustices in the galaxy. The road to the top isn't easy, though. I knew that I had to put so much effort into it that I lost a part of myself in the process."

Joshua quietly listened for a while. He could hear and feel the sincerity in her words.

It was hard for Jannzi to admit her failings and weaknesses, but now that she finally voiced them to the person she used to care about a lot, she felt as if a weight had lifted off her heart.

She could already feel herself growing stronger and more focused now that she had unburdened herself.

I TOLD YOU SO. BEING HONEST WITH YOURSELF AND ADMITTING YOUR FAULTS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR GROWTH PROCESS. IF YOU WANT TO BECOME A GREATER MECH PILOT ONE DAY, YOU MUST IDENTIFY AND SCOUR ALL OF YOUR WEAKNESSES.

"Where did you get this from?" Jannzi frowned and asked her mech.

THE QUINT AND QILANXO TAUGHT ME THAT. THEY BOTH POSSESS DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT IT TAKES TO GROW STRONGER.

"I can't say I dislike the change." Joshua said, dragging Jannzi's attention back to the main conversation. "I've hung out with many different expert pilots, from Venerable Tusa to Venerable Brutus. What I found is that each of us are different from what we were before. Back when we were just regular humans, we had ordinary wants and needs. Once we all broke through, something deep within us undergo so many changes that it seems to me that we are losing as much as we gain. It's not as obvious with me, but whenever I talk to you or Venerable Stark, I get the impression that I'm talking to an ideal rather than a person."

Jannzi did not disagree with his assessment. "We are the embodiment of our ideals. When we become demigods, we are empowered by our respective causes. We are driven by our convictions. We are like engines that must constantly be fueled in order to keep running. The moment we stop powering ourselves with our ideals, we become meaningless existences."

"I'm aware of that, but if you ask me, sometimes you can take it too far. Take Venerable Stark for example. She's always plotting to take revenge for what the sandmen have done to her state and all of those third-raters in the Komodo Star Sector. She's so obsessed with her personal goal that she is always spending her time on training rather than doing ordinary stuff like making friends or spending time on a hobby. You were like that too sometimes."

As someone who had become consumed by her own overarching desire to defend the clan, she fully understood why Venerable Stark pushed herself to such an extent.

"What Davia wants is nearly impossible to achieve." Jannzi said. "She recognizes that but isn't willing to give up on her goal. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she has willingly set aside many of her ordinary desires that might weaken her resolve or persistence. Out of all of the expert pilots in the fleet, it is not a coincidence that she is improving the fastest out of all of us. Her dedication to her goal is extreme even by my standards."

"What about you, then? Are you willing to sacrifice parts of your mortal self to close the distance to god pilot?"

This was not a simple question to answer for Jannzi. A lot of factors were involved. She needed to know what she wanted first before she could decide to what extent she was willing to give up in order to attain supreme power.

"The Larkinson Clan is everything to me." She said. "Despite its flaws and despite its current leader, I still love it and everyone who is a part of it. I love the old Larkinson Family too, but my old relatives can take care of themselves. The clan is still too new but Ves has already decided to plunge it into the Red Ocean without adequately preparing for all of the threats and challenges that we are facing even now. The fight against the Titania is just a preview for what is to come. I'm afraid... I will have to push the Shield of Samar's defensive capabilities to the limit in order to save as many Larkinsons as possible in the next big engagement."

"...I feel the same way sometimes." Joshua admitted. "While I don't agree with your stance that we should replace our patriarch, I'm not blind to all of the trouble he attracts on a regular basis."

"You mean seek out. Ves has made numerous decisions that have led us right into danger. We could have avoided all of those battles if he acted carefully, but he has

been anything but restrained. Even before he founded the clan, he was already acting like a maverick."

Joshua frowned. "It's bold leadership and a willingness to take risks that has got him and our clan this far. Your biggest fault is that you only look at Ves' bad side. He has done plenty of good as well! Also, remember that all of us signed up for this adventure."

"Let's not retread this argument, shall we?" Jannzi proposed. "Whatever the case, it is a fact that as long as Ves is in charge, he will attract enemies on a regular basis. We need to stay focused and do our best to improve so that we are better equipped to repel the powerful enemies that we know are coming."

Joshua was just about to respond when he and Jannzi suddenly sensed a powerful spike in activity down below!

As the spiritual remnant of the Titania came back to life in an altered form, it suddenly decided to shoot out a thick spiritual bond straight at Ves!

Yet before the transformed spirituality could link up with the person responsible for turning it into its current state, a strong resonance shield appeared in place. The powerful shield generated by Jannzi and the Shield of Samar gave no chance for the altered Titania to succeed in its odd attempt!

"Ves, are you alright?!" Jannzi transmitted from her mech.

"I'm fine! Even if you didn't make a move, I have a dozen other counter-measures. Besides, this spiritual connection attempt isn't particularly strong or threatening. I don't think it means any harm. What do you sense, Joshua?"

"I... can't really explain it." Joshua said as he tuned his senses to the new entity down below. "It's still a bit sluggish, but I can sense a lot of confusion but also comprehension. I haven't found anything that suggests to me that it wants to kill us all, though."

Ves smiled behind his helmet. "You see? It's fine. Let's give the new entity a chance to express itself."

"By the way, there's one more thing, sir. I think the Titania is a she." Joshua stated.

### *Chapter 3612 First Talk*

Ves communicated with many different entities over the years.

As a human, it shouldn't be a surprise that he spoke most often with other humans. He surrounded himself with people and depended on them to fulfill several needs. Jobs such as ferrying him around in space, producing his products and fighting his enemies on his behalf all needed to be done by a lot of individuals.

Gathering all of these men and women and convincing them that they should labor on his behalf was quite a difficult task. It was not enough to promise them a salary and a structure. They also needed to buy into his vision and believe in his cause as if it was their own. Good communication was crucial into converting them all into his loyal and dedicated underlings.

He also interacted with other life forms aside from humans.

His cats for example. Leaving aside companion spirits such as Blinky and Alexandria, he talked to Lucky and Clixie on a regular basis. Their different cat sounds might sound incomprehensible to everyone, but Ves understood them as if they were speaking perfect standard language.

Perhaps ordinary people could still be trained into understanding and communicating with different cats, but Ves was far more capable than that. What truly separated him from normality was his ability to communicate with every sentient life form regardless of their species or their corporeal state.

He could communicate perfectly well with living mechs, for example. Though first order and second order living mechs were not sentient and aware enough of themselves to become good conversation partners, his third order living mechs came very close to talking like normal humans.

Yet what truly made his ability to communicate valuable was that he could speak to even stranger and more exotic life forms. He was able to develop an accord with each of his design spirits due to this. Without building up and managing his relationships with them, it was doubtful that he would be able to retain some of them on a long-term basis.

Now, he voluntarily accepted a spiritual bond from a revived and transformed spiritual entity that he had recently brought back from nihilism.

The only complication was that he and his clan were actually responsible for bringing it close to death.

"No, not it. She." Ves mentally corrected himself.

From the moment they established a bond, he could immediately tell that the entity that he had taken to calling the Titania was unquestionably maternal.

Strong parental vibes exuded from her very being. Even after her near-death caused her to shed much of her identity, the essence of her identity was that of a mother.

An alien, bestial mother.

Both of them were new at this, so neither of them knew what to do at first. The revived spiritual entity was still in a mess. She came back to life but in a completely new state of

existence. Not only that, but Ves had forcibly integrated different ingredients into her that fundamentally altered her spiritual makeup.

Still, all of that confusion did not stop the Titania from harboring a strong sense of pride and strength.

She had lived through many years, though her perception of the passage of time was completely different.

The Titania did not keep track of time based on how long it took for humanity's ancestral planet to complete one orbit around a star.

The sentient beast instead tracked time through feeling the ebb and flow of the galaxy and the amount of hostile encounters it experienced.

Even though the Titania's means of counting time was a lot more primitive, there was no doubt in her mind that she was old, big, and strong.

It did not matter that she was currently stripped from her corporeal body.

It did not matter that she had shed the vast majority of her spiritual strength and energy.

Her age was still there, and the wisdom and fortitude she developed after long years of living had built up to a formidable mental fortress that still held true!

However, not everything went smoothly. The Titania was missing too much and foreign elements had come and plugged the void. Many different impulses tried to alter her personality and sense of self.

Influences from Ves, Goldie, the Husk Maker and Aisling Curver all tugged the Titania in different directions.

Ordinarily, she could have easily battered aside the contamination, but her compromised state along with their deep integration into her essence left her bereft of strength.

She had no choice but to integrate the foreign elements regardless of her own wishes.

That upset her a lot, of course. She was furious at the violation, yet the same foreign elements forced her to be pleased with her changes instead. The dichotomy in her mind set of a war that fundamentally altered her character in a way that would horrify most people.

Ves wasn't as surprised. He had induced these changes before on other people and the Titania was yet another one of his 'patients'.



The only concern was that the Titania's original personality was extremely strong and formidable. Even in a damaged state, she successfully retained most of her original character.

Now that she began to get a grip of her new self, she finally reached out to Ves. The altered Titania definitely recognized that Ves was the cause of all of the changes.

"You were dead and dying." He told her in this weird imaginary headspace that he had landed himself in. "When we found your injured body, you were prey to any that roamed the galaxy."

A strong sense of pride and indignity welled up from the revived astral beast! The wave of fury and emotion was quite intense despite the weak and recovering state of the Titania.

Ves maintained a strong front. He could not afford to show weakness in front of this potentially-hostile entity.

"We fought you in your previous state and managed to slay you. What makes you think we can't do it again? I do not want this to happen, though. Instead of letting you die, I took you in my care and nurtured you back to life. While I cannot restore you to your previous state, I made sure that you managed to survive, if in a different form than you are used to. Are you able to accept your new state of existence?"

This question was far too big for the Titania. She barely had time to process her new circumstances and sort out her disparate thoughts.

Nonetheless, as soon as Ves conveyed the meaning of survival, he triggered a strong instinct in her essence.

An astral beast that managed to live for over 6000 years must have strong survival instincts!

The imaginary surroundings suddenly shifted into vague images. They showed brief glimpses of different events.

First, it displayed the birth of the initial astral beast.

Contrary to Ves' expectations, the Titania wasn't a natural astral beast.

She was an artificial creation. Her relatively small form initially came to life in some sort of alien biolab. The architecture was vastly different from anything else that Ves had experienced. It was enormous and filled with living flesh and matter.

Lots of astral beasts identical to the one that would eventually grow up to become the Titania occupied other flesh tanks.



The shimmering memories skipped forward showing different glimpses of the biolab. Ves had the feeling that the Titania failed to retain her memories of her early youth as a test subject or bioproduct.

What she did manage to remember of that time was that some sort of attack broke apart the biolab.

Lots of vague blobs that Ves suspected to be alien ships bombarded the biolab and many of the other flesh structures in the area.

Thousands of trapped test subjects died, but a few managed to escape the bombardment. The Titania happened to be one of them. Utilizing an advanced form of biomovement, the young astral beast naturally knew how to hide behind debris and cover and managed to escape the attackers without getting hunted down.

After that followed an extremely long period of growth and survival.

The Titania lived no differently than other astral beasts. She roamed the most remote star systems while hunting for sustenance.

Whether through luck or strength, she never encountered a threat that was strong enough to kill her outright.

Once she got over her initial period of weakness, she grew to a formidable beast that finally gained the capital to survive in the Red Ocean.

That was when her maternal instincts came online.

Survival was one of her overarching priorities, but the need to produce offspring and propagate her race became just as strong!

"How many children have you produced in your long and eventful life?" He asked.

Too many. The Titania could not count the amount of time she produced potential offspring.

The reason why they only had the potential to become her children was because they would not survive if they did not burrow themselves into other prey.

Over the course of her later life, she had launched millions of seeds at her prey and adversaries.

The vast majority of them never successfully took root, but the few that did made the Titania proud.

She did not know how many of her offspring still lived in the Red Ocean, but they had to be hundreds.

Though the Titania never maintained contact with any of her children after their departure, she nonetheless maintained a small sense of affection towards them. They were the legacy of her life and the continuation of her artificial lineage.

The changes that Ves had forced upon her had caused the Titania to become even more maternal towards her offspring!

It was for this reason that she quickly calmed herself down. Though the more primal part of her wanted to lash out at Ves and whoever kept her captive, the motherly side of her was wise enough to know that it would only deprive her of an opportunity to see and care for her children again.

"I see you have figured it out." Ves smiled. "There is a big difference between life and death. If you are dead, you will never be able to meet and care for your offspring again. If you are alive, you still have a chance to do something for them. Let me tell you that this galaxy is about to undergo an immense change. Humans like myself have invaded the Red Ocean en masse and are about to turn it into our own playground. The more territory we claim, the harder it is for your astral beast offspring to survive unscathed. Humans have a tendency to hunt down threats and nuisances."

This evoked a strong protective reaction from the Titania! Before she turned her ire towards him, Ves quickly tried to make her see reason.

"I am not your enemy! I may be human, but I have no particular interest in hunting your children! If you calm down and cooperate with me, I can allow you to live in this current state. Once you grow stronger, I believe you may be able to help the children that are still vulnerable out there. You are not the beast you once were, but in my care, you can grow stronger than you could have ever imagined."

His words successfully evoked desires within the Titania that conflicted with her more primal instincts. Though he could tell that while he did not manage to convert her outright, he still managed to push back her aggression.

This was probably the most he could do at this moment. Everything was too new and sudden to the Titania.

"Let me introduce you to a couple of new friends who can help you get acquainted with your new life."

He pulled out of the spiritual bond that she had formed and shook his head to regain his bearings.

He looked at the Larkinson Mandate and the statue of the Superior Mother.

"Can you help keep our new friend company? She is awfully new to all of this and needs a helping hand."

Both Goldie and the Superior Mother reacted in their own ways.

Ves smiled. He knew that the Titania would be in good hands.

### *Chapter 3613 The Stakes*

The Titania that he had brought back to life in a sense was more powerful and potent than he thought. He couldn't wait to employ her in both the Minerva Project and future ranged mech designs.

Yet in order to do so, he needed her to be a willing collaborator, and that could not be accomplished within a day.

He already accounted for this. He deliberately created her a few months earlier because he expected that she would have to be coaxed into becoming a willing partner.

Ves did not intend to exploit her or to screw her over. He did not want to look behind his back or worry about rebellions all the time.

As long as she accepted her new state of existence and understood the benefits of becoming a design spirit, she would fall in line like the rest of her kind.

The strongest bond in existence was a mutually-beneficial arrangement. There were hardly any better deals for spiritual entities out there. Unless she found a way to become an existence akin to a dark god or something, it was much better for her to stay in place and collect spiritual feedback from the mech pilots making use of his living mechs!

While Ves kept close track of the Titania's state after the first few days, he slowly grew more reassured of her compliance. Goldie constantly kept her company and tried to convince the former astral beast to cooperate with the Larkinson Clan.

The Superior Mother did not descend as much but Ves could tell she kept a watchful eye over what was happening.

Goldie flew around his body and purred when he scratched her head.

"How is the Titania? Has she become more compliant?"

Nyaaaa.

"I see. Don't try to push too hard. We have plenty of time on our hands. No matter what, she used to be a lot older and wiser than you, so I doubt it will be easy for her to give up her primacy."

Nyaaa nyaaa.

"You're right. She's alone while we are not. Hopefully she will learn that it is better to join our pack than to think she can make it by herself."

After confirming that nothing went amiss, Ves returned to his regular duties.

The expeditionary fleet had reached the periphery of the Magair Middle Zone and was just about to cross over into the much more exciting Krakatoa Middle Zone.

The transition was obvious. The further the expeditionary fleet traveled, the less signs of civilization they encountered.

There were fewer colonies this far because the region was not completely pacified. Only strong or desperate pioneers chose to plant their flags in these areas.

There were fewer ships as well, and most of them had the good sense to band together.

It was not uncommon for the Golden Skull Alliance to enter a star system that was already hosting an amalgamation of different pioneering fleets.

Most pioneers weren't confident that they could roam this far in the new frontier by themselves, so they eagerly sought each other out in order to band their strengths together.

These alliances were either temporary or permanent. Just like the Golden Skull Alliance, their main use was to present a united front against anyone with hostile intentions in mind.

"What if the enemy comes from within?" Ves wondered.

The outcome wouldn't be pretty. During the journey, the Larkinsons already encountered the remnants of debris fields that spoke of back stabbings and double-crossings.

Malice wasn't always a part of the equation. One partner might simply decide the battle wasn't worth fighting and retreat early, thereby causing the rest of the defensive lines to collapse.

The remains of dead fleets taught valuable lessons to everyone in the expeditionary fleet. If they wanted to avoid this fate, they needed to be able to trust each other to stick around under high-pressure situations.

Ves wasn't particularly concerned at the moment. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan all needed the Larkinson Clan for several different reasons. They had already proven their commitment enough times for him to consider his allies as his true friends.

Sure, the Glory Seekers and the Crossers both wanted something from him, but that only made him feel more reassured. It was a lot easier for him to work around clear and obvious motives than vague notions of honor. He had seen too many people cast their honor and integrity aside whenever it was convenient.

There were other signs that the deeper regions of the Red Ocean harbored greater danger.

The fleet encountered more signs of alien movements.

From cooling alien starship wrecks to the destruction of human pioneering fleets at the hands of vengeful alien marauders, it became pretty clear that humanity's grip on occupied territory was not yet solid!

The mech pilots all intensified their training and maintained a higher state of readiness whenever the expeditionary fleet transitioned into another star system.

Fortunately, no terror came out to ambush the fleet so far. That might change once they entered the Krakatoa Middle Zone, but for now everyone was grateful for the moments of peace.

Ves resumed his work on his design projects. The Deceptor Project came closer and closer to completion and so did several other interesting projects.

Surprisingly enough, Gloriana was the first to bring her custom mech design to a functional state.

After several rounds of refinement, the New Man Project was ready to be fabricated.

"Vincent will be happy with this." He said as he studied the latest iteration of her mech design. "Are you sure it is up to your standards, though? You completed it awfully quickly."

Gloriana did not look happy despite carrying Aurelia in her arms.

"I have spent weeks optimizing this mech in person. While I have become good at it, there is only so much I can do when I can only rely on mathematical models and simulation testing. I need to see the mech perform in reality before I can optimize it any further. I don't want to conclude this project as soon as I fabricate the New Man Project. I intend to put it through its paces and use the data I've collected to iterate on it further."

"Even when it is already a whole mech?"

She nodded. "I can always modify the design when needed. I won't stop applying changes until I am reasonably satisfied with its state."

Ves took a closer look at the design once he completed his survey of its technical properties.

As someone who not only collaborated frequently with Ves but also contained a dormant spiritual fragment of him, Gloriana was no longer as ignorant about spiritual design as before.

The latter alone granted Gloriana the ability to borrow a small part of his power and make a mech alive.

Of course, the New Man Project was a far cry from the Deceptor Project in terms of living attributes. Its spiritual foundation was weak and its design was extremely rudimentary.

It reminded Ves of his earliest mech designs. Aside from possessing an elevated X-Factor, there was nothing distinctly alive about the New Man Project.

This was still an impressive feat, though. Aside from Ketis, Ves knew of no one else who could reproduce his design philosophy. Not even the MTA was that capable.

"Good job, Gloriana." He genuinely praised her work. "Vincent will surely embrace this new mech of yours."

Even if the New Man Project was just a first order living mech, its technical design fit Vincent far too well. The mech was also more powerful and more able to impact a battle than an ordinary Bright Warrior. All of these advantages more than compensated for the relatively weak living properties of the custom hybrid mech.

If Vincent Ricklin ever broke through to expert pilot, it shouldn't be a problem to design a brand-new expert mech for him. There was no need to retain the New Man Project and try to upgrade it like the Shield of Samar.

"Do you need my help in fabricating the mech?" Ves offered even though he already knew the answer.

Gloriana looked offended. "I don't need your handholding. I can take on my own work, thank you very much. I only need you to look after Aurelia while I am engrossed in my work. She has reached a stage where she needs regular attention from her parents, but I can't pull myself away from my operations often enough to keep her company. Please take care of her, but don't forget to bring her over to my workshop when I'm done with my shift."

"I can do that." Ves replied as he accepted Aurelia in his arms.

"Gwaaa...?"

"Yes. Daddy's here now. I'll be taking care of you for the next few days. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Buuwaaa!..."

Gloriana soon began to fabricate her first new solo project. Though Ves was tempted to drop by and offer his assistance, he knew it would only piss her off even further.

"Well, it's just you and me now, sweetie."

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"Oh, and you two as well."

When Ves returned to his own design studio, he soon went back to working on the Minerva Project.

Now that he had brought the Titania back to life in an altered form, he had a better idea on how to shape the ambitious expert command mech. He made a lot of progress on its spiritual design but also made sure to further its physical design.

"Mwaaauuu... buuubuuu..."

"Pretty, isn't it? Once we complete the Minerva Project, this won't be just a pretty projection anymore. It will turn into a real expert command mech that shall enable Commander Casella Ingvar to extend her empowering influence to every friendly mech pilot within reach. Hopefully, the Titania will cooperate with her as well in this endeavor."

The Minerva Project was by far the most complicated mech design in development at the moment, but that did not mean it had fallen behind. With five different mech designers collaborating on it, the mech design had already reached a relatively advanced state.

"Wuuuuuu... baaaahwhauaaaa..."

Aurelia tried to reach out to the projected mech design with her tiny hands. She was being so adorable that Ves couldn't help but play with her for a moment.

"Hihihih!"

Making her laugh was one of the greatest pleasures of his life. Sometimes, he never wanted this to end. Nothing made him feel warmer than to bond with his infant daughter.



Alas, Aurelia was growing bigger and smarter with each passing day. Though the differences weren't obvious, he knew that she would eventually outgrow her simple and innocent phase.

Ves lifted her up and kissed her head when she began to doze off again.

"Sleep well, my girl. Daddy will always protect you. Nothing will ever be able to hurt you. Our entire clan will do its best to ensure that. With the addition of the Minerva Project, our enemies will have to overcome even greater odds to threaten your life."

Holding and bonding with Aurelia gave more purpose in his life. Ves became a lot more invested in his design projects when her presence constantly reminded him of the stakes.

A part of him even questioned the need to travel deeper into the new frontier. He was heading straight into dangerous territory where a single bad encounter could lead to the destruction of the entire expeditionary fleet!

Yet it was because of all of the opportunities it held that made Ves more determined to stay his course. Only by growing stronger would he truly be able to give his daughter and possibly his subsequent children a bright and wonderful future.

"I love you so much, Aurelia. Please forgive daddy if he ever makes a mistake."

He placed his sleeping baby in her crib before turning back to his work. The Minerva Project was already making good progress, but perhaps he could push it a little further. The sooner it was complete, the sooner Commander Casella would be able to fight the enemies of the Larkinson at her full strength!

*Chapter 3614 Second Skin*

"Hihihihii!"

Aurelia crawled and giggled as she chased after Clixie.

Whenever she was energetic, she just loved to explore anything that caught her attention. Clixie and in particular her tail endlessly fascinated the little designer baby.

While Ves completely tunnel-visioned on the Minerva Project, Aurelia was left to roam around as she wished, within limits.

Though Ves hadn't overhauled his design studio into pastel colors like his wife had done for hers, he made sure to implement sufficient safety precautions.

That along with the watchful cats allowed him to feel assured that his daughter wouldn't bump her head against a cabinet or something.

"Waaaa! Bhwaaa!" Aurelia excitedly cried as her surprisingly swift and vigorous body was gaining on Clixie.

"Miaow~!"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat pretended to be tired and slowed down just enough for the little girl to grab her tail.

Soon enough, the two merged into yet another bundle of cute as Aurelia eagerly hugged Clixie as if she was a plushie.

What neither of them noticed was that Aurelia's body briefly glowed. Not only that, but the glow also spilled over into Clixie's body!

The flash of luminance occurred too quickly for anyone to have noticed the anomaly. Even the monitoring system that Ves had specifically programmed to keep close watch on his girl only thought it was an ordinary visual glitch.

While Aurelia and Clixie were bonding with each other, Ves pulled himself out of his design session after his comm sounded an alert.

"I see it's time. C'mon, sweetie. It's time to see what your mother has accomplished these past few days."

"Bwaaaaa...!"

Ves picked up his baby and held her close. Aurelia curiously looked around her as they exited the design lab and walked down the corridors until they reached Gloriana's private workshop.

After passing through a routine security check, they entered the large hall where his wife looked on with a measure of pride.

She finally fabricated Vincent Ricklin's custom mech.

Ves already began to admire it as he walked close to his tired-looking wife. The mech truly looked fitting for an expert candidate. It was not as powerful as an expert mech but could definitely overpower any other ordinary mech.

"Well done, honey."

"Don't celebrate just yet. It's not entirely complete. I still need Vincent to pilot it in order to make the final corrections."

"Mhmm. That doesn't take away the fact that you did a fine job."

"It's not a masterwork mech. Maybe I should have borrowed your hammer."

"Perhaps that would have made a difference, but you wanted this project to be reflective of your true capabilities. Even without borrowing Vulcan's help, you still managed to produce a high-quality mech."

Ves would never be able to design and build a mech that was this refined. Gloriana generally worked best in collaborations, but in instances where she was all by herself, she was fully able to apply her own vision without any compromises.

Compared to her husband, Gloriana's design approach emphasized precision, technical perfection and a high degree of optimization.

Though Ves felt that her approach was too rigid and mechanical at times, he did not doubt its excellence.

The New Man Project was a machine that would definitely perform well in all of the situations that Gloriana wanted it to excel in. On the other hand, Ves doubted it was adaptable enough to cope in situations outside of its comfort zone.

Not that it should matter. The New Man Project was designed to fight in the company of many friendly mechs. It should always have backup on hand.

From all appearances, the mech was designed to operate like a defensive platform. Layers of armor both protected it and weighed it down, but despite the excellent protection, it did not look fat or oversized.

No, under Gloriana's exquisite design, the armor layers rolled off the internal frame like an exquisite sculpture. Like the Adonis Colossus before it, the New Man Project was modeled after Vincent's own trained physique.

Of course, upon the client's request, the curves and lines were a bit more exaggerated than in real life. This mech was supposed to represent an ideal rather than serve as an accurate reflection of reality.

That, or Vincent viewed himself in a much more impressive fashion than warranted.

The thick limbs and thick chest provided excellent all-round protection. If that wasn't enough protection, the shield generator that Gloriana had managed to integrate into the design provided an additional defensive buffer that would allow the New Man Project to withstand a lot of hits but keep fighting.

There was just one little quirk that Ves couldn't quite accept.

"I can't believe you actually listened to Vincent's advice and relocated the shield generator down to the lower waist." He said in a hollow tone.

Gloriana smirked. "Just because he is a layman doesn't mean that all of his words should be discounted. I am an excellent listener. Although it is relatively rare for mechs to incorporate their shield generators in such a low position, it does allow for the torso to become sleeker and less top-heavy. Besides, the shield generator is just as well-protected in that particular location because of the... 'waist protection layer'."

"You know quite well that the only reason that Vincent made that stupid suggestion was because his codpiece would look bigger as a result."

"At least there is a functional purpose behind it now!"

"I'm not sure it will actually do the job it is supposed to do. It only protects against attacks from the front, not the sides and rear. The thing looks so glaring that it probably acts as an attractive target to enemies. What if they all concentrate their attacks on the codpiece? That expensive miniaturized shield generator module will get blown to bits in no time!"

Gloriana crossed her arms. "At least the life of the mech pilot will be safeguarded in that case. This is a mech that will certainly attract a lot of enemy fire due to its flamboyant appearance and its relative lack of mobility. I can tolerate the mech getting disabled, but I do not want my client to die so soon."

The mech was designed as if the mech pilot was an incompetent child who could not be trusted to pilot a more complicated mech. It not only lacked the more complicated and advanced functions that skilled mech pilots preferred to utility, but also came with a lot of safety layers.

That said, the New Man Project was most definitely not a toy. Gloriana had taken advantage of its generous design budget and stuffed its frame full with multiple weapon systems.

The miniaturized gauss weapons were its main armaments. Four of them were mounted on the arms and the legs respectively. A larger one was mounted in its abdomen area in case Vincent needed a greater punch.

The missile launcher that was discreetly mounted on its back gave the machine additional offensive options while the small laser weapons mounted on the sides of its head gave it a backup option in case it finally ran out of ammunition.

Not that this was likely to happen. The New Man Project came with external ammunition carriers that could be mounted on its sides and back.

Another notable visual trait was that the New Man Project lacked Gloriana's signature look. Upon Vincent's request, she skipped marking her work with a hexagon on the forehead, though Ves wouldn't put it past her to hide one on the inside of her custom mech's codpiece.

Instead, the mech bore a large and prominent white B on its golden chest. The letter stood for Bravo and was meant to give Vincent an additional boost to his confidence.

As Ves kept studying all of the nuances of the finished mech, two people arrived in the workshop.

"My mech! My new mech!"

Vincent Ricklin quickly arrived before his mech and quickly fell in love with it. The stars in his eyes showed that he not only liked his machine, he adored it! With this mech, he could truly start fighting like the champion that he always imagined himself to be. Nothing would stop him from standing out in battle any longer!

Raella approached at a more sedate pace. She took a contemptuous glance at the codpiece of her lover's mech.

"Gloriana, I thought we agreed to keep Vincent's ego in check."

"I already did the best I could. His shield generator isn't that big, but the internal architecture needed to be bigger to accommodate such an energy-hungry component. The codpiece not only serves as protection for all of those important systems, but also functions as an additional heat-venting mechanism."

Raella stared at Gloriana with an odd expression. "Are you telling me the codpiece heats up in battle?"

"Correct. That's why it has those fins. The fact that they add additional... depth to the codpiece is an unintentional side effect. The heat that channels through the codpiece will also make it so that heat-seeking ordnance will generally seek out the lower waist before the chest. This might serve as an additional safety guarantee for Vincent."

"..You're serious, aren't you?"

Ves looked surprised at his wife. Last time he had a good talk about the New Man Project with her, she attempted to minimize the size and girth of the codpiece. How come she changed her mind all of a sudden? Did she give in to Vincent's demands because she had no other choice or was there something else afoot?"

Whatever the case, Vincent looked extremely delighted when he carefully studied the shape of the codpiece.

"Marvelous! It looks so accurate! With a codpiece that big, no one will doubt my manhood when I deploy with this mech!"

Raella scoffed. "Who the hell thinks about the size of your little brother while you're piloting a mech, you dolt?!"

"I do!"

"What? Why?!"

"Because big brothers always beat their little brothers!"

A silly argument ensued which did not interest Ves in the slightest. Once they were done, Raella stood back while Vincent suited up and entered the cockpit of his new mech for the first time.

"Alright, let's bring it out for testing."

For safety reasons, Vincent wasn't allowed to boot up the mech immediately. He had to wait until the dormant machine was moved to the hangar bay before being dragged out into space.

Once the mech was far enough to pose a minimal threat to the fleet, Vincent was finally allowed to activate his mind.

The New Man Project came to life. As energy coursed through its systems, Vincent began to feel as if he had slipped into a much greater and stronger version of his body!

"This... this is amazing!" He gasped. "This new mech fits me so much better than my old Adonis Colossus mech that there is no comparison! I feel like I am truly one with this machine!"

Though Ves was too distant from the New Man Project to study its spiritual interactions, he could guess what was happening by studying Vincent's reactions.

When he studied the mech just before, he saw that Gloriana adopted a different approach to the spiritual design of her work.

She did not seek to turn her mechs into completely independent but also interconnected life forms.

Instead, she sought to leverage her limited means into turning the mechs into a second skin of their pilots.

The result of this approach was that the ego and awareness of the New Man Project was very weak. Yet whatever was alive fit so well with Vincent's mind and nascent force of will that it was as if the mech was truly an extension of the pilot!

"Interesting." Ves whispered as he thought about the implications of this approach.

He could see the advantages of this approach, but the downside was that the New Man Project would never truly be able to become a complete life form, but that was not a big deal.

Not every mech had to turn into the next Quint or Shield of Samar. Piloting a mech that immediately molded with their mech pilots like a second skin was already sufficient for most individuals!

### *Chapter 3615 A Different Order*

When Gloriana ordered Vincent to put the New Man Project through its paces, she wasn't the only mech designer who was interested in his performance.

Ves closely studied how well the expert candidate handled his new machine. He initially thought that he would just be here to admire and applaud his wife for fabricating a fine custom mech, but he was pleasantly surprised by how well her interpretation of living mechs was faring.

"She's doing something different."

It was similar to when he studied Ketis' work. His former student had also learned a thing or two about designing living mechs, but she did not blindly follow Ves' path. The swordmaster put her own spin on the approach and sought to make living blades that sang.

Gloriana on the other hand used the fact that her mechs were slightly alive to make them consciously into an accurate image of their intended users.

The New Man Project did not come across as a full living mech to Ves. Instead, it performed like a living vessel for Vincent Ricklin.

"How brilliant!"

Though Ves personally did not prefer to design mechs in this fashion, he appreciated the creativity and effectiveness of this alternative approach.

Gloriana truly succeeded in developing her own unique interpretation of living mechs. Even if her attempt was incredibly weak compared to his own work, the important part was that it fully complemented her main design philosophy.

"Rather than serving as the main feature of her mech, it instead functions as one of many components that form the total package."

The combination of a completely tailored physical and spiritual design produced a synergistic combination that provided Vincent Ricklin with the smoothest and most comfortable piloting experience of his life!



"I love this mech!" he repeated for the umpteenth time as his mech fired all of its integrated gauss cannons at once! "I feel strong and solid in a way that I never could in any other mech! I am invincible!"

The joy that Vincent expressed when he exercised the capabilities of his mech was great.

Ves already expected Gloriana to excel in this, but the actual outcome surpassed his expectations.

When he turned to his wife, she looked at him with a smug expression. "Did I do well?"

"You did." He said, offering her the praise she expected and admittedly deserved. "You've opened up another window to me and also taught me a good lesson."

"And what is that, Ves?"

"That I shouldn't get too focused on making mechs alive at all costs. Don't get me wrong. I love them, but sometimes I can get so carried away that my decisions might not serve the best interests of the mech pilots I am supposed to be serving. The reaction that you've elicited from Vincent... is what mech designers like us should be truly aiming for. The best mech doesn't necessarily have to be the strongest mech or the machine with the greatest growth potential. It just has to please the client the most."

The New Man Project truly proved its worth in this aspect. Though Ves did not think it was the best or strongest custom mech for an expert candidate, it was exactly right for someone like Vincent.

The mech bestowed a powerful boost to his morale and comfort. His delight in his new machine caused him to interface with the New Man Project on an extremely deep level without requiring any adjustment time.

It was a form of delight that Ves had seen in mech pilots like Joshua but not many other people.

"There is nothing better for a mech pilot than piloting a bespoke creation." Gloriana nodded and smiled at the fruit of her own effort.

That put Ves to thought. He threw a suspicious glance at his wife.

"I get it now. I understand why you deigned to design a mech for someone as stupid as Vincent."

"Oh?" Gloriana looked back with an amused expression. "What is your theory?"

"Vincent may have his shortcomings, but he also has a few strengths. He appreciates a mech that conforms to his tastes and needs. He dislikes piloting most mechs because they don't satisfy his psychological needs. Yet his feelings were completely different when he used to pilot the Adonis Colossus. You thought you could take advantage of this effect to test out a few new concepts. Vincent is the perfect test subject on this occasion because he can only exhibit two different reactions. Either he adores his mech and expresses that in a clear way, or he finds that something is wrong and subsequently rejects the machine."

Gloriana clapped as if Ves was a kid who just offered a correct answer to his mommy. "That's right! Vincent is indeed a good subject to test the new methods that I have developed. I have learned a lot from our past mech design projects, but because they are all collaborative in nature, it was difficult for me to track my individual progress. Working on the New Man Project allowed me to test my own solutions without worrying about contamination from your own work, but I had to pick the right mech pilot to record the clearest subjective reactions from the mech pilot. Vincent happens to be the best candidate out of everyone in the clan."

Although it sounded as if Gloriana took advantage of Vincent, the truth was that they both benefited from this arrangement. Gloriana managed to validate her new innovations while Vincent finally received a second worthy custom mech.

Once the testing session came to a conclusion, the New Man Project returned to the hangar bay and subsequently shut down.

An elated-looking Vincent emerged from the cockpit. He looked like he had just experienced the greatest session of his life.

He floated over to the mech designers before bowing like a gentleman in front of Gloriana.

"Thank you for making this wonderful mech, madame. I used to think that Ves was the only mech designer who could make a manly mech for me. I was wrong. You are just as good if not better. Ah, I mean no offense, Ves. It's just..."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "It's fine. Gloriana is better at designing custom mechs than me. I can't compete with her in this area. I'm happy for you. Have you thought about naming your mech to make your ownership over it complete or are you willing to give her the honors?"

"Wel... I already have a name in mind as soon as I began to pilot it." Vincent said as he turned back to gaze at his new mech with great love and appreciation. "I'd like to call it the B-Man!"

Gloriana's smile suddenly turned brittle. "The... B-Man?"

"Yes! It's perfect! My Adonis Colossus was the first, but it is gone now. He shall forever live on in my memories as my A-Man. This new mech looks similar to it, but it deserves to be treated as a unique machine rather than a rebirth of my old mech. Since it has a big 'B' painted on its chest, I'll just call it the B-Man! Isn't this a great idea?!"

Even his fiancé had to palm her face when she heard his rationale. She looked embarrassed beyond words!

Ves lightly coughed. "If calling it the B-Man makes you feel better, then so be it. You are the recipient of this custom mech. You have this right."

Though Gloriana didn't like the name at all, she was enough of a professional to accept this outcome.

"Vincent, come here please. I need to examine you and hear your recounting of your first piloting experience. The... B-Man... is anything but complete and your feedback is vital to putting the finishing touches on my work."

While Gloriana interrogated a hapless-looking Vincent with ruthless efficiency, Ves continued to contemplate on what he witnessed from the B-Man.

Director Raella Larkinson walked up to him. "What do you think?"

"Vincent will be okay, if that's what you're concerned about." He said. "Gloriana designed the B-Man to be a resilient mech. It might not look like it, but it contains a lot of layers of protection around the cockpit. What happened to him before shouldn't happen so easily this time."

"I'll take your word for, Ves. I just worry for him, that's all. On one hand, he loves the power and attention of being a powerful mech pilot. On the other hand, I know it terrifies him to enter a battlefield that he might never return from. He has fought so many battles that there is always the specter of an accident hovering his head. He knows he can't be lucky all the time. He probably needs the help of a mech that can enhance his courage in order to keep deploying into battle."

Ves was surprised at what he heard. "Are you sure you should be telling me this? You are painting your future husband in a bad light."

Raella crossed her arms. "He's not my hubby yet, and even if he is, I have no qualms about exposing his weaknesses. If there is anyone that should know his insecurities, it is the mech designers of his new machine. To be honest, I already shared this with your wife."

"What did Gloriana say to your story?"

"She sympathized with me. She also expressed a lot of understanding. She told me she knows exactly how to handle someone like him. It looks like she did a good job."

He nodded. "Better than what I could have accomplished, in fact. She was the right mech designer for the job. I can already see the joy and sense of completion from your husband. I believe he will be making a lot more progress now that he has obtained his ideal mech."

Raella grunted. "Yeah. He's really going to love piloting his new B-Man."

"You don't sound terribly enthused about his good fortune."

"If he breaks through... will he still be the Vincent I know?" She asked with a concerned voice. "I've seen what happens to expert pilots when they break through. The old Jannzi was a friend. The new one... not so much."

"I don't think you need to be concerned." Ves tried to reassure her. "Expert pilots all abide by their strongest principles and convictions. If he truly has you in his heart, then he will commit to you for the rest of his life. Also, from my observations, the biggest changes in personality usually happens to expert pilots who are fighting for a great cause. If Vincent just wants to stay alive or defend your life, then he should hardly be different from his current self."

"I see. I'll make sure to keep him humble."

The two fell silent for a few minutes as they quietly observed the B-Man.

They could spend hours admiring its impressive curves along with its ostentatious codpiece. There was a sense of harmony in how clean and perfect it looked. Though the mech lacked the sense of chaos and spontaneity that always characterized the mechs designed by Ves, the B-Man was not any worse for it in his eyes.

If Ves had to put his impression of the B-Man into general terms, then he would say that it was a mech that embraced order, Gloriana's order.

The mech fit into a neatly-defined box and was supposed to stay in it. Whether that was good or bad depended on the context and the person making the judgment.

Personally, Ves felt it was an overly rigid approach that did not properly account for unexpected avenues of growth and change, but that wasn't always bad.

Sometimes, a mech just needed to be exactly what it was meant to be and nothing more.

The B-Man still possessed growth potential, though it would take a lot more time and effort to bear fruit. Even if it grew stronger, Ves seriously doubted it would develop a strong independent personality like that of the Quint.

Still, a part of Ves grew curious how exactly the B-Man might develop over years of use. Whatever happened to it, he would surely be able to make valuable observations!

#### *Chapter 3616 Happy Occasion*

The arrival of the B-Man injected a lot of energy in the clan!

As the first fruit of the current design round, the custom hybrid mech tailored to Vincent Ricklin fully showcased the new level of mech design of the Design Department.

The mech not only showcased Gloriana's gains over the years, but also incorporated a lot of new materials, techniques and methods that were previously inaccessible or impractical back in the galactic rim.

Vincent himself was pleased beyond measure. The mech was a fine early wedding gift from the clan in his opinion and he delighted in showing off its manly prowess every chance he got! The B-Man's 'generous' codpiece often started a lot of conversations, and Ves even received requests from various mech pilots on whether he could add codpieces to the next designs.

"Rejected! Codpieces are completely unnecessary and superfluous in most designs!"

Dividing mechs by gender was a completely ridiculous concept to Ves and he did not want to encourage this distinction in his clan!

Time continued to pass after this initial success. More mech design projects came closer to completion while the expeditionary fleet smoothly crossed over into the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

The Golden Skull Alliance adopted a much more guarded posture and avoided the most convenient routes in order to avoid bumping into trouble.

Though Ves and the others weren't afraid of encountering hostile human fleets, it was a different story when it came to alien fleets. The odds of bumping into these powerful threats were much lower if they avoided the big and obvious destinations.

Of course, that still left the expeditionary fleet open to the possibility of encountering alien forces seeking to sneak past human patrols.

Still, there were so many small and empty star systems that the probability of encountering a powerful alien fleet should be low.

Expectations held for now. Everyone in the expeditionary fleet continued to take advantage of this quiet period to prepare for the difficulties on the horizon.

The most notable events that occurred after the completion of the B-Man was the series of weddings that took place in the Larkinson Clan.

Transports and shuttles kept flying back and forth as the invited guests all flocked to the Vivacious Wal.

Most couples chose to conduct their wedding in the bright and picturesque Dawn City.

No venue was more grand and beautiful than the Garden of Beginnings. It was located close to the Golden Palace and contained many sculptures and other refined artworks made by the growing artist community in the city.

Now, tens of thousands of Larkinsons had flocked to it so that they could witness the most anticipated wedding of the year.

When Joshua finally leaned forward and kissed a resplendently dressed Ketis, the entire clan and many other people cheered in jubilation!

"Meeeeeeoooww!"

"Miaaaaooooow!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Woooof!"

Even the pets in the city expressed their happiness at the occasion! While not all of them were smart enough to know what weddings meant, they still sensed the waves of happiness rolling off the humans!

The marriage between the two not only cemented a promising new dynasty in the Larkinson Clan, but also signaled a possible continuation of the lineage of a swordmaster!

The attention to this wedding was much higher because the proceedings were transmitted right back to the Heavensword Association in the old galaxy!

Billions of citizens tuned in to watch the first recorded marriage that involved a certified swordmaster.

Many prominent acquaintances from the eccentric state chose to honor Ketis by showing up in their own ways. Their physical projections occupied entire rows of seats.

Though the swordmasters and other dignitaries could not attend the wedding in person, their willingness to show up in public at this event already conveyed a lot of support.

Not that Ketis paid attention to them. She left all of the politicking and influence-building to the likes of Minister Shederin Purnesse and old man Fred Walinski today.

For now, she was just Ketis Larkinson, the wedded woman to Joshua Larkinson.

As both Swordmaidens and other people flocked to the newly-wedded swordmaster to express their congratulations, she lifted her arms to part the crowd aside so that Ves could approach her without pressing through the throng of people.

The clansmen would have parted for their patriarch anyway, but her gesture saved him the trouble of making his own move.

As Ves approached the happy woman while wearing his best ceremonial garb, Lucky darted forward first and flew right into Ketis' uncharacteristically white wedding dress.

"Meow!"

"Hahahaha! Don't worry. Just because I'm married doesn't mean I will retire my sword. Maybe we will fight alongside each other once again in the future. The only difference is that I will be fighting for my family and my children instead of glory."

"Meow meow meow~"

Lucky rolled and squirmed in her grasp as if he was playing the part of a spoiled baby. Ketis was happy enough to indulge in his antics.

The owner of the cat was not amused, though. Ves directed a flat look at his pet.

"Geez, Lucky. Sometimes I wonder whose side you are on." He grumbled.

His cat responded to his remark with a petulant flip of his tail.

"Anyway, congratulations, Ketis. You've finally joined the ranks of the married. It is a great pleasure for you to bind yourself to a partner who you can trust and start a family with. Joshua is a good man. He will assuredly protect you with his life."

"I know." She smiled back. "I don't need his protection, though. I can take care of myself."

She nodded back to the floating form of her sheathed greatsword. Though she had taken the time to decorate the Bloodsinger's scabbard in white embroidered cloth, its presence along with its sharp intensity already signified that the bride was not a pushover!



"It's the thought that counts. You've entered an entirely new phase in your life. I hope you will be able to find a good balance between your duties as a mech designer and a married woman. I hope you won't be absent too often from the design labs, but I also don't want you to waste this opportunity to start your own family. Having kids is an indescribable joy and I think that it will benefit you particularly well."

"I already have plans." Ketis she told him. "It will take time for them to come into fruition. For now, I'm not in a hurry to turn Joshua into a father."

The two chatted a bit more. Ketis went into this relationship with full awareness of what that entailed. She was also highly conscious of the fact that a pairing between a Journeyman and an expert pilot would attract a lot of scrutiny within the clan.

"Neither of us are bothered by our new roles." She said in a factual tone. "The clan needs more role models and examples and while I am not a natural at it, I can't avoid it on account of my strengths."

"From what I've seen, you're already handling your growing fame in an excellent manner. Don't get too consumed by what the public thinks of you. What truly defines you is your work and your accomplishments. Continued success is the best way to maintain a good image."

Once their little chat came to a close, Ves moved on to talk with Joshua who was surrounded by a lot of men.

He looked more alive than ever before. He was all smiles as he reveled in the happy occasion.

"You're a lucky man, Joshua! Take good care of Ketis, you hear?" Ves jovially called.

Joshua bowed in a chivalrous fashion. "I will do so to the best of my abilities. It won't be easy, but I will fight any enemy that threatens my family and my clan."

Though he spoke those words out of his own conviction, the clansmen around them all became inspired by his statement.

This was how a true Larkinson should sound!

As Ves briefly chatted with Joshua, another prominent Larkinson approached.

Everyone in the vicinity could feel the protective embrace emanated by the expert pilot in question. Venerable Jannzi Larkinson stopped in front of the happy man.

Though Ves and the others expected to see a bit of friction, the two expert pilots got along a lot better than they thought.

Jannzi usually wore a uniform in her daily life but wore a conservative dress for this occasion. She did not look as if she was trying to compete or supplant Ketis which some rumors suggested might be the case.

"Are you happy, Joshua?"

"Do you even need to ask that question?"

"You're right. I can clearly sense how you are feeling right now. Ketis looks just as content as you. That reinforces my belief that the two of you make a great pairing. I hope you will be able to make the most out of your marriage. Our clan needs a lot of families and you are setting a great example."

"Thanks. I'm not sure if that's any of your concern, though."

"The clan needs new blood, especially considering the dangerous waters that we are entering." Jannzi replied while giving a sidelong glance at Ves.

"I can hear you, you know." Ves said with an irked expression.

"I know." Jannzi turned to the patriarch. "I hope you can show our present and future children more compassion and refrain from sending our fleet into certain danger. Do you truly think it is right for you to bring your daughter into the deep frontier?"

"This is not the time and place to discuss politics. Plenty of wise leaders and institutions in our clan have considered these matters and do not object to our current course."

"That is because they are all in your pocket!"

"They support me because they know they cannot make our clan great by avoiding risks. We are not the Larkinson Family that has chosen to serve the Garlen Empire. Do any of you here prefer to stay in the Larkinson Family and become just another average space peasant in a state beset with internal rivalry, or do you think you are better off in our clan where we have already grown a lot wealthier and powerful than we could have imagined a few years before?"

The answer was obvious. The entire crowd of mostly men raised their fists and expressed their support.

"FOR THE CLAN!"

Despite the repudiation from all of the clansmen around her, Venerable Jannzi did not look bothered by the lack of support.

"You're young and you're excited but you won't be like this forever. When you marry your lovers and start having kids, would you still be eager to dive head-long into the

most dangerous regions of the Red Ocean? I very much doubt so. We'll see whether you will still be willing to bring our entire clan into every reckless adventure that your patriarch wants to bring you. At the very least, we should consider leaving our more vulnerable and non-combat elements behind in some form of safe harbor. At least then we won't lose all of our children and our future if our main fleet ever suffers an accident."

That was a surprisingly good suggestion from Jannzi. Many clansmen around them already started to consider this idea.

Ves narrowed his eyes. He did not want to split up his fleet. Parking the Vivacious Wal and all of the other 'civilian' vessels in a place like the Pellysa System would only give enemies an opportunity to take their vulnerable relatives hostage!

There was no one in the Red Ocean that he could trust with the civilian population of his clan. Not the Hexers, not the Heavensworders and certainly not mechers!

The best way to keep them safe and protect the clan from any unwanted obligations was to keep the population of the clan confined to a single fleet. Though the disadvantages were obvious, at least everything remained within his grasp!

#### *Chapter 3617 Kalo*

So many marriages took place that time that Ves had to think hard before he accepted any invitation.

Though it was a great gesture for him to attend the wedding of his clansmen, his time was too precious. His progress on his mech design projects slowly fell behind until he stopped attending most functions.

At the most, he chose to show up for a few minutes in the form of a projection.

He still showed up in person when anyone of note got married. The one between Vincent Ricklin and Director Raella Larkinson and the one between Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and Director Ranya Wodin-Larkinson were prime examples.

In the meantime, he finally reached the final stages of the Deceptor Project. The mech wasn't that complicated for him to design so it was not that difficult to make it functionally complete.

It took a lot of time to fabricate the prototype and test it in action. He had yet to create the design spirit during the testing phase, but that also allowed him to study the mech's performance without any other influences distorting the data.

When Gloriana dropped by in order to see how her husband's solo project was faring, she studied the collected data with a lot of interest.

"I can immediately tell that the Deceptor Project is your work." She remarked. "Its design and performance characteristics are so you that I would be able to recognize it light-years away. While I'm glad to see that you have cleaned up and refined your technical design work, it is still too sloppy in my eyes. You need to invest more weeks into optimizing your design."

"It already looks fine to me. You're entering nitpicking territory here. Any improvements that I can make will be so marginal that they won't even affect the outcome of a battle. All it will do is make you happier while preventing me from completing our other mech designs."

"What other designs are you truly working on right now? Your Fearless Project is still on ice and your contribution to the Minerva Project is limited."

"I can still head over to our new Journeymen and ensure that their respective mech designs are alive."

"I know, but even then you don't have to invest that much time in them when they clearly want to push through their own visions. You shouldn't encroach on their territory more than is necessary."

Ves sighed. "There are plenty of other matters that require my time. I'll see what will happen. In any case, I don't intend to spend more time on the Deceptor Project than necessary. I'll give our design teams a few more weeks to optimize the design before proceeding to fabricate the first copy. The Flagrant Vandals will be happy to put this new mech into service."

"And how are you supposed to fabricate the mech when you don't have enough raw materials on hand? Hmm? Have you ever thought about that?" Gloriana smugly asked.

His expression fell. "Urgh, don't get me started on it. The Krakatoa Middle Zone's infrastructure is quite bad."

The Magair Middle Zone might not be as exciting, but its development level was definitely higher. Colonies required a huge amount of resources and products to grow into a more self-sufficient state. Traders looking to profit from the disparity between supply and demand eagerly flocked to these regions in order to earn a hefty but also risky profit.

The trading fleets could earn even more profit if they chose to fly deeper into the Red Ocean and sold their valuable cargo to the colonies based in Krakatoa, but not many of them actually dared to go this far!

Unless the trading companies were able to arrange huge convoys with plentiful escorts, it was far too risky to even attempt the crossings.

Only colonies set up by more powerful and influential pioneers were able to retain their footing in Krakatoa. Only they could establish exclusive trading agreements with the right suppliers.

The result of this dynamic was that there were far fewer colonies in this particular zone, but each of them should not be underestimated. They were all founded by pioneers who were strong enough to move first in a region that was much more promising than Magair.

Once Krakatoa was properly pacified, the colonies that enjoyed a first-mover advantage would be able to remain at the forefront of a large community for decades to come!

Ves bet that each of those colonies aspired to become the capital planets of brand-new states. It was a massive bet and anything could happen to disrupt the ambitious arrangements.

Still, one thing was for sure. The supply of resources was absolutely crucial! The more materials a colony received, the faster it developed. Every colony in the zone competed against each other to claim the most resources and it wasn't unheard of for 'pirates' to assault even the largest trading convoys all of a sudden!

Even though these costly raids always inflicted heavy damage to the attackers, as long as it deprived a colony of a lot of resources at a crucial time, the victim's rivals would definitely be able to get ahead!

Given all of this intense competition for raw materials and industrial goods, it was virtually impossible for a small player like the Larkinson Clan to gain priority on any of these strategic goods!

"I'll figure something out once we get to the Davute System." He replied. "The place is not just a regular colony and the MTA has significant influence over there. We'll buy the required resources directly from the mechers if necessary. The Deceptor Project is a vital new addition to our mech roster and can comprehensively upgrade the battle effectiveness of the Flagrant Vandals."

The spaceborn harasser mech might not be particularly powerful by itself, but Ves designed it to form an excellent synergistic relationship with the Ferocious Piranha. The combination of the two would finally turn the mobile light mech forces of the Larkinson Army into a real threat against powerful opponents!

"You're saying that, but you failed to close any deals back in the Pellysa System where the circumstances are more generous. What makes you think you'll succeed in an even harder market environment?"

"...My lovely charm?"

"Hmph!"

Though she did make a good point, Ves still hoped he could succeed this time.

The stakes were higher as Ves had just promised to Calabast that he would try his best to keep his grand expedition in the current zone for a number of years.

It was a lot easier to establish a business deal with a supplier when the delivery destination wasn't moving up and down the Red Ocean all the time!

At the very least, he could make arrangements to deliver all of the goods to a warehouse in the Davute System. The expeditionary fleet could regularly go back to the port system in order to sell their latest haul before loading in the purchased materials.

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that this could work. While this arrangement would anchor the expeditionary fleet to the Davute System to an extent, this was not a big deal as he could always let go of the resources piled up in the warehouse if threatened.

While husband and wife talked about the logistical challenges of the Larkinson Clan, their baby was getting more and more adventurous.

"Hihihih! Baabaaabaaaa!"

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

Aurelia had grown quite quickly for a baby at her stage. She rolled and crawled whenever she pleased and loved to play with the cats.

As far as she was concerned, Lucky and Clixie were both her playmates!

Not only that, her companion spirit grew more adventurous as well. Though Mana still napped most of the time, she grew more curious of reality and occasionally floated out of Aurelia's mind.

Right now, the adorable white kitten was trying to poke inside the Hammer of Brilliance, but failed to gain any purchase.

..Mieww... mieww...

Maow~

Alexandria flew down to the Persian kitten and bit her by the scruff of the neck before moving away. Mana should really learn not to poke other people's property!

After Aurelia got tired of cuddling with Lucky and Clixie, she crawled over to Ves' leg and tried to climb up to her feet.

Her parents both interrupted their discussion in order to observe their baby's progress.

"Oh, you're so strong! Look at you! You can almost walk on your own legs!"

Though that was a bit of an exaggeration, it didn't matter as Aurelia giggled in response.

Ves bent down and held his baby's arms in order to see how much she could walk. Her legs and balance weren't quite up to the task, but it was only a matter of time before she gained the strength and coordination to succeed.

After the couple enjoyed their personal time with their child, they sat down together while Aurelia fed on another bottle of high-energy nutrient solution.

"I'm ready to have another baby."

"What?! So soon?!" Ves reacted with shock. "Aren't first-time mothers supposed to wait for a longer period before getting pregnant again?"

Gloriana snorted at him. "You know nothing about my body. I'm genetically-enhanced, remember? While my package doesn't focus on physical enhancements, my health and recovery speed are better than many other people in the clan. I've also received excellent care whenever I visited the Dragon's Den. There will be no problems. I wouldn't bring this up if I wasn't confident."

"Oh. Then... I don't have any objection if that's the case. I love it if we can give Aurelia a younger brother to grow alongside with. We're having a son, right?"

"I'm thinking of giving Aurelia a little sister first."

"What? Oh c'mon! I don't want to wait that long before raising my first boy. While daughters are lovely, we already have Aurelia for now. I could use some variety."

"Aurelia needs a reliable second in order to govern our clan better in future!" Gloriana insisted. "Just look at my sisters. My eldest sister Amarintha is already taking shape as my mother's successor while my second sister Kellandra is being groomed to lead the Wodin Dynasty's household troops."

"That shouldn't be necessary in our clan. Besides, even if you want to replicate such an arrangement, Aurelia's second doesn't have to be a sister. A brother could also do the job!"

His wife did not respond well to this argument. They continued to bicker back and forth even after Aurelia finished her little meal.



"Huuuwaaa..." She cutely yawned.

Ves turned to his daughter. "What do you think, sweetie? Do you want to gain a new brother?"

"Bawawwaaa..."

His wife reached down to caress Aurelia's soft head. "Don't listen to him, dear. You're a smart girl, so you should know what's best. You want a little sister, right?"

"Gwuaaa?..."

"Reach out to me if you want a baby brother to spoil."

"No! Reach out to me if you agree to gain a close sister!"

The two parents competed against each other so much that Aurelia grew befuddled.

Spoon, she closed her eyes and slumbered while her parents kept bickering.

In the end, they failed to come to a consensus. As usual, they decided to leave the decision for later.

Ves suddenly came up with a brilliant idea.

"Hey, how about having twins?"

"NO!"

That was the end of that.

Days continued to pass as Ves kept working on the Deceptor Project with an eye to completing it as soon as possible.

Since the mech design was very close to reaching its final phase, he also created a new spiritual product to serve as its design spirit.

He decided to go a bit more frugal this time and skipped the use of universal life energy.

The spiritual fragment of the Checkered Garbadine played a central role this time. The masterwork mech embodied the deception-based abilities that Ves wanted to bestow to his Deceptor Project.

He added in spiritual fragments taken from the Illustrious One and Arnold because both of their domains should help.

Other than that, Ves only added in his own spiritual energy in order to merge the ingredients together and make everything alive.

The result of his modest effort was the birth of Kalo, who existed in the form of a spectral chameleon.

"Well, it's not my most creative work, but it will do the job."

Hissss....

#### *Chapter 3618 Additional Inspiration*

Ves retained so many design spirits these days that the addition of another one started to become routine.

Compared to the Titania who was still being indoctrinated by his other design spirits, the emergence of Kalo was not that notable.

Kalo was a completely new spiritual product that did not have an inkling of the history and memories of the Titania. It started off with nothing but the materials derived from its ingredients along with whatever knowledge Ves had imprinted on his new creation.

Right now, Kalo was extremely weak and fragile. It did not benefit from accelerated growth because Ves chose to save his limited reserves of universal life energy.

He was willing to accelerate the growth of important entities such as Vulcan, but Kalo simply wasn't as important.

As long as his collection of design spirits continued to grow in the future, there was no need to treat them all as equally as if they were his own children. It was fine to play favorites and give preferential treatment to his more important and useful design spirits.

Though this might not sound fair to his lesser design spirits, they didn't require his hand holding. There were many other spiritual entities that could take over the job and the oldest or strongest among them already assumed leadership roles by themselves.

For example, soon after the birth of Kalo, Ves noticed that Qilanxo had descended in order to give the ghostly chameleon an introduction in the spiritual community.

With the big lizard attending to the tiny lizard, Ves had no worries that Kalo would go astray. He could leave all matters concerning the upbringing and acclimatization of the deception-oriented design spirit to one of his most trusted natural spiritual entities.

"Take good care of him, Qilanxo. Kalo hasn't received any powerful supplements so he is extremely weak and immature. It will take a while for him to reach a respectable

amount of strength. I will try to help as best as possible by finding a way to mass produce my Deceptor Project mechs, but that might take a while."

Qilanxo expressed reassurance at Ves. She possessed a particular interest in mentoring Kalo because Ves had designed him as a chameleon.

Although appearances didn't matter as much to spiritual entities, Qilanxo nevertheless felt compelled to take responsibility over Kalo for her perception of their shared kinship.

Seeing her treat the new ghostly chameleon so generously made Ves think about whether he would see this pattern more often in the future.

This was the first time he thought about the racial makeup of his design spirit collection. A significant proportion of them were humanoid because they were derived from real people or human objects of worship.

The rest were relatively random though Ves felt it was wrong that he only had two cat-like beings in his collection up to this point. The Golden Cat and Zeigra were both opposites in many ways, but they could definitely use more company in order to make sure that cats were well-represented in their spiritual community!

"I'll have to think about adding more cats to the collection!"

He briefly thought about adding a bit of variety by adding a dog as well, but he quickly discarded the notion.

He was a cat person!

Why would he ever contemplate getting a dog when a cat could fulfill all of his needs?

Sure, cats were whimsical, selfish and didn't always follow orders, but that was part of their charm!

Besides, cats were much cuter than dogs!

"Cats it is, then. I'll think of a good opportunity to add not just one, but a whole set of them at a later date."

Perhaps he should have turned Kalo into a cat as well, but he felt that shaping him as a chameleon was an intuitively better choice. It fit with his powers and his themes.

With Kalo's creation, the Deceptor Project finally obtained a proper if somewhat weak design spirit.

While Ves didn't think the glow of the Deceptor Project would be that powerful or drastic at first, that was okay. By allowing the ghostly chameleon to grow organically at its own

pace, it would be able to develop its powers in a direction that complemented the new Flagrant Vandal mech model better.

Of course, this might not work out that well if an enemy confronted the expeditionary fleet in the near-term. The Deceptor Project would not be able to contribute as much on the battlefield in that case!

"I really hope nothing happens."

Now that the Deceptor Project obtained its new design spirit, there were no further obstacles that prevented Ves from completing it. He worked extra hard to rush its testing and optimization rounds.

Once Ves was done with putting the finishing touches on his solo mech design, he finally stood back to admire his work as a whole.

"It's done."

Though he could still think of many ways to refine and optimize his mech even further, he wasn't as high strung as his wife.

It would take months to improve the mech's performance by two percent or so. That might be worth it for some people, but the diminishing returns were way too much for Ves. The Deceptor Project had reached a fine state at this point.

"Let's turn you into a real mech!"

In truth, the Deceptor Project had already been realized in the form of a prototype, but Ves deliberately kept its distance from it and ordered his assistants to fabricate it instead.

The prototype was purely a tool in his mind. It only served to refine the final product, nothing more.

This was why he did not hesitate to order its demise by sending it over to the Graveyard in order to disassemble it and recycle its raw materials.

Perhaps this was cruel treatment for a mech that had done nothing wrong but serve as a test subject, but Ves did not tolerate a rough and incomplete work.

"The mech I'm about to make will be the first true copy of the Deceptor Project." He whispered to himself. "This is the real deal."

Even though the Deceptor Project was not as important as the Minerva Project, he still valued it a lot. It was a reflection of his own efforts and a reflection of the progress he had made.

The Enlightened Warrior already showed him what he was capable of, but that was merely a variant. He lacked the flexibility to implement his full vision because he was still shackled by the Bright Warrior's template.

This was different. The Deceptor Project was a mech that he had designed from scratch. There was less reason to stick to his old solutions when he had the freedom to apply newer ones that were possibly better.

He already had a good expectation on how the Deceptor Project would perform based on the prototype testing sessions, but the addition of a design spirit along with other final changes should make the final result a little better.

He decided to fabricate the first copy of the new mech model straight away.

Ves moved to his personal workshop where he had already prepared a batch of materials. At least half of it came from the prototype that the Graveyard broke down and recycled.

Though there was no reason to think that the batch of materials prepared by his assistants were faulty or inadequate, Ves made sure to check the goods in person. Gloriana had instilled the habit in him and he didn't particularly mind adopting it given that it might truly make a difference in certain cases.

"Besides, touching these materials beforehand gives me a better feel for what I have to work with. Isn't that right, Vulcan?"

The hammer holstered on the side of his toolbelt pulsed its soft bronze glow.

Vulcan excelled at manipulating materials, which meant he also possessed a good understanding of them. Integrating a part of Cassandra Breyer's high-quality metal spiritual energy augmented his senses towards metallic materials in an unknown fashion!

While it was difficult to guess what benefits this incident had brought, Vulcan and by extension Ves managed to develop an even better understanding of metals.

This came in quite handy at this time as Ves was able to gain intuitive impressions of all of the slabs of materials.

Some were as rigid and solid as they should when they rolled out of the processing plant. Other materials were less consistent and possessed slight faults or cracks due to excessive exposure to swinging temperatures and atmospheric conditions, the presence of impurities or plain rough handling during transport.

Whatever the case, Ves was able to use the impressions he gained to make slight changes to how he planned to process the different materials into mech parts.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't have made much of a difference. No matter what, the suppliers of these materials were still professionals and they rigidly adhered to industry standards.

"Even the tiniest differences can have a remarkable impact on quality, though."

At his and Vulcan's level of craftsmanship, the deviations produced by inconsistent and lower-quality materials could absolutely make a substantial difference in the final product!

Previously, if Ves wanted to gain this much insight on the materials he was working, he had to put them all through rigorous tests and scans.

He had no doubt that the first-raters probably possessed technology that was advanced enough to replicate what he had done for the most part. Yet there was something intimate and personal about relying on his own intuition and feeling rather than cold machines to feed him their observations.

Ves even had the illusion that he was transforming the materials through his touch, causing them to become more aligned with what he had in store.

This was an illusion, though. He was ascribing more weight to the materials than they possessed. It was only when he processed them and combined them into a real mech that they would truly show their value. For now, they were just blocks of metal.

"Everything is in order. Let's begin."

Ves reached down and took a hold of his hammer. With a practiced motion, he tapped the flat end against his forehead with just the right force. It was firm enough to make him feel the weight of his action but not strong enough to actually cause any injury.

As soon as Vulcan partially melded with his mind, he began to see and understand concepts and ideas that previously remained out of his grasp.

"I missed this. You've improved, Vulcan."

His incarnation hadn't been doing nothing all of this time. Aside from getting a better grip on his abilities, the design spirit also started to derive some benefits from the totems that Ves had traded to Zachren Bilitsa and the House of Barach.

The differences were obvious. Vulcan's craftsmanship which was previously a close mirror to that of Ves had begun to branch out in other areas, if only tentatively.

The influence from Chief Fabricator Denner enhanced Vulcan's intuition when it came to making mechs with traditional fabrication equipment. Decades of experience enriched and augmented the theoretical knowledge that the design spirit already possessed.

Balancing that out was the contribution made by the House of Barach. Master Artisan Sivare Coriten Barach had not waited long to make use of the mini totem. What Vulcan gained from blessing the old tailor was an appreciation for art and a greater understanding of style.

The feedback that Vulcan gained from these two influences were still relatively minor, but Ves already gained more inspiration than before.

"I knew it was the right idea to get Vulcan in touch with more people." He smirked.

That said, Ves needed to be careful not to get subsumed by other people's preferences. He constantly had to remind himself that he should pursue his own style and only take light inspiration from other people's ideas.

Several days passed by as he fabricated the first proper copy of the Deceptor Project. Even though he worked alone, light mechs were smaller and faster to make, so it did not take long before Ves ended up with a complete machine.

He wearily stepped back and gazed at the final result. "Done."

#### *Chapter 3619 Checkerboard Pattern*

Gloriana dropped by his workshop as soon as she heard that he completed his solo project.

Naturally, she brought along Aurelia and their cats as well.

After Ves planted a kiss on his daughter's head, he allowed her to crawl around and explore the personal workshop after making sure that the security settings prevented her from approaching anything dangerous.

"Wuuhaaa! Bubuaabaaa!"

His energetic and adventurous daughter immediately took advantage of her freedom to crawl at every curiosity in the vicinity.

Given her proclivity for moving about on her own, Gloriana had fashioned a pink onesie for the baby that perfectly covered her extremities and made it more bearable to crawl on solid metal deck surfaces.

"Miaow~"

Clixie escorted the Aurelia as usual while also providing additional entertainment for the little girl.



Ves and Gloriana both smiled at the cute sight for a moment before turning their attention back to the finished mech.

Previously, Ves had been the one to admire Gloriana's handiwork. Now, it was her turn to critique her husband's efforts.

"Well, our stylistic choices differ as widely as ever, though I'm glad to see you've inherited a greater portion of my nuances."

He shrugged. "I am happy with my own style, but that does not mean I am unwilling to learn from other people's best practices. As long as it is good and does not conflict with my style, I am more than happy to absorb it. I think my mech is certainly better for it without compromising the essence of my style."

The Deceptor Project had to be a good representation of his own design style. He needed to show that he had improved without losing his original self in the process. This was much harder than it sounded but he figured he had struck a good balance.

Gloriana continued to study the new mech from top to bottom. "I think your new work is still rough around the edges, but I admit that your quality standards have gone up. Your Deceptor Project will perform reliably in all but the most intense situations. What weaknesses it possesses is mostly derived from its weight class rather than your execution. It is still a bit light and fragile though. Are you truly confident it will survive on the battlefield?"

Ves confidently nodded. "The Deceptor Project possesses excellent agility and evasion characteristics, so it should allow mech pilots to dodge and minimize most incoming fire. While it is true that it won't last long if a single mech gets focused upon by hundreds of enemy rifleman mechs, casualties will occur regardless of what happens when our forces are arrayed against so many enemies. In most circumstances I believe it can get close enough without getting cut to pieces."

"That is assuming that it doesn't get assailed by enemy light skirmishers. It is still as defenseless against melee mechs than ever and its relatively lackluster acceleration won't help."

"That is why I hope the Flagrant Vandals will never deploy it alone. It is really made to team up with the Ferocious Piranha at all times."

They already had this discussion before. Ves knew what he was getting into when he configured the Deceptor Project in this fashion. The benefits of developing greater synergies with the Ferocious Piranha was worth the tradeoffs. Gloriana knew that as well so she did not address it any further.

She instead turned her critical gaze towards the main armament of the Deceptor Project.

"I see you have also decided to stick with the submachine gun."

"Yes, but it's not a standard one. This is a luminar crystal weapon of my own design. Not only does it pack a greater punch than regular energy-based submachine guns, I've also made sure it can charge its shots for greater penetration."

His wife looked skeptical at the light and slim weapon model. "The gun is too small. How can you properly implement a high-powered firing mode in such a slim frame?"

"It's not a proper hand cannon." Ves admitted. "I just added it in as a backup option should the Deceptor Project fail to inflict effective damage against its opponents. The penetration power is higher but the process is much more inefficient. The mech can't keep it up for long. Either the gun will overheat, endure too much stress or drain the light mech's energy reserves at a rapid rate. When you have to employ the Deceptor Project against an enormous defensive fortification, then something has already gone wrong on our side."

The gun worked best when it was put in its normal firing mode. The gun was able to fire out energy beams at a high rate for a long duration. This made it ideal for applying constant pressure and harassment. It also allowed the mech to chew through lightly-armored targets at great efficiency.

Gloriana called up Ves' design schematics in order to study the submachine gun design and the accompanying supporting systems in greater detail.

"The damage tolerance of these systems isn't particularly high." She remarked. "I can see you put effort into making the mech more robust, and while it is able to endure internal stresses to a decent level, it is less able to defend against external stresses."

In other words, as long as the enemy managed to hit the Deceptor Project, the mech was more prone to losing functionality than even the Ferocious Piranha!

"This is yet another tradeoff I've made. In order to align it with its main theme, I had to use up valuable capacity for passive and active ECM systems. This comes at the expense of solid armor and other defensive features. I think it's worth it, though. The mech employs multiple different ways to confound and frustrate any enemies attempting to target this mech."

The entire reason why the Deceptor Project was called this way was because it was supposed to excel at misdirecting enemy mechs!

Reducing its chances of getting hit by distracting their opponents was its best form of defense!

Though Gloriana understood her husband's intentions, she still reserved her judgment. "We'll see how effective the Deceptor Project can avoid enemy fire in the upcoming testing session. The prototype testing sessions haven't yielded any dramatic results."

"That's because Kalo didn't exist yet for the majority of tests. Even then, he is still a newborn design spirit. In a few years he'll get up to speed. Even then, the Deceptor Project in its current form should already be a valuable addition to our lineup."

They would both find out soon enough anyway.

After Gloriana made a few more observations about the mech that Ves had fabricated, they both came closer to the machine in order to observe its craftsmanship up close.

She placed her hand on the surface of the oddly-coated mech.

"The pattern and color scheme is quite... special."

Ves shrugged. "The black-and-white checkerboard pattern will help with making it less distinguishable to the enemy, at least when relying on pure optical sensors."

"Enemy mechs don't rely solely on optical sensors to spot and track enemy mechs."

"I know. It's only a supplementary measure rather than a main feature. What it truly relies upon is the exterior that is made out of sensor-dampening materials and the various ECM systems integrated across its frame. As long as the Deceptor Project isn't operating at a high intensity, its heat emissions won't be high enough to compromise its ECM effectiveness."

Ves had spent a lot of time and effort into lowering the Deceptor Project's energy consumption and heat buildup. By making his mech more efficient in how it handled energy, it would radiate less waste energy that could serve as a beacon that painted a clear target on the mech's back.

The configuration of the Deceptor Project also supported this goal. The two biggest energy-eating parts were the flight system and the primary weapon. Both of them were designed and tuned to generate considerably less energy than comparable systems, though that inevitably came at the cost of peak performance.

After Gloriana surveyed the physical state of the mech, she tried to focus on the most distinctive properties of the Deceptor Project.

The mech possessed a distinct glow, but it was hard for her to get her grip around it. Furthermore, its effectiveness was much higher when the mech was being actively piloted against other mechs.

As far as living mechs went, the Deceptor Project sought to avoid drawing attention, which was quite the opposite compared to the other mechs designed by Ves.

"It's an interesting exercise to employ my design philosophy in a manner that is opposite to my usual approach." Ves explained. "Working on this project has made me realize that I have been designing way too many mechs that attract people's attention."

Gloriana snorted and crossed her arms. "I think that says a lot about you. There's a part inside you that just loves to command the public. That flows back in your work. I do not think this is bad, but it's definitely an aspect of your design style that you should be aware of. I am glad you have shown that you can also design subtler mechs when needed, though if I purely go by appearances, this mech of yours still can't help but attract attention."

"That's mainly due to its patterned surface."

The checkerboard pattern was just too odd compared to other mechs that were painted in simple solid color schemes.

Once the couple was done with examining the mech, they soon prepared to test it out. Ves had to make a few more arrangements by calling over the Flagrant Vandals and having them prepare a few test scenarios.

After a day of preparation, the first true deployment of the Deceptor Project was about to commence.

The Vandals already received word and information about the new mech during the prototype testing phase. Ves had been generous enough to provide them with virtual models of the earlier iterations of the Deceptor Project to use as simulation practice material.

They already trained a batch of mech pilots who were all proficient with the basic operation of the Deceptor Project. Ves picked a random man out of the Vandal lineup to pilot the completed version of the light harasser mech for the first time.

A few notable clansmen had gathered next to the workstation where Ves was operating from. As a pair of heavy-duty bots slowly dragged the inactive Deceptor Project out into space, the leader of the Flagrant Vandals harbored a lot of hope for the new mech model.

"If the Deceptor Project performs well, how many copies can we expect to receive?" Commander Abis Firelight asked.

Ves glanced at the dark-skinned man. While he wasn't very familiar with Firelight, the man had proven to be a competent leader who did not produce a lot of drama. He was quite opposite to Venerable Orfan in that regard.

"That's a difficult question to answer." He replied. "Currently, we're having difficulties sourcing the necessary raw materials. We can easily produce a squad's worth of my mech, but anything more will require our clan to secure an agreement with a solid and reliable material supplier."

That was not the news that Commander Firelight wanted to hear. "Just... ten?"

"Maybe more, maybe less. Some materials are more abundant but others are more scarce. I'll have to check our total inventory to be sure. We also need to reserve at least a proportion of them in case of emergencies, so that will also limit the amount of mechs we can build."

The Flagrant Vandals accompanying their legion commander all looked disappointed. They had learned of the new signature mech and eagerly wanted to put it into service!

Ves noticed their dissatisfaction and sighed. "Look, it won't take long for our fleet to reach the Davute System. Once we arrive, I will prioritize this matter. We need to secure a channel for materials and supplies for many more reasons aside from fabricating mechs. Hopefully, I'll be able to give you a more positive answer within a month."

"We'll hold you to that, patriarch." Commander Firelight slowly nodded. "There's nothing worse than not being able to pilot a useful new mech that is tailored to our needs."

#### *Chapter 3620 Light Weapon Effectiveness*

The Deceptor Project debut proceeded quite well.

Once it was put into space at a safe distance from the main fleet, it activated without any fuss or complications.

After performing a routine of basic actions such as moving its limbs and flying in different directions, the light harasser mech finally showed what it was capable of in the more advanced tests.

First, it warmed up its submachine gun by firing at numerous practice targets.

Though the target dummies weren't actual mechs, they were built to closely mimic the defensive properties of different mechs.

"As expected, the submachine gun is powerful enough to defeat other light mechs." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

Although the Deceptor Project possessed no defenses against light skirmishers that managed to get into melee range, beyond that the ranged mech possessed a decisive advantage!

The high firing rate made it easier for the Deceptor Project to track and land their hits on fast, maneuverable targets.

The relatively low damage per shot was not a big deal if the enemy mech did not possess that much armor to begin with. This was showcased by how the various stationary and mobile target dummies all got shot to pieces by the submachine gun.

One of the advantages of this weapon over many other comparable ones was that it was based on luminar crystal technology.

Though the weapon was too small and compact to fit too many luminar energy attack phase crystals, Ves still managed to make enough space to equip the submachine gun with three different energy beam types.

For this test, Ves was equipped with a laser beam crystal, a slicer beam crystal and a disruptor beam crystal.

This caused Commander Firelight to grow intrigued.

"Is this the recommended package for the Deceptor Project? What is the rationale for this luminar crystal loadout?" He asked the patriarch.

"Out of the six energy attack phase crystals at our disposal, I found that the three of them work out the best. First, you need to be aware of how the weapon fits in the overall system. It's a light weapon because it is paired with a light mech. It needs to deal effective damage at a budget because the Deceptor Project does not cope well with elevated energy consumption and heat generation. The simple and humble laser beam is therefore the most optimal attack pattern for the Deceptor Project."

Sure, laser beam weapons were relatively simple and low tech compared to other energy weapon types, but that played to its advantage in this case.

Humanity's understanding of laser weapons had grown so high that it was an extremely mature tech. The same applied to the luminar race as their own application of laser weapons was extremely refined!

The direct consequence of this was that the Deceptor Project remained highly efficient as long as it kept firing laser beams!

Although the damage potential and penetration power of this beam type was not that impressive, the Deceptor Project could easily keep it up without issue.

"The damage that a single Deceptor Project can deal is not high, but remember that it is a ranged mech." Ves told the Vandals. "A mech squad or mech company can easily array their guns against single targets. Even better-armored mechs will succumb when they are being peppered with a torrent of laser beams!"

This was much better than with the Ferocious Piranha. While it was possible for the light mechs to gang up on a single target, only a few of them could safely approach at a time. If they weren't careful enough, they could easily collide against each other!

"This is the capability that we have been missing." A Vandal mech captain said. "The Ferocious Piranhas are good machines, but some mech formations are too dense to attack easily. With this ranged mech, we have more options than before. At the very least, we have means to apply pressure without committing anything."

Aside from the laser beam attack phase, the Deceptor Project also tested out the other two attack phases.

The slicer beam fired by the submachine gun was quite thin and weak. Even though it was more effective than the laser beam at penetrating through solid armor plating, when put into rapid-fire mode a lot of beams scattered around, preventing the Deceptor Project from quickly dealing critical damage.

It was only when the Deceptor Project switched the firing mode of its weapon that it was able to penetrate through armor more effectively.

"This is an option that works best in the high-powered firing mode. This is because it is easier to apply a lot of energy at the same position." Ves explained to them. "The downside of this is that the submachine gun cannot fire like this continuously without quickly reaching its limits. I highly recommend you to stick to the rapid-fire mode."

"Will that still be effective?" Commander Firelight asked in a skeptical tone. "Because it looks to me that you're firing the equivalent of a lot of razors at a wall."

Ves nodded. "Your analogy isn't wrong, but like the previous case, think about how fast a mech company of Deceptor Project mechs can chew through the exterior of an enemy target. In fact, the true value of employing this mech this way is not to reach the internals, but quickly wipe out and disassemble all exterior modules. If your mech units are able to target the rear section of enemy mechs, they can quickly knock out the flight systems and possibly other rear modules without requiring to do anything further."

"We can already do that with the laser beams."

"It will be more effective with the slicer beams. Flight systems are built to withstand a lot of heat because they often generate a lot of it in order to generate thrust. The alloys and materials used to make these modules need to be able to resist heat first, so a typical laser beam will just disperse a lot of heat energy over surfaces that are expressly designed to deal with it. While slicer beams consist of energy as well, they are a special type that keeps it extremely concentrated."



There was a lot more theory behind it, but Ves did not bother to explain it to the mech pilots and mech officers. They just needed to take his word that the slicer beam was highly effective when utilized in certain situations.

"Of course, slicers are also highly efficient because of their low total energy output, and that is exactly what the Deceptor Project needs."

"And the disruptor beam?"

"They're just there so that the Deceptor Project mechs can easily drain enemy energy shields. There's nothing complicated about it, and while it might not be necessary to employ it in every battle, it will come extremely handy in the few situations where you are compelled to attack shielded units."

The Vandals slowly nodded. Energy shields were a bit more prevalent in the Red Ocean than in the galactic rim. While it was uncommon to see them in cheaper and smaller mechs, the larger ones had a good chance of carrying them. Miniaturization and better energy cells made it easier to integrate them in offensive mechs.

"You've explained why you chose those three crystals. Why did you reject the other three?"

"Well, let's start with the positron beam. This attack type is considerably more powerful than the laser beam but is also a lot more inefficient as well. Not only will your mechs run out of energy faster, they will also overheat a lot sooner. Once that happens, a lot of ECM measures will become ineffective. It isn't worth it in my eyes."

While it was fine for Bright Warriors and Transcendent Punishers to make use of positron weapons, they were substantially bigger and much more capable of dealing with the increased demands of this weapon type. They also didn't place a high emphasis on ECM or misdirection so it didn't matter if they lit themselves up on enemy sensors.

"As for the kinetic beam, the reason why I don't recommend it is because it's not efficient. You are converting a lot of electrical energy into physical energy when you employ this luminar crystal attack phase, and that is such a big leap that a lot of energy goes to waste. This isn't too big of a deal with bigger rifles but the loss in damage output is much more severe with lighter weapons."

"Oh. What of the light beam, then? They are highly effective against expert mechs."

Ves grimaced. He already had a much better mech design lined up for this until the MTA forcibly put a stop to it. He still hadn't gotten a resolution at this time. The Association's bureaucracy sure liked to take its time!

"The light beam is somewhat effective, but the relatively low damage output per mech means you will need to field hundreds if not thousands of Deceptor Project mechs to effectively threaten an enemy expert mech. Given our limited carrier space, we can't field so many of this mech at the moment. It is much more efficient to leave the job to other mechs that pack a much greater punch."

"I see..."

The Vandals all looked disappointed at this reasoning.

"Fighting against expert mechs is important but the burden should never fall upon light mechs." Ves told them all. "Your jobs are different. With your Ferocious Piranhas and your new Deceptor Projects, you can become our consummate flankers. Any mech formation that isn't prepared to fight against a light assault unit like yours will easily get torn to shreds!"

In order to prove his words, the final tests were the most important ones.

The Avatars of Myth agreed to volunteer a Bright Warrior piloted by one of their own. The mech was in its rifleman mech configuration at the moment so that it could effectively retaliate against the Deceptor Project.

Once they went through the safety checks, the two mechs began to perform a mock duel against each other.

Their luminar crystal weapons had been set to the lowest power settings possible so that they dealt minimal damage to each other.

When the two mechs fought against each other, it quickly became clear that they were very different mechs.

The Bright Warrior was not as agile and was not as effective at fairly close ranges, but its solid construction and armor plating provided it with a lot of buffer!

The Deceptor Project was much faster and performed much better at this range. Nonetheless, its submachine gun was not that powerful and it surely felt every hit that its opponent managed to land.

However, as the Vandal mech pilot became more proficient at piloting the real mech in a realistic battle setting, the Deceptor Project stopped getting hit as much.

While this was expected from a well-piloted light mech, the amount of attacks it was able to dodge was on the high side!

"I wouldn't be able to make an Avatar mech miss so many shots with my Ferocious Piranha."

"The difference isn't that big, though."

"Who knows. It might mean the difference between life and death."

Ves was happy to see that the Flagrant Vandal mech pilots were discerning enough to notice the difference. The combination of the glow and numerous ECM systems both worked to make it difficult for the Avatar mech to keep its gun on target.

However, there was no denying that the difference wasn't big enough to merit so much investment.

In order to prove the Deceptor Project's true value, Ves ordered his men to move to the final test.

A second Avatar mech joined the first one. The arriving Bright Warrior was in a space knight configuration, which immediately compensated for nearly all of the rifleman mech's weaknesses!

On the other hand, the Deceptor Project teamed up with a Ferocious Piranha mech dispatched by the Flagrant Vandals.

The duel had turned into a two-on-two match. While Ves expected his new light mech combination to perform effectively, the Avatar mech pilots weren't going to make it easy! They had their own pride and they were highly familiar with dealing all kinds of glow effects!